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The Play of the Royal Astrologers

A Play

Willis Hall

A SAMUEL FRENCH ACTING EDITION

**SAMUEL
FRENCH**
FOUNDED 1830

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CHARACTERS

The Chancellor
The Emperor
The Emperor's Daughter
Father Mole-Cricket
Master Mole-Cricket
Mother Mole-Cricket
First Villager*
Second Villager*
Wizard*
Palace Messenger*
Leader of the Thieves*
First Thief*
Second Thief*
Third Thief*
First Sailor—Henry*
Second Sailor—Fred*
First Mate*
Captain Beanfeast*
First Palace Guard*
Second Palace Guard*

(All the characters marked with an asterisk appear in one scene only, they can, therefore, be doubled, if necessary.)

ACT I SCENE 1 The Mole-Cricket Back Garden
SCENE 2 The same
SCENE 3 Indera Maya's Palace

ACT II SCENE 1 The Mole-Cricket Back Garden
SCENE 2 On board the Bold Tassel—at sea
SCENE 3 The same—in harbour

ACT I

SCENE 1

Before the CURTAIN rises the Chancellor, a tall harassed man with a long beard, dressed in flowing robes, bustles across the stage and addresses the audience across the "footlights"

Chancellor Ah, there you are! I've been looking for you everywhere! Something dreadful has happened. Too horrible for words. Goodness only knows what will happen to me when they find out. I shall lose my head, that's a certainty. Off—clean as a whistle. And there's nothing I can do about it. Nothing. You see, the truth is, promise not to laugh, the truth is—I've lost the Emperor. One minute he was standing right next to me, the next moment he was gone. He'll say it was my fault of course. He always does. There we were, all ready to begin the play and now this has to happen. I don't suppose, by any chance, that any of you have seen the Emperor? . . . No? No, I didn't think so. I don't know what we're going to do now. I just don't know . . . You wouldn't care to come back tomorrow? Or next week say? . . . No? No, I didn't think that you would. There is only one thing for it—we must carry on without him, that's all. We'll begin now.

This is a play about the Emperor, Indera Maya, and about the lands of Indera Maya, and about the peoples of Indera Maya. The Emperor rules over a beautiful and prosperous country, set amongst the tallest tips of the distant mountains, which wear clouds for bonnets and change their bonnets twice a day. At the foot of the mountains is a forest, and beyond the forest is a desert, and beyond the desert is the edge of the world . . .

As for the people of Indera Maya—myself included (I, by the way, am the Emperor's Chancellor and by far the most important person you will see this evening), the people of Indera Maya are a happy people. Every year, in every village, they plough their fields, plant their grain, water their crops and gather their harvest; for the subjects of Indera Maya are the hardest working people in the whole world . . .

But wait—you shall see for yourselves. (*He calls off, into the wings*) You there! Peasant! Take up this curtain! We are about to begin! . . . Thank you.

The back garden of the Mole-Cricket family

The rear of the set is taken up with the exterior of the Mole-Cricket house—a rickety construction of bamboo and thatched palm. A small veranda and door lead into the house

Two figures, both dressed in peasant costume, lie in the shade of a small tree. They are asleep and snoring heavily. The larger of the two is Father Mole-Cricket and the smaller his son, Master Mole-Cricket

The Chancellor moves into the set and continues

As I was saying, the subjects of Indera Maya are the hardest working people in the whole world. The two . . . er . . . persons you see here are the exception. This one is Father Mole-Cricket.

The Chancellor nudges the sleeping form of Father Mole-Cricket with his foot. Father Mole-Cricket stirs but does not waken

And this one is his son, Master Mole-Cricket. As a matter of fact, these two aren't at all hard-working. As a matter of fact, they have been described as lazy. As a matter of fact, it has been said that these two are the laziest pair in all the world. But I shall wake them and you may judge for yourselves . . . *(He raises his foot as if to bestow a kick upon the seat of Father Mole-Cricket, but his eye is caught by something in the wings and his foot is lowered)* Excuse me a moment . . . I thought I saw . . . *(He peers again off stage)* It is! His Majesty! His Most Imperial Majesty! He's arrived! What did I tell you! Majesty! Wait for me! I'm here, Majesty! I'm coming! . . . I'm coming! *(He moves off L. He pauses before making his exit and again addresses the audience)* Pardon me, but I must speak to his Majesty. Don't worry. I'll be back again later.

The Chancellor bustles off

There is a pause as the two Mole-Crickets continue to snore and then, slowly and carefully, Father Mole-Cricket lifts himself up and yawns loud and long. Master Mole-Cricket does the same

Father Mole-Cricket What are you doing, my son?

Master Mole-Cricket Nothing, Father. I just yawned.

Father Mole-Cricket Oh.

Master Mole-Cricket A thought crossed my mind and so I yawned.

Father Mole-Cricket Oh.

Master Mole-Cricket I had an idea.

Father Mole-Cricket And it made you yawn?

Master Mole-Cricket Yes, Father.

Father Mole-Cricket What kind of idea was it?

Master Mole-Cricket Just a . . . Well . . . I'm too tired to remember, Father.

Father Mole-Cricket Then we might as well go back to sleep.

Master Mole-Cricket Yes . . . Wait a minute! It's coming back to me! I know what it was! I thought I might go into the house and get something to eat.

Father Mole-Cricket Oh . . . I don't think there is anything to eat, my boy.

Master Mole-Cricket Isn't there? . . . Oh, well, it doesn't really matter.

Father Mole-Cricket No.

Master Mole-Cricket I shall just lie here in the warm afternoon sun until it is cool, and then I shall go to bed. That's an even better idea, isn't it, Father?

Father Mole-Cricket, having already nodded off to sleep, does not reply

Father. (*He shakes Father Mole-Cricket roughly*) Father!

Father Mole-Cricket (*opening one eye*) Mmmmmm?

Master Mole-Cricket You haven't answered me.

Father Mole-Cricket I don't think there is anything to eat.

Master Mole-Cricket You said that before.

Father Mole-Cricket Did I? . . . Then I have said enough to be going on with. I can't keep saying things all the time.. It makes me tired . . .

Master Mole-Cricket It . . . It makes me feel tired, too, Father . . .

Father Mole-Cricket Then the best thing to do . . . is . . . go to . . . sleep . . .

They lie down and immediately begin to snore

The door to the house opens and Mother Mole-Cricket comes out. She carries an empty cooking pot. She moves down the veranda and across to the two sleeping figures

Mother Mole-Cricket (*digging Father Mole-Cricket in the ribs with the cooking pot*) Idler! Loafer! Good-for-nothing! Wastrel! Are you going to lie there and sleep all day?

Father Mole-Cricket It's a very good suggestion, my love. But I don't quite see how we can. (*He rises reluctantly*) Not if you keep interrupting us, we can't.

Mother Mole-Cricket What about the work? What about the house? What about the farm? What about the roof you were going to mend on the chicken run?

Father Mole-Cricket (*yawning*) Tomorrow, my love. I shall see to all those things tomorrow.

Mother Mole-Cricket And what about the yard? And the broken fence? To say nothing about the water to be carried from the well and the wood to be chopped.

Father Mole-Cricket The day after tomorrow.

Mother Mole-Cricket And the floor to be swept and the chimneys to be cleaned and the fowls to be fed and the——

Father Mole-Cricket The day after the day after to——

Mother Mole-Cricket Idler! Idiot! And what do you think you're going to do today?

Father Mole-Cricket Perfectly simple, my dear. Today I'm going to sit here, in the warmth of the sun, and plan all those things I intend to do tomorrow and the day after tomorrow and the day after the day after tomorrow.

Mother Mole-Cricket And who is to plant the rice? Tell me that!

Father Mole-Cricket Rice! Ah, rice! Strange you should mention rice, my love. Now there you have a commodity. Have you ever considered, beloved, the amount of rice consumed per square stomach in this village alone?

Mother Mole-Cricket Oh . . . !

Father Mole-Cricket I assure you, my dear, the figures would astonish you. As a matter of fact, believe it or not, I was only in the process of

constructing a little philosophy on that very subject not two moments ago. Give a man a bag of rice and what does he do? Eat it? No. He plants it, and tends it, and waters it—which is work. Fact number one. To work makes him hungry. Fact number two. So what does he do? Why, he harvests the rice he planted and eats it! Fact number three. And where has it all got him, eh? Nowhere. He might just as well have eaten the bag of rice in the first place. A man either eats to work or works to eat. I worked all that out on my own. You should be pleased, dear heart, to have a husband who has struggled the hard path towards spiritual contentment.

Mother Mole-Cricket Pleased, should I? Then you should be pleased to have a wife with nothing to cook for the dinner tomorrow. (*She raises the cooking pot menacingly*) And nothing to cook for the dinner the day after tomorrow, and nothing for the day after the day after . . .

Father Mole-Cricket All right, my love! I'll think of something. Never you fear. Just you leave it to me.

Mother Mole-Cricket If I left it to you we should never eat at all, we should never do anything but sleep. And as for that son of yours . . .

Father Mole-Cricket And yours, dear one, and yours.

Mother Mole-Cricket Don't argue. As for that son of yours . . . Look at him! Just look at him!

They both survey the sleeping figure

Father Mole-Cricket (*with pride*) A fine lad! A fine lad indeed!

Mother Mole-Cricket Why, he's only awake twice a day: once to get out of bed and again to get into it. I can't imagine why he ever takes the trouble to get out of bed at all.

Father Mole-Cricket Now that you come to mention it, my dear—neither can I. I'll ask him, if you like, the next time we're both awake together.

Mother Mole-Cricket You'll do nothing of the sort. You'll go out and find some work. Both of you. Now.

Master Mole-Cricket (*sitting bolt upright with shock*) Work? Work! Did someone say something about work? I . . . I was just dozing.

Mother Mole-Cricket I did. I said you must go and earn some money. Now!

Master Mole-Cricket Work! *Earn* money! (*He scrambles to his feet*) But, Mother . . .

Mother Mole-Cricket You heard me. I shall light the fire and put on the pot, by which time I shall expect you both back here with something for the evening meal . . .

Master Mole-Cricket Mother!

Father Mole-Cricket Now, my love! Patience! We mustn't run into this business foolhardily, you know. Dear me, no. Now . . . Let me think . . . I know! We'll borrow something! How's that?

Master Mole-Cricket Hopeless. Everyone is in the fields at work.

Mother Mole-Cricket Where you idle pair should be.

Father Mole-Cricket Hush, my love, and let me think . . . Ah, yes! I have it! Yes, yes! Capital! I can't imagine why I never thought of it before!

Mother Mole-Cricket You were probably asleep at the time.

Father Mole-Cricket Listen, my boy, I'll explain my plan. You must go down to the rice fields where our good neighbours are at work—God bless their simple souls. And then you must hide in the long grass by the edge of the stream . . .

Master Mole-Cricket And then?

Father Mole-Cricket And then, bide your time carefully, and when no-one is looking, take two of their buffaloes and hide them somewhere out of sight. Hide them in the bushes just past the end of the village.

Master Mole-Cricket I don't see where all this is getting us.

Father Mole-Cricket Will you listen to me! I'm telling you, aren't I? When the villagers notice that the animals are missing, tell them that your father knows a little about—astrology.

Master Mole-Cricket Astra-what-a-gy?

Father Mole-Cricket Ology. The study of the stars, my son.

Master Mole-Cricket Astrology.

Father Mole-Cricket Tell them, in fact, that your father is an astrologer!

Master Mole-Cricket As-what-a-ger?

Father Mole-Cricket Astrologer. And that by studying the stars I may be able to help them.

Master Mole-Cricket I don't quite see, Father, what the stars have got to do with buffaloes.

Father Mole-Cricket Never mind, my boy. You leave all that to your clever old father. Just you tell the villagers all that I have said. Bring them here. And leave the rest to me.

Master Mole-Cricket Wait a minute! I think I'm beginning to understand! You'll tell the villagers where to find their buffaloes, they'll be pleased and . . .

Father Mole-Cricket Just so.

Mother Mole-Cricket Astrology indeed! What nonsense!

Master Mole-Cricket If you ask me, Father, I think it's the best idea you ever had.

Father Mole-Cricket Thank you, my boy.

Master Mole-Cricket Although, I would like to make one small suggestion . . .

Father Mole-Cricket Yes?

Master Mole-Cricket How would it be, Father, if you went down to the fields and took the buffaloes? You see, it's a very dusty road, and it is hot, and I'm not feeling very well today. If you were to go I could lie down here for a little while. By the time you got back I'm sure I should be . . .

Father Mole-Cricket Sometimes, my boy, I feel ashamed of you. I do really. Here am I, your poor, tired, old father, and you suggest that I go walking in the hot fields and hide buffaloes and watch everyone working and . . . and . . . Oh dear! I'm beginning to feel quite faint!

Master Mole-Cricket Very well, Father. I was just going. But, I still can't see why—

Father Mole-Cricket That's better, my boy. Don't forget what I've told you!

Master Mole-Cricket Very well, Father . . . *(He moves away but has only walked a few paces before he is asleep on his feet)*

Mother Mole-Cricket (*crossing to Master Mole-Cricket and shaking him vigorously*) And don't fall asleep on the way!

Master Mole-Cricket (*stifling a yawn*) Very well, Mother. . .

Master Mole-Cricket trudges off

Father Mole-Cricket You see, my love, all our worries are at an end. And all because your wise and diligent husband has been using his brains. (*He prepares to seat himself on the grass*) And now that's done I can just . . . (*He yawns*) . . . I can just . . .

Mother Mole-Cricket (*crossing to his side*) You can just what?

Father Mole-Cricket Well, my dear, I was just going to . . . that is to say . . . at least I . . . and then after that I was . . . at least I thought I might . . .

Mother Mole-Cricket I have a better idea. Come along, you can peel the onions for supper.

Father Mole-Cricket Peel the onions? But, my love, I was . . .

Mother Mole-Cricket (*taking a firm grasp of his ear*) I said, come along!

Father Mole-Cricket Very well, my love. Very well. I'm coming.

Mother Mole-Cricket (*leading him unceremoniously onto the veranda*) And when you've finished them I'm sure I'll be able to find you something else to keep you busy.

They exit, Father Mole-Cricket protesting loudly, through the door and into the house

There is a pause before the Chancellor enters L

At the same time the Emperor, a short and fussy monarch, enters R

They are both peering into the respective wings from which they made their entrances and slowly each walks backward towards the centre of the stage. When they are but a few inches apart, neither being aware of the other, the Emperor draws himself erect and calls out in a loud voice

Emperor Chancellor!

Chancellor (*swinging round in surprise*) Majesty!

Emperor (*equally surprised*) There you are, Chancellor!

Chancellor Here I am, indeed, Majesty! (*He bows low*)

Emperor Well, it won't do, Chancellor! It just won't do! Here am I, searching high and low, up and down, round and about, all over the kingdom for you—and here are you playing hide and seek behind my back in front of my nose.

Chancellor A thousand apologies, Majesty. A thousand, thousand apologies. Indeed, I too, have been looking for you.

Emperor You'd no business to do anything of the kind, Chancellor. You should have stood quite still where you were—and not started scurrying about looking for where I were—was—were—

The Chancellor, in his agitation, is bowing low many times

And for goodness sake, man, stop bobbing up and down like a yo-yo. You make me feel quite ill.

Chancellor A thousand, thousand, thousand apologies, Majesty.

Emperor And stop calling out numbers, Chancellor! You know very well I hate numbers. Really, Chancellor! You must learn to control your emotions. You do lose your head so easily.

Chancellor Do I, Majesty?

Emperor You do indeed. One of these days I can see that you are going to lose it altogether. (*He draws a significant finger across his throat*)

Chancellor I'm sure I do my utmost to please your Majesty, your Majesty.

Emperor Then it isn't utmost enough. I have more than enough to do, I would remind you, without having to spend my afternoons running all over the countryside looking for my Chancellor.

Chancellor But it was so late, Majesty. And I knew that you would be annoyed if we ventured to begin without you, and before I could find you everyone had arrived and—

Emperor Will you speak plainly! Will you speak audibly! Will you make yourself understood! Start? Start? Start what? What are you whispering into your whiskers now, man! Start what?

Chancellor The play, Majesty.

Emperor Play? Play? I've no wish to play, Chancellor! Now look here! Listen to me! I spend all my time scouring the district for you, I finally run you to earth in this broken-down back-yard, I'm hot, I'm tired, my robes are too heavy, my feet are burning, my head aches, I'm out of breath and, worst of all, I've lost my temper—and you calmly stand there and tell me it's all been some silly sort of game.

Chancellor Indeed no, Majesty, you see—

Emperor Indeed yes, Chancellor. And I don't see, no. (*He draws the Chancellor towards him and they move downstage*) Now, listen carefully, Chancellor. Pay attention. For while you've been hopping around in your back-yards, hiding and seeking whatever it is you've been seeking and hiding—a crime has been committed.

Chancellor Crime, Majesty?

Emperor A burglary, Chancellor.

Chancellor Burglary, Majesty?

Emperor At the Royal Palace, Chancellor.

Chancellor The Palace, Majesty!

Emperor Before we go any further into the matter, Chancellor, you will oblige me by not repeating every word I say like a stuttering parrot.

The Chancellor bows low

And don't start all that business again! Listen to me! This afternoon, Chancellor, four thieves broke into the Royal Palace Vaults and stole four chests of gold. My gold, Chancellor.

Chancellor You don't say so, Majesty?

Emperor I have said so, haven't I, you burbling idiot! The four thieves, Chancellor, must be caught.

Chancellor Indeed they must, Majesty.

Emperor And when they are caught, Chancellor ... When they are caught—they must be punished.

Chancellor Indeed they must, Majesty. Might I suggest the Royal Dungeons?

Emperor Good, Chancellor. A good idea.

Chancellor Or—shall we say the Lower Dungeons, Majesty? The very Lowest Dungeons?

Emperor Warmer, Chancellor. You're getting warmer!

Chancellor Or even . . . *(He draws a significant finger across his throat)*

Emperor Excellent, Chancellor! A capital suggestion!

Chancellor I am pleased your Majesty is pleased, your Majesty. And I can only venture to add that it is my most sincere desire that you should succeed in capturing the miscreants.

Emperor Chancellor . . .

Chancellor Majesty?

Emperor I have a surprise for you, Chancellor. You are going to capture the thieves.

Chancellor I am?

Emperor You are. Or else . . . *(He draws a significant finger across his throat)*

Chancellor Or else . . . ? *(He imitates the gesture)*

Emperor Precisely.

Chancellor But, Majesty, if you don't mind, I would much rather turn down the assignment. You see, there are so many affairs of state to attend to and I did promise to . . .

Emperor Chancellor! Self control! Remember! We don't want to lose our heads over this, do we?

Chancellor Indeed we don't, Majesty.

Emperor Good, good! I knew you'd listen to reason. Now then. Listen to me. I have already decided upon the plan you will follow. Two hours ago I instructed my Royal Astrologer to look in the heavens, study the stars, examine the skies and, in short, discover the whereabouts of the criminals. I ordered him to present me with their names, addresses, and all the usual particulars before sunset this afternoon.

Chancellor It is already sunset, Majesty.

Emperor I can see that, you oaf! Will you be quiet while I'm speaking! The Royal Astrologer, Chancellor, has failed.

Chancellor Most unfortunate.

Emperor *(taking a scroll from the wide sleeve of his robe)* As you remark, Chancellor. Most unfortunate. However, the possibility of the Royal Astrologer's failure in his appointed task did not altogether elude me. I have, in fact, prepared for that self-same contingency.

Chancellor Your Majesty thinks of everything.

Emperor Of course I do. *(He hands the scroll to the Chancellor)* What do you think of this, Chancellor?

Chancellor *(turning the scroll over in his hands)* It rather looks like . . . like a scroll, Majesty.

Emperor Of course it looks like a scroll, Chancellor! It is a scroll!

Chancellor Why, so it is.

Emperor Be so good as to read it aloud, Chancellor!

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