

SHIRLEY / VENABLES / CAMPBELL

Act I, Scene 1

9

the ante-room door) Mr Venables won't be long, he's expecting you.
May I take your coat?

Shirley Thanks. *(She removes her coat, revealing her attractive red dress)*

Taking the coat, Campbell ushers Shirley into the ante-room, closing the door behind her. He then exits through the main door, with the coat. Shirley comes out of the ante-room, looks round, and giggles with satisfaction. Hearing voices approach, she scuttles back into the ante-room. Venables and Campbell enter

Venables *(coming in)* Blasted pound's down a quarter of a point. Why?
Campbell Possibly the Foreign Secretary's toothache. He's been looking rather off at the Brussels Conference, and Foreigners do notice.

Venables At least it took some wind out of the Chancellor's sails. Cramond's really becoming very difficult. The worst thing is, he can pop in here and nag me whenever he feels like it. *(He indicates the door to the Chancellor's passage)* Which Prime Minister had that passage built to Number Eleven? Must have been out of his mind.

Campbell I don't know. But I'm sure Miss Frobisher does.

Venables I'm sure. Pity about the pound. With this journalist coming, I'd hoped to launch the idea of an export boom. As it is, I'll have to stick to the "tighten our belts" routine. Where is she?

Campbell In the ante-room.

Venables Better get it over with. If Rotherbrook's daughter's anything like *him*, it'll be pretty heavy going.

Campbell She seems quite pleasant, actually.

Venables Look here, you know I get very bored with these chatty Fleet Street women. I'll give her five minutes, then I want you to come in and get me off the hook. Remind me I have to go to a meeting or something. I may argue a bit, out of politeness, but keep stressing it's very urgent.

Campbell I know the form, sir. *(He goes to the ante-room door and opens it)*
The Prime Minister will receive you now.

Shirley enters

Shirley Thanks very much. Good afternoon, Prime Minister. It's nice of you to see me.

Venables is clearly surprised and delighted to find that his visitor is so attractive. He advances and shakes her by the hand

Venables Good of you to come, Miss Rotherbrook. I'm always glad to help the Press. Do sit down. *(He indicates the settee)*

Campbell *(advancing with the silver cigarette box from the Prime Minister's desk)* Cigarette?

Shirley No thanks, I don't smoke.

Venables Very wise. As you know, cigarettes are extremely harmful to health. But naturally we always offer them to guests.

Campbell returns the box to the desk, and leaves by the main door

Venables has not sat down. He seems disposed to stand in the centre of the room, in expansive mood, or pace about

Shirley Your government is very much against smoking and drinking and that sort of thing, Prime Minister?

Venables We believe they are among the dangers which threaten the physical and moral welfare of our nation. You as a journalist must know something of the way alcohol destroys efficiency, wrecks people's health, and breaks up homes. Do you drink?

Shirley Well, yes, I do a bit.

Venables There's no harm in a little bit.

Shirley Pardon?

Venables Moderation. No harm in one drink, or even two. In fact, I could do with one now—will you join me?

Shirley Oh, thanks.

Venables goes to Gladstone and opens the cabinet

Venables Scotch?

Shirley Yes please. Neat.

Venables pours two drinks, gives Shirley hers, returns to shut the cabinet door, then resumes his standing and pacing, talking the while

Venables Excess! That's what we're against. My government's vigorously determined to cleanse the public and private life of the nation: to restore to the country its health and self-respect.

Shirley "Make Morality Matter!"

Venables Yes. That was *my* phrase, you know. Cheers!

Shirley Cheers!

Venables I'm glad you're also a believer in moderation. You're a very attractive girl, my dear, a fine advertisement for our principles.

Shirley Thanks. You don't look bad yourself.

Venables Oh—very kind of you to say so. By the way, shouldn't you have a pad and pencil or something?

Shirley No, I remember everything.

Venables I see. Well—it's good of you to call, I don't see many pretty girls in here. Where was I?

Shirley Moderation.

Venables Yes, moderation. This government was elected on its programme of morality and restraint, and I want your readers to know that those remain our watch words.

Shirley Morality and restraint?

Venables Morality and restraint. Let me top up your glass.

Shirley Oh, thank you.

Venables goes to Gladstone and fetches a bottle of whisky from the cabinet. He returns and tops up Shirley's glass. Then he puts the bottle on a handy table, and sits down on the settee with her

Venables But I mustn't go on about *me*, my dear. What about *you*? No doubt you've got some questions to ask about me.

Shirley There are rumours that tomorrow's Budget'll be very tough, clamping down on all sorts of things. Bashing the permissive society.

Venables The Budget has to remain confidential until the Chancellor, Mr Cramond, reveals it to the House. But, of course, legislation of the kind you describe is imminent. We've said all along that we'll vigorously pursue those who prey on the moral weakness of others.

Shirley Like strip shows and rude films, and that sort of thing?

Venables Exactly. People who exploit fleshly desires for financial gain.

Shirley You're going to sort of stamp out sex?

Venables (*the last word, and the proximity of the voluptuous Shirley, having an effect upon him*) Er—no. No, by no means. I'm not against sex *itself*, my dear. If two people are—er—mutually attracted, and they so conduct themselves as to not—er—offend public morals, then—er—let them.

Shirley Let them what?

Venables Well, let them—er—do what they want—er—to do. As long as they don't upset the tourists. All this is off the record, of course. (*He takes a stiff swig of his whisky*) What a lovely dress that is. Lovely.

The main door opens, and Campbell enters as prearranged.

Venables leaps to his feet, annoyed at the interruption

Campbell Pardon me, Prime Minister, I thought I'd better remind you of the meeting.

Venables Meeting? What meeting?

Campbell The meeting. The Defence meeting.

Venables There's no Defence meeting today!

Campbell Oh. Isn't there? I meant—the *Budget* meeting—some ends to tie up . . .

Venables Don't ramble, Campbell! Can't you see I'm in the middle of an important interview?

Campbell It's very urgent.

Venables What is?

Campbell Oh—er—*it*.

Venables You're talking nonsense, man. Leave us alone, and see that I'm not disturbed again.

Campbell All the same, you did tell me to say . . .

Venables Campbell!

Campbell Yes. Very good, Prime Minister.

Campbell withdraws, bewildered, and closes the main door behind him

The Prime Minister sits down again, beside Shirley

Venables So sorry, my dear. The burden of office, you know: they bring everything to me. You were putting some questions . . .

Shirley Yes, you said just now that smoking and alcohol threaten the welfare of the nation?

Venables In excess.

Shirley Have you always felt the same way? As a young man didn't you ever have a night out with the boys?

