

# VENABLES / CAMPBELL / FROBISHER / CRAMOND

Act I, Scene 1

3

**Venables** Then bring me a breath tablet at the same time. Mr Gladstone has some next to the Scotch.

*There is a portrait of Mr Gladstone on one of the side walls. Campbell swings it outwards. It turns out to be the door of a drinks cabinet, wherein are bottles, glasses, and a cigar box. Campbell pours the Prime Minister a whisky and takes it to him with a small tin of tablets, and a cigar*

How does the Chancellor feel about my doing this television chat on Sunday?

**Campbell** (*lighting Venables' cigar*) He has the idea you might be trying to steal the thunder from his Budget broadcast tomorrow. He feels this new Puritan movement is his baby.

**Venables** Nonsense! I saw the way public opinion was going eighteen months ago—after that business with the Home Secretary and the Bunny girls. I told the Party Policy Committee, "The people have had too much of this permissiveness", I said. They're ready for the Puritan Backlash.

**Campbell** How right you were.

**Venables** The British like discipline, Campbell. Remember Cromwell.

**Campbell** I think the Chancellor feels he's a better Cromwell than you are.

**Venables** Maybe. Between ourselves, Campbell, the Chancellor's obsessive morality is almost obscene. He and his cronies are taking this clean-up campaign a bit too far.

**Campbell** Most of the Cabinet are behind him, though. Not to mention all the Purity League groups up and down the country. I think that's why he feels the whole thing's his baby. He'd like to have the television coverage to himself.

**Venables** We in the Progressive Party have never gone in for internal feuds. But do remember, some Prime Ministers have been unseated by members of their own governments.

**Campbell** Lloyd George, eh?

**Venables** Yes, and Asquith. And Gladstone.

**Campbell** (*taking Venables' empty glass*) Gladstone? Certainly, sir. (*He refills the glass at the drinks cabinet*) You haven't forgotten there's a journalist coming to see you?

**Venables** No, I haven't. A daughter of Lord Rotherbrook, I gather.

**Campbell** She's just started working for one of his Sunday papers. They want an exclusive on "Life at Number Ten".

**Venables** After what old Rotherbrook's papers did for us at the election, I suppose it's the least I can do.

*Campbell hands Venables his refilled glass*

*There is a knock on the door to the Chancellor's passage. It is opened and the Chancellor's secretary, Miss Frobisher, appears. She is in her twenties, potentially pretty, but her charms are blurred by unattractive glasses, severe hair-style, and stodgy clothes. Her sole concession to femininity is her crush on Rodney Campbell*

Miss Frobisher Pardon me, Prime Minister, but the Chancellor would like a word with you. (*Winsomely*) Good afternoon, Mr Campbell.

Campbell Good afternoon, Miss er—um . . .

*Venables starts nervously. He opens the top drawer of his desk, drops in his lighted cigar, and slams it shut. He takes a quick swig of his drink, opens another drawer, and is about to put the still half-full glass in it*

*The Chancellor, the Rt Hon. Hector Cramond, enters. He is a sturdy, no-nonsense Scotsman, in his fifties: a militant Scots Puritan, whose harsh exterior conceals a heart of stone. But somewhere deep down there may lurk a spark of humanity. He wears a black jacket, striped trousers and a militant expression, and carries a file of papers*

Venables Come in, Hector, come in. (*Caught with the glass in his hand*) My blood mixture, you know.

Cramond Smells like whisky.

Venables Yes, it's unfortunate, isn't it? The manufacturers are trying to eliminate the odour.

Cramond I want a final word about tomorrow's Budget.

Venables Very well, but there's a journalist coming to see me in a few minutes.

Cramond Journalist? Is that wise? We don't want any suggestion of Budget leaks.

Venables My dear fellow, Lord Rotherbrook's daughter wants to do an article on "Life at Number Ten". There'll be no mention of parliamentary business.

Cramond Hm.

Venables Anyway the public already know what to expect from our Budget.

Cramond They look to *my* Budget to smash the permissive society. And they'll not be disappointed! I've decided to start my speech to the House by launching straight into the new taxation proposals. Firstly, I'll announce the trebling of tax on cigarettes and alcoholic liquor, as from three o'clock tomorrow afternoon.

Venables So there'll be no chance of anyone beating the axe?

Cramond (*thumping the desk*) Right!

Venables Don't you feel some sort of introduction desirable? This is the first time a government's deliberately used the Budget to alter the nation's way of life.

Cramond (*uncertainly*) Well, that's as may be, but . . .

Miss Frobisher Excuse me, Chancellor . . .

Cramond What is it, Frobisher?

Miss Frobisher What the Prime Minister says isn't quite correct. Social reform was the basic purpose of the Budget of eighteen sixty-two. According to Hansard, the debate was . . .

Cramond All right, Frobisher. I was about to mention that. Anyway—the public *want* us to stamp out vice and immorality and to clean up Britain.

Venables It's what I promised at the election. But, as I said, it's unusual



to stamp out social evils by fiscal means, rather than by discreet legislation.

*Smoke now appears from the desk drawer into which Venables dropped his lighted cigar earlier*

**Cramond** Getting separate bills through the House, banning everything we disapprove of, would have taken years. With my Budget, we tax them all out of existence in one fell swoop. By the way your desk seems to be on fire.

**Venables** Parliamentary precedent . . . *(He hastily opens the drawer into which he dropped the cigar)* Good Lord! It's—er—that wretched pipe they make me use for television speeches. Do something about this, will you, Campbell?

*Campbell, who has become aware of Miss Frobisher's steady and adoring gaze, is quite glad to escape and come to the Prime Minister's assistance. He peers into the offending drawer*

**Campbell** It seems to have ignited some of your papers, sir.

**Cramond** There's a fire bucket in the hall, man.

*Campbell removes the drawer and carries it with him as he goes to leave by the main door*

**Venables** *(calling after him)* Those papers are the Defence Estimates, by the way. Get on to the Ministry, will you, and tell them to send some more. Say those weren't detailed enough.

**Campbell** Very good, sir.

*Campbell goes, with smoke billowing in his wake*

**Cramond** And another thing, I propose a guillotine on the Budget debate.

We don't want the Opposition messing about and clouding the issue.

**Venables** Now, Hector, we are a democracy, you know, and this is a controversial matter. The Budget debate is never guillotined.

**Cramond** Then it's time it was.

**Miss Frobisher** Excuse me, Chancellor. According to Hansard, the Budget debate was curtailed in nineteen fifteen.

**Cramond** Just what I was going to point out.

**Venables** But nineteen fifteen? That was a national emergency. A war.

**Cramond** And so is this a national emergency. A war against filth! *(To Miss Frobisher)* All right, Frobisher, I want those reports typed by tea time.

**Miss Frobisher** Very good, Chancellor.

*Miss Frobisher exits by the door to the Chancellor's passage*

*Cramond presses home his attack on Venables, who is beginning to look hunted*

**Venables** Well, Hector, if that's all . . . ?

