



**PARDON ME,
PRIME MINISTER**

Auditions

Synopsis

The PM and Chancellor are preparing a severely puritanical Budget; taxing amusements such as gambling, bingo and night clubs out of existence. On the eventful afternoon before its presentation, however, shocks are in store for both of them as each in turn appears to be the father of the pretty Shirley, the result of a post party conference night years ago. Many cover ups (and uncoverings) ensue.

Roles

The Rt Hon George Venables MP (Male 45 +): Prime Minister, outwardly stern, strong and impressive. (Inwardly, a vulnerable human being.)

Rodney Campbell (Male 20-30): The PM's Parliamentary Private Secretary. Well spoken, good looking, elegant and smooth.

The Rt Hon Hector Crammond MP (Male 45+): Chancellor of the Exchequer. Sturdy, no nonsense Scotsman. A militant Scots puritan whose harsh exterior conceals a heart of stone.

Miss Frobisher (Female 20-30): The Chancellor's secretary. Encyclopaedic knowledge of Parliament, efficient, potentially pretty. Has a secret crush on Rodney Campbell.

Sybil Venables (Female 45+): The PM's wife. Sweet, vague, gracious, jolly and keen supporter of all things bright and beautiful.

Shirley Springer (Female 20s): Pole dancer and possible daughter of either the PM or Chancellor. Scatty but not dumb, cheerful, direct but with an oddly naïve manner.

Jane Rotherbrook (Female 20-30s): Press Baron's daughter; Cool and sophisticated.

Dora Springer (Female 45+): Shirley's mother. Shrewd, bright, extrovert and over-dressed.

Audition Pieces

Venables/Campbell

Venables (*briskly*): Good evening. I am speaking to you tonight from Ten Downing Street. I'd like to talk to you about the great changes in our national life which I, as your Prime Minister, have this week set in motion: changes which we believe will improve the health and happiness of the world. I know that many of you feel, as I do, that the dubious moral standards of recent years have brought with them a decline in the quality of life, in our self-respect and in our ability to compete with other world powers. As you have heard, we are now taking firm steps to arrest this decline, to sweep away slackness and self-indulgence and to restore our national morality. You know already of our measures to stamp out pornography, gambling, drunkenness and other public symptoms of the so-called permissive society. But government action alone is not enough. It is up to all of us as individuals -- to me -- and to you -- (*He gestures at the Audience with the stem of his pipe*) -- to put our shoulders to the wheel and turn back the tide. If we are to succeed in the battle against depravity, then of one thing I am sure -- very sure -- very, very sure indeed... Oh, sod it, I've forgotten again!

(At this point a previously unseen figure, sitting downstage in a high backed chair with its back to the audience, speaks. This is Rodney Campbell the Prime Minister's Parliamentary Private Secretary. He is in his early thirties, well-spoken, good looking, elegant and smooth, always showing the right amount of cuff, and appropriately deferential to the PM. He is dressed in a light grey suit.)

Campbell (*prompting*): "Our private lives must be above reproach."

Venables: Thank you, Campbell, I keep forgetting that bit.

Campbell (*rising*): Don't worry Prime Minister, I've had the first line of every paragraph printed on cue cards. (*He holds up some large white cards. He picks out one on which the recent prompt is boldly printed*) I'll be behind the camera ready to hold them up if you do dry.

Venables: Thank you, Campbell.

Campbell: Mind you, these telly chaps do have auto-cue machines. You could read the whole speech if you wanted.

Venables: I should regard that as dishonest.

Campbell: As you wish, Prime Minister. While you've paused, may I suggest a wag of the finger on "slackness and self-indulgence"? It went awfully well when you wagged a finger in Wolverhampton.

Venables: Wolverhampton isn't the nation. The feeling of the country is against flamboyance of that sort. I'm not even sure about having this pipe.

Campbell: Oh, the Image People are adamant about that. Recent research makes pipe-smoking the top stability symbol -- even ahead of dogs.

Venables: Hm. How far had I got?

Campbell: You'd finished the opening broadside and fluffed on "private lives".

Venables (*resuming his speech*): "Our private lives must be above reproach. Only by shunning the slippery slopes of selfish"-- that's a terrible phrase to have to say! Who wrote that?

Campbell: You did, sir. It was one of your alterations.

Venables: Oh (*He resumes*) “I needn’t remind you of the government’s achievements.” Er – what’s next?

Campbell: You remind them of the government’s achievements.

Venables: I don’t have to rehearse that. As it’s to do with facts and figures, I’ll consult the notes on my desk. I’ll just rehearse the closing of my speech now.

Campbell: Perhaps from where you say you “realise there’ll be criticism”?

Venables(*launching himself again*): “I realise there’ll be criticism. But I appeal to short-sighted people to take a longer view.”

(*A thought strikes him*) How long do I have on the air, Campbell?

Campbell: Ten minutes. You’ve got just under ten minutes’ material, leaving five seconds at the end for a steadfast look.

Venables: Hm. Where was I?

Campbell: You’d just said you appeal to short-sighted people.

Venables (*launching himself again*): “I appeal to short-sighted people to take a longer view. Let us build a world which we can savour with lungs untainted by cigarettes, with eyes no longer blurred by alcohol, and with hearts and minds no longer polluted by excess.” (*He stares fixedly ahead of him*)

Campbell: What’s the matter, sir? Is it your indigestion again?

Venables: Of course it isn’t! I’m rehearsing my steadfast look. “Goodnight to you all.” Right, Campbell, get me a cigar and a good stiff whisky.

Campbell (*rising to obey, but sounding a cautionary note as he goes*): Is that wise sir? The Chancellor of the Exchequer’s popping in. He can smell drink on the breath at twenty paces.

END

Venables/Campbell/Frobisher/Cramond

PM is having a cigar and a whiskey. Campbell regularly tops up the PM's glass, lights cigar for PM. 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 plain, stodgy clothes, glasses, potentially pretty. She has a 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, Cramond, enters. He is a no-nonsense Scotsman.)

Venables: Come in Hector, come in. *(Caught with 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 1862. 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 appears from desk drawer where Venables dropped his lit 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 PM'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 them 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 1915.

Cramond: Just what I was going to point out.

Venables: But 1915? 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.

END

Venables/Cramond/Sybil

(Sybil, carrying a vase of flowers, enters the room; while Cramond and Venables are in a tense discussion)

Sybil: Now then, what are you boys up to? I thought you'd like some flowers, George, as it's Monday. *(She puts the vase on the PM's desk).*

Venables: Thank you, Sybil. The Chancellor and I are in conference We're busy, my dear.

Sybil *(arranging the flowers)*: I hope you're not bullying poor Hector. *(To the Chancellor)* You must forgive him, he's so domineering sometimes.

Cramond: We're resolving some vital points on the Budget, Mrs Venables.

Sybil: How nice. *(Looking at the flowers)* No, they're not *quite* right on desk dear; Perhaps on the ... *(She lifts the vase and looks around the room)*

Cramond: This Budget will be the cornerstone on which we rebuild the nation.

Sybil *(moving to a cabinet with the flowers)*: Still got a hole in your sock Hector. You bachelors are all the same. You need a good woman to look after you.

Cramond *(looking at his sock)*: You know I'm married to my job, Mrs Venables.

Sybil *(rearranging the flowers)* Such a pity. You must have met lots of pretty girls in the past. I remember reading an article about you, years ago, in a magazine.

Venables: Sybil dear...

Cramond: Giving that interview was one of my rare lapses of judgement.

Sybil: It was called, "Hector, A Man light on his Feet, with fire in his Heart". Or was it, "a light in his Heart, with fire in his Feet"? There was a girl once – you glimpsed her briefly, then lost track of her forever.

Cramond: Tch! They embroidered everything I said.

Sybil: Awfully romantic.

Venables: Sybil dear, the matters I'm discussing with Hector are very urgent. The Budget's tomorrow, remember?

Sybil: Tomorrow will be a busy day for us all. And it's my birthday. I hope you hadn't forgotten George?

Venables *(with a start)*: Indeed not, my dear *(He makes a surreptitious note on his desk pad.)*

Sybil: Not that I'll have much time for budgets or birthdays. This "National Blood Donar Week" is taking up so much of my time. Did you know they've made me Honorary Commandant, Hector?

Cramond *(amazed)* Good heavens! Er – good heavens, how splendid.

Sybil: Such a good cause isn't it? Which reminds me, George, you haven't pledged a donation of a pint of blood.

Venables: But I gave my donation yesterday when we went to the Mobile Unit parked out there in the street. The TV cameras were there, I had to.

Sybil: That wasn't a donation, Geroge, that was just a drop of blood from your thumb so that we could register your blood group.

Venables: Oh

Sybil: You've had your blood grouped, haven't you Hector? And all your staff?

Cramond: Yes I was done this morning. I went out to the van first thing and pledged my pint, if mine is a group they want.

Sybil (*going to the main door*): I'll find Mr Campbell and ask him to send everyone who comes to Number 10 out to the Mobile Unit to be grouped.

Venables: Well, when you see Campbell, my dear, ask him to bring in the journalist as soon as she arrives. It's Lord Rotherbrook's daughter.

Sybil: Very well, dear, I mustn't waste time with you chatterboxes. I've lots to do.

END

Shirley/Venables

Shirley: Daddy?

Venables: *(jumping)* Sh!

Shirley: What have you done so far?

Venables: I've decided to have a talk with your mother face to face. The personal touch, you know, always the best way.

Shirley: This isn't a trick is it?

Venables: I'll telephone and ask her to come here as quickly as possible.

Shirley: Here's the number. *(She gives him a card from her bag)* We live in Putney.

Venables takes the card and picks up the external telephone.

Venables: No, better not use this one. I've having it tapped. We can use the hot line. *(He picks up the telephone receiver and speaks into it)* Hello?...Where are we plugged into at the moment?...Washington? Well unplug me and get me Putney. The number is 0-5-2-9. *(He passes the telephone to Shirley)* Tell her to come here as soon as possible. *(He opens the main door to make sure no-one can overhear)*

Shirley: *(into telephone)* Hello, Mummy. It's me, Shirley. I did it!...Yes! I'm here...Promise! It is a bit of a grin, isn't it?

Venables groans

Yes, I have told him, and he wants to meet you and talk... Yes he does! Can you come to Downing Street now?...Doing what?...Toenails? Well, cut them later...What? Well, paint *them* later. Come straight away.

Venables: *(urgent whisper)* Tell her to ask for Mr Campbell.

Shirley: *(excitedly)* I can't believe it! I'll see my parents together for the first time! I hope I don't become unorthodox.

Venables: *(with feeling)* And so do I, and so do I.

Shirley: Well, as we're going to behave sensibly, I'd better put my clothes on. Where's my dress?

Venables: Ah-yes a good question. Your dress.

Shirley: Where is it?

Venables: My wife took it away.

Shirley: Why?

Venables: *(hastily)* To hang it up. Now, you go into the library for a few moments, and I promise to retrieve your dress. *(He leads her to the library and opens the door).*

END

Jane Rotherbrook/Venables

Venables: This way, Miss Rotherbrook.

Jane: Thank you, Mr Venables.

Venables: Please excuse my shirt sleeves, but we're workers here, you know. We don't put on a show.

Jane: May I quote that? *(She produces her pencil and notebook)*

Venables: By all means. *(Repeating slowly)* "We're all workers here, we don't put on a show."

Jane: It's so kind of you to spare a few minutes of your precious time. *(Writing in her notebook, she wanders over to the Gladstone portrait)*

Venables: This morning's been usually hectic, but I'm delighted to help you. After all, your father's newspapers have helped me many times in the past. You may quote that too.

Jane: Thank you. *(Laying a hand on the Gladstone frame)* Ah, Mr Gladstone, I presume?

(Hastily Venables pushes the picture back into position as it is about to open and reveal the drinks cupboard.)

Venables: The Grand Old Man – he means a lot to us here.

(Venables steers Jane away from the portrait.)

Jane: What a pleasant room. So full of history. These walls have seen so much – if only they could talk.

Venables: *(with an uneasy laugh)* This room is "The Power House of the Nation" you know.

Jane: But it's so warm and friendly – I'd describe it as the Heart of the Nation.

Venables: Oh very good Miss Rotherbrook! Very good indeed. The "Heart of the Nation". Yes that's exactly what it is – and you may quote me.

(Jane raises her eyebrows and moves towards the library)

Jane: Is that the Cabinet Room in there?

Venables: No, that's the library. Whence comes my wisdom and inspiration. Ah yes-- many a happy hour I've passed in there, curled up in an armchair with a Macaulay or Gibbon, or even a Trollope.

(Jane opens the library door, but before she can go in Venables utters a cry, for he of course thinks that the undressed Shirley is still in there. He runs towards Jane but trips and falls at her feet. As he falls he clutches Jane's dress and tears it.)

Jane: Mr Venables! Are you all right?

Venables: *(picking himself up)* I think so – you can't go in there Miss Rotherbrook, not at the moment.

Jane: Oh?

Venables: Decorators! You see, the place is littered with –er – painters and dust-sheets and –er-decorators. They came in an hour ago. Unexpectedly. *(He sees her torn dress)* Your dress!

Jane: My dress! What a damned nuisance, it's torn.

Venables: Did I do that? I do apologise, Miss Rotherbrook! How clumsy of me. I'm so sorry.

Jane: Oh don't worry. If someone can find me a needle and thread, I'll fix it in a moment.

(Venables goes to the side table on which his wife left one of her needlework boxes.)

Venables: Here we are, the very thing.

(While Venables rummages in the box, the library door swings open, and Jane looks in.)

Jane: Oh! There are no decorators in there, Mr Venables.

Venables: *(swinging round)* No! I mean- no?

Jane: No, not a soul.

Venables: They've been quicker than I thought.

Jane: But you said they'd only been here an hour?

Venables: It's the Incentive Scheme my Government introduced.

(Jane takes the needlework box)

Jane: Thanks so much. I'll just go in here and repair the damage.

Venables: Yes you do that. And again, may I say how sorry I am.

(The internal telephone rings. Venables goes to answer it.)

Excuse me. Affairs of State, you know.

Jane: But of course.

(Jane exits into the library)

END

Dora/Venables/Shirley/Campbell

(When the CURTAIN rises Venables lies prostrate on settee with a large ice pack on his head. Dora hovers in attendance.)

Dora: Come along, Moley. You'll be all right. Take deep breaths, that'll make you feel better. You've had a nasty shock that's all.

Venables: That's all? *(He groans)* My reputation *(He groans)* My head.

Venables tries to sit up but Dora pushes him down again

Dora: Out like a light, you were. You must try and rest for a while.

Venables: It's a nightmare. I know it is.

(Shirley enters from the library, wearing the outdoor coat she arrived in)

Shirley: Where is Mr Campbell? I want my dress.

(Campbell enters from the ante-room)

Campbell: Did someone call?

Shirley: There you are. I think you should reimburse me.

Dora *(lightly)* Shirley! None of that dear.

Venables: I know I'm only the Prime Minister, but will someone please tell me what's happening?

Campbell: We have come to an arrangement, sir. I've taken twenty pounds from the Petty Cash, so that Shirley here can pop out to buy herself a new dress.

Dora: Don't worry, Shirley, I'll hold the fort.

Shirley: Be sure he doesn't try to get rid of you. You've got to watch these politicians. I'll be back as soon as I can.

Venables *(with feeling)*: No hurry.

Shirley: See you later, Daddy.

(Shirley blows a kiss and exits by the main door)

Venables *(weakly)*: Campbell? Do me a favour will you, and tell me it's eight o'clock in the morning.

Campbell *(puzzled)*: Er – it's eight o'clock in the morning.

Venables: Tell me I've had a night full of nightmares. Tell me I'm not anyone's father, tell me I don't know this lady, and above all, tell me that the Chancellor of the Exchequer didn't see what he thought he saw.

Campbell: All those undressed ladies?

Dora: It wasn't a nightmare, Moley, you silly old thing.

Venables: Oh God! *(He falls prostrate on the settee again)*

Dora: He's had another turn, Mr Campbell – no he hasn't, his eyes are open – crossed but open.

(Campbell bends over Venables)

Campbell: Everything's been smoothed over, sir.

Venables: It has?

Campbell *(moving to the Gladstone portrait, opening it and taking out the whisky decanter)* I told the Chancellor the ladies undressed to give samples for National Blood Week.

Venables: Oh?

Campbell: And I said Miss Springer here was part of the organisation.

Dora: Well, would you believe it?

Venables: No, but if Cramond does, I'm in the clear for a while. And my wife, Campbell? What did you tell her?

Campbell: Oh, the same. She got the general gist, she doesn't have much of an ear for detail. She was just delighted to have more blood donors.

Dora: Oh, that explains it. She made us all give blood samples. I can still feel that needle in my thumb.

(Campbell walks towards the ante-room with the whisky decanter)

Venables: Campbell – where are you taking my whisky?

Campbell: To Miss Rotherbrook *(He points towards the ante-room)*

Venables: She's still here?

Campbell: In there. She was all set to tell the whole story in her father's paper.

Venables: I *am* finished, then!

Campbell: Not yet, sir. By the time she's had a few Gladstones she'll have a change of heart.

Venables: Good luck, Campbell. Remember the Party's reputation's at stake.

Campbell: Yes, sir.

Venables: And my job.

Campbell: Yes, sir.

Venables: Any yours.

(Campbell exits into the ante-room with the decanter)

Dora: You do as we ask, and it'll be fine. You've just got to alter that Budget.

Venables *(sitting up)*: I'd forgotten that little catch. Dora – may I call you Dora?

Dora: You used to call me "Lotus Blossom".

Venables: I'll stick to Dora. *(Pause)* I confess that I too find these punitive measures hard to take.

Campbell/Jane Rotherbrook

Campbell: Miss Rotherbrook – Jane, please don't go, let me explain.

(Jane, now wearing her own dress held together by bulldog clips, moves to the main door but Campbell bars the way.)

Wait, please.

Jane: Wait? For what? To be softened up with whisky so I forget my story?

Campbell: You can't go back to your paper in a torn dress, held together by Stationery Office bulldog clips.

Jane: But that's all part of my scoop. Think of those headlines – "Undressed Dollies at Number Ten" – "PM Tears Off Journalist's Clothes".

Campbell: You can't leave – I forbid it! I have a job to do.

Jane: And so have I. I was sent here to get a story, and I've got one *hell* of a story!

Campbell: There's a perfectly logical explanation.

Jane *(laughing)*: I wasn't born yesterday!

Campbell: Look, if you wait in the ante-room you'll hear something that'll give you the biggest scoop your newspaper's everlikely to have. The Prime Minister's not your man. There's no story there I assure you. But the Chancellor, haha!

Jane: What do you mean haha?

Campbell: There's a different kettle of fish. How can I phrase it? The Chancellor is *unstable*.

Jane: Well he was shouting a great deal but so was everyone else. Unstable in what way?

Campbell: *Morally* unstable.

Jane: *(Insisting)* But in *what* way?

Campbell: Oh, this and that. And quite a bit of the other.

Jane: *(Interestedly)* Really?

Campbell: The Chancellor doesn't match up to the PM's high moral standards, I promise you. Haven't you heard the stories of Cramond's private life?

Jane *(amazed)*: But – but I always thought he was a pillar of rectitude, a Puritan of the first degree.

Campbell: The man's a whited sepulchre.

Jane: I can hardly believe it.

Campbell: If you write the story you think you've got, you'll make a fool of yourself. On the other hand, you can take my advice, wait in the ante-room and just listen. Remember – *(he steers her into the ante-room)*—Cramond is your man!

(Jane goes in unprotesting; he closes the door after her, leaning against it to mop his brow. As soon as he moves away she pops out again.)

Jane: Give me a hint – what is his "thing"?

Campbell: His thing?

Jane: Well you know – call-girls? Or choir-boys?

Campbell: Oh, everything – anything. Bus conductors, charladies – you name it.

Jane: My God!

(Jane exits to the ante-room, as the main door opens and Dora and Venables enter.)

END