

START

MRS. BOYLE. Mrs. Ralston, if you don't mind my saying so, that is a very extraordinary young man you have staying here. His manners – and his ties – and does he ever brush his hair?

MOLLIE. He's an extremely brilliant young architect.

MRS. BOYLE. I beg your pardon?

MOLLIE. Christopher Wren is an architect...

MRS. BOYLE. My dear young woman. I have naturally heard of Sir Christopher Wren. *(She crosses to the fire.)* Of course, he was an architect. He built St Paul's. You young people seem to think that no-one is educated but yourselves.

MOLLIE. I meant *this* Wren. His name is Christopher. His parents called him that because they hoped he'd be an architect. *(She crosses to the sofa table and takes a cigarette from the box.)* And he is – or nearly one – so it turned out all right.

MRS. BOYLE. Humph. Sounds a fishy story to me. *(She sits in the large armchair.)* I should make some inquiries about him if I were you. What do you know of him?

MOLLIE. Just as much as I know about you, Mrs. Boyle – which is that you are both paying us seven guineas a week. *(She lights her cigarette.)* That is really all I need to know, isn't it? And all that concerns me. It doesn't matter to me whether I like my guests, or whether *(meaningly)* I don't.

MRS. BOYLE. You are young and inexperienced and should welcome advice from someone more knowledgeable than yourself. And what about this foreigner?

MOLLIE. What about him?

MRS. BOYLE. You weren't expecting him, were you?

MOLLIE. To turn away a *bona fide* traveller is against the law, Mrs. Boyle. *You* should know that.

MRS. BOYLE. Why do you say that?

MOLLIE. *(moving down centre)* Weren't you a magistrate, sitting on the bench, Mrs. Boyle?

MRS. BOYLE. All I say is that this Paravicini, or whatever he calls himself, seems to me...

*(PARAVICINI enters softly from the stairs left.)*

PARAVICINI. Beware, dear lady. You talk of the devil and here he is. Ha, ha.

*(MRS. BOYLE jumps.)*

MRS. BOYLE. I didn't hear you come in.

*(MOLLIE moves behind the sofa table.)*

PARAVICINI. I came in on tiptoe – like this. *(He demonstrates, moving down centre.)* Nobody ever hears me if I do not want them to. I find that very amusing.

MRS. BOYLE. Indeed?

PARAVICINI. *(sitting in the armchair centre)* Now there was a young lady...

MRS. BOYLE. *(rising)* Well, I must get on with my letters. I'll see if it's a little warmer in the drawing-room.

*(MRS. BOYLE exits to the drawing-room down left.*

*MOLLIE follows her to the door.)*

PARAVICINI. My charming hostess looks upset. What is it, dear lady? *(He leers at her.)*

MOLLIE. Everything's rather difficult this morning. Because of the snow.

PARAVICINI. Yes. Snow makes things difficult, does it not? *(He rises.)* Or else it makes them easy. *(He moves up to the refectory table and sits.)* Yes – very easy.

MOLLIE. I don't know what you mean.

PARAVICINI. No, there is quite a lot you do not know. I think, for one thing, that you do not know very much about running a guest house.

MOLLIE. *(moving to left of the sofa table and stubbing out her cigarette)* I daresay we don't. But we mean to make a go of it.

PARAVICINI. Bravo – bravo! *(He claps his hands and rises.)*

MOLLIE. I'm not such a very bad cook...

PARAVICINI. (*leering*) You are without doubt an enchanting cook. (*He moves behind the sofa table and takes MOLLIE's hand.*)

(*MOLLIE draws it away and moves below the sofa down centre.*)

May I give you a little word of warning, Mrs. Ralston? (*moving below the sofa*) You and your husband must not be too trusting, you know. Have you references with these guests of yours?

MOLLIE. Is that usual? (*She turns to PARAVICINI.*) I always thought people just – just *came*?

PARAVICINI. It is advisable to know a little about the people who sleep under your roof. Take, for example, myself. I turn up saying that my car is overturned in a snowdrift. What do you know of me? Nothing at all! I may be a thief, a robber, (*He moves slowly towards MOLLIE.*) a fugitive from justice – a madman – even – a murderer.

MOLLIE. (*backing away*) Oh!

PARAVICINI. You see! And perhaps you know just as little of your other guests.

MOLLIE. Well, as far as Mrs. Boyle goes...

(*MRS. BOYLE enters from the drawing-room. MOLLIE moves up centre to the refectory table.*)

MRS. BOYLE. The drawing-room is far too cold to sit in. I shall write my letters in here. (*She crosses to the large armchair.*)

PARAVICINI. Allow me to poke the fire for you. (*He moves right and does so.*)

(*MAJOR METCALF enters up right through the archway.*)

MAJOR METCALF. (*to MOLLIE; with old-fashioned modesty*) Mrs. Ralston, is your husband about? I'm afraid the pipes of the – er – the downstairs cloakroom are frozen.

MOLLIE. Oh dear. What an awful day. First the police and then the pipes. (*She moves to the arch up right.*)

STOP