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DANGEROUS CORNER

A Play in Three Acts

by J. B. Priestley

SAMUEL FRENCH

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

John Boynton Priestley was born on 13th September 1894 in Yorkshire. After leaving school at sixteen, he worked in a wool office, but was determined to become a writer, with his spare time spent buying books and writing. His first published article was "Secrets of the Rag-Time King" which appeared in London Opinion in 1912.

His writing success allowed him to enter the theatre world, working on *The Good Companions* and his first solo play *Dangerous Corner*. Some of his best-known plays include: *Time & The Conways, I Have Been here Before, An Inspector Calls* and *When We Are Married.*

AUTHOR'S NOTE

I should like to call the attention of prospective producers of this play to the alternative version of the beginning and end, to be found on pages 90-97 (beginning) and 98-102 (end). This was written for the American producers, who did not care for the wireless play effect in the original version. Perhaps it is neither so plausible nor so amusing as the original beginning, but it is simpler to produce, less confusing, and allows a few minutes' dialogue before the blackout and the shot.

J. B. P.

DANGEROUS CORNER

Produced at the Lyric Theatre, London, on May 17th, 1932, with the following cast of characters:

(In the order of their appearance)

FREDA CAPLAN	Marie Ney
MISS MOCKRIDGE	Esmé Church
BETTY WHITEHOUSE	Isla Bevan
OLWEN PEEL	Flora Robson
CHARLES STANTON	Frank Allenby
GORDON WHITEHOUSE	William Fox
ROBERT CAPLAN	Richard Bird

The Play produced by Tyrone Guthrie

SCENE

The Drawing-room of the Caplans' House
at Chantbury Close. After Dinner

Time – the Present

The action of the Play is continuous

ACT I*

The drawing-room of the **CAPLANS***' Home at Chantbury Close. It is after dinner.*

For details, see Furniture and Property Plot at the end of the play.

The curtain rises on the stage in darkness. There is a sound of a revolver shot, somewhat muffled, followed by a woman's scream. After a small interval of silence, **FREDA** *says, with a touch of irony, "There!" and switches on the lights at the mantelpiece, where she remains standing for a minute or two.*

OLWEN *is discovered sitting in the armchair below the fireplace left.* **BETTY** *is sitting on the settee down centre.* **MISS MOCKRIDGE** *is in the armchair, right centre, smoking a cigarette from a long cigarette-holder.*

FREDA CAPLAN *is in her late twenties or early thirties, rather tall and fair. She is very smart and self-possessed, superficially rather hard, but capable of showing signs of deep emotion.*

OLWEN PEEL *is about the same age as* **FREDA***, dark, not so smart, but quite trim. She has a pleasant open manner, but is just a trifle aloof.*

BETTY WHITEHOUSE*, in her early twenties, is very pretty, preferably rather small, and a decided blonde. She should be dressed to emphasize her youthfulness.*

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*See Author's Note on page viii.

Petulant, kittenish, in lighter scenes, and shrill and hysterical in the emotional passages.

MISS MOCKRIDGE, *between forty-five and fifty, is a heavy, sophisticated woman, well-dressed. She has an authoritative manner and a speculative eye.*

They are all in evening dress, and have obviously been listening to the wireless—on the table up right—and waiting for the men to join them. **FREDA** *starts to move across to switch off the set when the wireless announcer, speaking in the accents of his kind, begins:*

ANNOUNCER You have just been listening to a play in eight scenes, specially written for Broadcasting, by Mr. Humphrey Stoat, called "The Sleeping Dog."

FREDA *(crossing slowly to the radio set)* And that's that. I hope it didn't bore you, Miss Mockridge?

MISS MOCKRIDGE Not in the least.

BETTY I don't like the plays and the stuffy talks. I like the dance music, and so does Gordon.

FREDA *(switching off the radio)* Dance fiends! You know, Miss Mockridge, every time my brother Gordon comes here, he annoys us by fiddling about trying to get dance music. *(She comes down and switches on the lamp on the piano)*

BETTY I *adore* switching off the solemn pompous lecturers—just extinguishing them.

MISS MOCKRIDGE What did they call that play?

OLWEN "The Sleeping Dog."

MISS MOCKRIDGE Why the "sleeping" dog?

BETTY Because you had to let him lie.

FREDA Let who lie? *(She takes a cigarette from the box on the piano, then crosses behind* **MISS MOCKRIDGE***'s chair to the table centre)*

BETTY Well, they were all telling lies, weren't they? Or they had been.

MISS MOCKRIDGE How many scenes did we miss?

OLWEN Five, I think.

FREDA *lights her cigarette from a match on the table.*

MISS MOCKRIDGE I suppose they must have been telling a lot of lies in those scenes. That's why that man was so angry—the husband, I mean.

BETTY But which was the husband? Was it the one with the adenoidy voice?

MISS MOCKRIDGE *(briskly)* Yes; the one with the adenoidy voice: and he went and shot himself. Very pathetic, I'm sure.

FREDA Rather too many adenoids. *(She sits on left arm of the armchair left centre)*

MISS MOCKRIDGE They're rather pathetic, too.

They laugh, and then there comes a subdued burst of laughter from the men in the dining-room, somewhere off right.

BETTY Listen to the men.

MISS MOCKRIDGE They're probably laughing at something very improper.

BETTY No, just gossip. Men gossip like anything.

FREDA Of course they do.

MISS MOCKRIDGE Quite right. People who don't like gossip aren't interested in their fellow creatures. I insist upon my publishers gossiping.

BETTY Yes, but the men pretend it's business.

FREDA They've got a marvellous excuse now that they're all three directors of the firm.

MISS MOCKRIDGE Yes, of course. Miss Peel, I think you ought to marry Mr. Stanton.

OLWEN Oh, why should I?

MISS MOCKRIDGE To complete the pattern here. Then there'd be three pairs of adoring husbands and wives. I was thinking so all through dinner.

FREDA There you are, Olwen.

MISS MOCKRIDGE I'm almost prepared to marry Charles Stanton myself to be one of your charmed circle. What a snug little group you are.

FREDA Are we?

MISS MOCKRIDGE Well, aren't you?

FREDA *(with a laugh, rising)* Snug little group. *(Moving over to the piano)* How awful!

MISS MOCKRIDGE Not awful at all. I think it's charming.

FREDA *(smiling)* It sounds disgusting.

BETTY Yes. Like Dickens or a Christmas card.

MISS MOCKRIDGE And very nice things to be. In these days almost too good to be true.

FREDA *(apparently amused)* Oh, why should it be?

OLWEN I didn't know you were such a pessimist, Miss Mockridge.

MISS MOCKRIDGE Didn't you? Then you don't read the reviews of my books—and you ought to, you know, being an employee of my publishers. I shall complain of that to my three directors when they come in. *(She gives a slight laugh)* Certainly I'm a pessimist. But I didn't mean it that way, of course. I think it's wonderful.

FREDA It *is* rather nice here. We've been lucky.

OLWEN Enchanting. I hate to leave it. *(To* **MISS MOCKRIDGE***)* You know, I'm in the town office now—not down here at the press—but I come back as often as I can.

MISS MOCKRIDGE I'm sure you do. It must be so comforting to be all so settled.

BETTY Pretty good.

MISS MOCKRIDGE *(to* **FREDA***)* But I suppose you all miss your brother-in-law. He used to be down here with you too, didn't he?

FREDA *(embarrassed, turning to* **MISS MOCKRIDGE***)* You mean Robert's brother, Martin.

MISS MOCKRIDGE Yes, Martin Caplan. I was in America at the time, and never quite understood what happened. Something rather dreadful, wasn't it?

There is a pause, and **BETTY** *and* **OLWEN** *look at* **FREDA.** **MISS MOCKRIDGE** *looks from one to the other.*

Oh, have I dropped a brick? I always am dropping bricks.

FREDA *(sitting on the piano-stool, and speaking very quietly)* No, not at all. It was distressing for us at the time, but it's all right now. Martin shot himself. It happened nearly a year ago—last June, in fact—not here, but at Fallows End, about twenty miles away. He'd taken a cottage there.

MISS MOCKRIDGE Oh yes—dreadful business, of course. I only met him twice, I think. I remember I thought him very amusing and charming. He was very handsome, wasn't he?

CHARLES STANTON *and* **GORDON WHITEHOUSE** *come in right.* **STANTON** *is about forty, dark, with a small moustache. He has a deep voice and a manner that is rather harsh and authoritative.* **GORDON**, *about twenty-four or twenty-five, is fairly tall, slight and good-looking. He has an indolent, graceful, Oxford-ish manner in lighter scenes, but with frequent suggestions of underlying hysteria. Both men wear well-cut dinner-jackets.*

OLWEN Yes, very handsome.

STANTON *crosses below the settee and takes up a position in front of the fireplace.* **GORDON** *goes to the settee, sits at right end with his back to the audience, and takes* **BETTY***'s hand.*

STANTON *(with jovial condescension)* Who's very handsome?

FREDA Not you, Charles.

STANTON May we know, or is it some grand secret between you?

GORDON They were talking about me. Betty, why do you allow them all to talk about your husband in this fulsome fashion? Have you no shame, girl?

Everybody talks ad lib. here, until the entrance of **ROBERT**.

STANTON How's the new novel going?

MISS MOCKRIDGE Splendidly, thanks.

STANTON Is it as naughty as the last?

MISS MOCKRIDGE I'm afraid it is.

BETTY *(squeezing his hand)* Darling, I'm sure you've had too much manly gossip and old brandy. You're beginning to look purple in the face and bloated—a typical financier.

GORDON *kisses her hand.*

ROBERT CAPLAN *comes in right, switching on the light at the doorway as he enters. He is between thirty and thirty-five, of medium height and build, clean-shaven, with a pleasant smile. He must be able to suggest honest bewilderment without seeming too stupid. He wears a well-cut dinner-jacket.*

ROBERT Sorry to be so late, Freda—but it's that wretched puppy of yours.

FREDA Oh, what's it been doing now?

ROBERT *(moving to right of, and a little below,* **MISS MOCKRIDGE***'s chair)* It was eating the script of Sonia William's new novel, and I thought it might make him sick.

BETTY Oh, the darling.

OLWEN How—

ROBERT You see, Miss Mockridge, how we talk of you novelists.

MISS MOCKRIDGE Yes, I heard you. I've just been saying what a charming cosy little group you've made here, all of you.

ROBERT I'm glad you think so.

MISS MOCKRIDGE I think you've all been lucky.

ROBERT I agree, we have.

STANTON It's not all luck, Miss Mockridge. You see, we all happen to be nice easy-going people.

ROBERT Except Betty—she's terribly wild.

STANTON That's only because Gordon doesn't beat her often enough—yet.

MISS MOCKRIDGE You see, Miss Peel, Mr. Stanton is still the cynical bachelor—I'm afraid he rather spoils the picture.

STANTON Miss Peel can't afford to talk—she's transferred herself to the London office and deserted us. *(He strolls down left and picks up a glass-case puzzle which is lying on the table. He then sits on the downstage arm of* **OLWEN***'s chair and tries to work it, rolling the ball about)*

OLWEN I come back here as often as I'm asked.

GORDON *(rising, moving up to the radio and playfully turning* **ROBERT** *round as he passes him)* But whether it's to see me or Robert, we can't yet decide. Anyhow, our wives are getting jealous.

BETTY *(laughing)* Oh, frightfully.

GORDON *(beginning to fiddle with the wireless)* What's disturbing the ether to-night? Anybody know?

ROBERT I'll find something for you. *(He picks up the "Radio Times" from the piano and begins to look through it)*

FREDA Oh, Gordon, don't start it again. We've only just turned it off.

GORDON What did you hear?

FREDA The last half of a play.

OLWEN It was called "The Sleeping Dog."

STANTON *(without looking up from his puzzle)* Why?

MISS MOCKRIDGE We're not sure—something to do with lies, and a gentleman shooting himself.

STANTON *(still without looking up)* What fun they have at the B.B.C.

FREDA Yes, don't they? Shots and things.

OLWEN *(rising and moving up to the armchair left centre)* You know, I believe I understand that play now. The sleeping dog was the truth, do you see, and that man—the husband—insisted upon disturbing it. *(She sits on the left arm)*

ROBERT He was quite right to disturb it. *(He turns to the piano, puts down the "Radio Times," then takes a cigarette and lights it)*

STANTON *(looking up)* Was he, I wonder. I think it a very sound idea—the truth as a sleeping dog.

MISS MOCKRIDGE Of course, we do spend too much of our time telling lies and acting them.

BETTY Oh, but one has to. I'm always fibbing. I do it all day long.

GORDON *(still fiddling with the wireless)* You do, darling, you do.

BETTY It's the secret of my charm.

MISS MOCKRIDGE Very likely. But we meant something much more serious.

ROBERT *(moving to right end of settee and sitting, facing up stage)* Serious or not, I'm all for it coming out. It's healthy.

STANTON *(rising, drifting down to table left and leaning back against it)* I think telling the truth is about as healthy as skidding round a corner at sixty. *(He still holds the puzzle)*

FREDA And life's got a lot of dangerous corners—hasn't it, Charles?

STANTON It can have—if you don't choose your route well. *(Leaning over towards* **OLWEN***)* To lie or not to lie—what do you think, Olwen? You're looking terribly wise.

OLWEN I agree with you. I think telling everything is dangerous. The point is, I think—there's truth *and* truth.

GORDON *(turning)* I always agree to that. *(Leaning against the piano)* Something *and* something.

STANTON Shut up, Gordon. Go on, Olwen.

MISS MOCKRIDGE Yes—go on.

OLWEN *(thoughtfully)* Well—the real truth—that is, every single little thing, with nothing missing at all, wouldn't be dangerous. I suppose that's God's truth. But what most people mean by truth, what that man meant in the wireless play, is only half the real truth. It doesn't tell you all that went on inside everybody. It simply gives you a lot of facts that happened to have been hidden away and were perhaps a lot better hidden away. It's rather treacherous stuff.

GORDON Yes, like the muck they drag out of everybody in the law courts. "Where were you on the night of the twenty-seventh of November last? Answer yes or no."

MISS MOCKRIDGE I'm not convinced, Miss Peel. I'm ready to welcome what you call half the truth—the facts.

ROBERT *(with one foot upon the settee, tying his shoelace)* So am I. I'm all for it.

FREDA *(enigmatically)* You would be, Robert.

ROBERT What do you mean by that, Freda?

FREDA *(nonchalantly)* Anything; nothing. *(Rising and going to the drink table up right)* Let's talk about something more amusing. Who wants a drink? Drinks, Robert. And cigarettes.

ROBERT *(rising and examining cigarette-box on table centre)* There aren't any here. *(He crosses to the piano and is about to take up cigarette-box from there)*

FREDA There are some in this one. *(She takes the musical cigarette-box from the table up right, being careful to keep it closed, and moves down between* **MISS MOCKRIDGE** *and* **OLWEN***)* Miss Mockridge, Olwen—a cigarette? *(Offering the closed box to them)*

OLWEN *(looking at the box)* Oh, I remember that box. *(Rising)* It plays a tune at you, doesn't it? I remember the tune. Yes, it's the Wedding March, isn't it? *(She opens the box, taking a cigarette, and the box plays)*

ROBERT Good, isn't it?

FREDA *(snapping the box shut)* It can't have been this box you remember. This is the first time I've had it out. It belonged to—someone else.

OLWEN It belonged to Martin, didn't it? He showed it to me.

GORDON *moves down to below* **MISS MOCKRIDGE** *as Martin's name is mentioned. There is a tiny silence. The two women look at each other steadily.*

FREDA He couldn't have shown it to you, Olwen. He hadn't got it when you saw him last.

STANTON How do you know he hadn't got it, Freda?

FREDA That doesn't matter. I do know. Martin couldn't have shown you this box, Olwen.

OLWEN Couldn't he? *(She looks at* **FREDA** *significantly for a second, then makes a quick change of manner)* No, perhaps he couldn't. I suppose I got mixed up. I must have seen a

box like this somewhere else, and then pushed it on to poor Martin because he was always so fond of things like this.

FREDA *moves away up centre.* **GORDON** *moves back to the piano and looks at the "Radio Times".*

ROBERT *(moving slightly in)* Olwen, I'm going to be rather rude, but I know you won't mind. You know *you* suddenly stopped telling the truth *then,* didn't you? You're absolutely positive that this is the box Martin showed you, just as Freda is equally positive it isn't.

GORDON *puts down the "Radio Times" and turns to the wireless again.*

OLWEN Well, does that matter? *(She moves to the table up left, then comes back again to behind the armchair left centre, facing front)*

GORDON *(fiddling with the wireless)* Not a hoot. I'm trying to find some dance music, but this thing has suddenly decided not to function.

ROBERT *(moving up to* **GORDON** *with irritation)* Then don't fiddle about with it.

BETTY Don't bully Gordon.

ROBERT Well, you stop him. *(Moving down again)* No, I don't suppose it does matter, Olwen, but after what we'd been saying, I couldn't help thinking that it was rather an odd, provoking situation.

MISS MOCKRIDGE Just what I was thinking. It's all terribly provoking. More about the cigarette-box, please.

FREDA *(moving down between the armchairs)* It's all perfectly simple—

OLWEN *(quickly, going to left of* **FREDA***)* Wait a minute, please, Freda. I don't think it is all perfectly simple, but I can't see that it matters now.

FREDA I don't understand you.

ROBERT *(lightly, moving to below right end of settee and putting one knee on it)* Neither do I. First you say that it can't have been the same box, and now you say it's not all perfectly simple and begin to hint at grand mysteries.

OLWEN *moves away to the fireplace.*

I believe you're hiding something, Olwen, and that isn't like you. Either that box you saw was Martin's, or it wasn't—

STANTON Oh, damn the box! *(He crosses below the settee to the piano-stool, taking the puzzle with him)*

OLWEN *lights her cigarette at the mantelpiece, then sits in the armchair left.*

BETTY
MISS MOCKRIDGE } *(together)* { Oh, but, Charles—we'd like to hear—
But, Mr. Stanton—

STANTON *(sitting)* Sorry—but I hate a box that plays tunes at you like that, anyway. Let's forget it.

GORDON *(with a sudden touch of bitterness, turning slightly up stage)* Yes, and Martin, too. He's not here—and we are, all warm and cosy— *(Turning back)* —such a charming group.

ROBERT *(going up to* **GORDON** *and nudging him)* Shut up, Gordon.

GORDON Don't let's mention Martin or think about him. Bad form. He's dead. *(He moves up stage again)*

FREDA Well, there's no need to be hysterical about it, Gordon. One would think you owned Martin, to hear you talk. *(She crosses right and puts the musical-box back on the table)*

BETTY Instead of which, nobody owned Martin. He belonged to himself. He'd some sense.

ROBERT *(right of* **MISS MOCKRIDGE***)* What does all that mean, Betty?