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5 Mother's Day

J.B. Priestley

The following play is a humorous portrayal of the status of the mother in a family. Let's read on to see how Mrs Pearson's family reacts when she tries to stand up for her own rights.

Characters

MRS ANNIE PEARSON
GEORGE PEARSON
DORIS PEARSON
CYRIL PEARSON
MRS FITZGERALD

The action takes place in the living-room of the Pearsons' house in a London suburb.

Time: The Present

Scene: The living-room of the Pearson family. Afternoon. It is a comfortably furnished, much lived-in room in a small suburban semi-detached villa. If necessary only one door need be used, but it is better with two—one up left leading to the front door and the stairs and the other in the right wall leading to the kitchen and the back door. There can be a muslin-covered window in the left wall and possibly one in the right wall, too. The fireplace is assumed to be in the fourth wall. There is a settee up right, an armchair down left and one down right. A small table with two chairs on either side of it stands at the centre.



When the curtain rises it is an afternoon in early autumn and the stage can be well lit. Mrs Pearson at right, and Mrs Fitzgerald at left, are sitting opposite each other at the small table, on which are two tea-cups and saucers and the cards with which Mrs Fitzgerald has been telling Mrs Pearson's fortune. Mrs Pearson is a pleasant but worried-looking woman in her forties. Mrs Fitzgerald is older, heavier and a strong and sinister personality. She is smoking. It is very important that these two should have sharply contrasting voices — Mrs Pearson speaking in a light, flurried sort of tone, with a touch of suburban Cockney perhaps; and Mrs Fitzgerald with a deep voice, rather Irish perhaps.

MRS FITZGERALD: [collecting up the cards] And that's all I can tell you, Mrs Pearson. Could be a good fortune. Could be a bad one. All depends on yourself now. Make up your mind — and there it is.

MRS PEARSON: Yes, thank you, Mrs Fitzgerald. I'm much obliged, I'm sure. It's wonderful having a real fortune-teller living next door. Did you learn that out East, too?



MRS FITZGERALD: I did. Twelve years I had of it, with my old man rising to be Lieutenant Quartermaster. He learnt a lot, and I learnt a lot more. But will you make up your mind now, Mrs Pearson dear? Put your foot down, once an' for all, an' be the mistress of your own house an' the boss of your own family.

MRS PEARSON: [*smiling apologetically*] That's easier said than done. Besides I'm so fond of them even if they are so thoughtless and selfish. They don't mean to be...

MRS FITZGERALD: [*cutting in*] Maybe not. But it'd be better for them if they learnt to treat you properly...

MRS PEARSON: Yes, I suppose it would, in a way.

MRS FITZGERALD: No doubt about it at all. Who's the better for being spoilt—grown man, lad or girl? Nobody. You think it does 'em good when you run after them all the time, take their orders as if you were the servant in the house, stay at home every night while they go out enjoying themselves? Never in all your life. It's the ruin of them as well as you. Husbands, sons, daughters should be taking notice of wives an' mothers, not giving 'em orders an' treating 'em like dirt. An' don't tell me you don't know what I mean, for I know more than you've told me.

MRS PEARSON: [*dubiously*] I—keep dropping a hint...

MRS FITZGERALD: Hint? It's more than hints your family needs, Mrs Pearson.

MRS PEARSON: [*dubiously*] I suppose it is. But I do hate any unpleasantness. And it's so hard to know where to start. I keep making up my mind to have it out with them but somehow I don't know how to begin. [*She glances at her watch or at a clock*] Oh — good gracious! Look at the time. Nothing ready and they'll be home any minute and probably all in a hurry to go out again.

[As she is about to rise, Mrs Fitzgerald reaches out across the table and pulls her down.]

MRS FITZGERALD: Let 'em wait or look after themselves for once. This is where your foot goes down. Start now. [She lights a cigarette from the one she has just finished.]

MRS PEARSON: [embarrassed] Mrs Fitzgerald—I know you mean well—in fact, I agree with you—but I just can't—and it's no use you trying to make me. If I promise you I'd really have it out with them, I know I wouldn't be able to keep my promise.

MRS FITZGERALD: Then let me do it.

MRS PEARSON: [flustered] Oh no—thank you very much, Mrs Fitzgerald—but that wouldn't do at all. It couldn't possibly be somebody else—they'd resent it at once and wouldn't listen—and really I couldn't blame them. I know I ought to do it—but you see how it is? [She looks apologetically across the table, smiling rather miserably.]

MRS FITZGERALD: [coolly] You haven't got the idea.

MRS PEARSON: [bewildered] Oh—I'm sorry—I thought you asked me to let you do it.

MRS FITZGERALD: I did. But not as me—as *you*.

MRS PEARSON: But—I don't understand. You couldn't be me.

MRS FITZGERALD: [coolly] We change places. Or—really—bodies. You look like me. I look like you.

MRS PEARSON: But that's impossible.

MRS FITZGERALD: How do you *know*? Ever tried it?

MRS PEARSON: No, of course not...

MRS FITZGERALD: [coolly] I have. Not for some time but it still ought to work. Won't last long, but long enough for what we want to do. Learnt it out East, of course, where they're up to all these tricks. [She holds her hand out across the table, keeping the cigarette in her mouth] Gimme your hands, dear.

MRS PEARSON: [dubiously] Well—I don't know—is it right?

MRS FITZGERALD: It's your only chance. Give me your hands an' keep quiet a minute. Just don't think about anything. *[Taking her hands]* Now look at me. *[They stare at each other. Muttering]* Arshatta dum—arshatta lam—arshatta lamdumbona...

[This little scene should be acted very carefully. We are to assume that the personalities change bodies. After the spell has been spoken, both women, still grasping hands, go lax, as if the life were out of them. Then both come to life, but with the personality of the other. Each must try to adopt the voice and mannerisms of the other. So now Mrs Pearson is bold and dominating and Mrs Fitzgerald is nervous and fluttering.]

MRS PEARSON: *[now with Mrs Fitzgerald's personality]* See what I mean, dear? *[She notices the cigarette]* Here—you don't want that. *[She snatches it and puts it in her own mouth, puffing contentedly.]*

[Mrs Fitzgerald, now with Mrs Pearson's personality, looks down at herself and sees that her body has changed and gives a scream of fright.]

MRS FITZGERALD: *[with Mrs Pearson's personality]* Oh—it's happened.

MRS PEARSON: *[complacently]* Of course it's happened. Very neat. Didn't know I had it in me.

MRS FITZGERALD: *[alarmed]* But whatever shall I do, Mrs Fitzgerald? George and the children can't see me like this.

MRS PEARSON: *[grimly]* They aren't going to—that's the point. They'll have me to deal with—only they won't know it.

MRS FITZGERALD: *[still alarmed]* But what if we can't change back? It'd be terrible.

MRS PEARSON: Here—steady, Mrs Pearson—if you had to live my life it wouldn't be so bad. You'd have more fun as me than you've had as you.

MRS FITZGERALD: Yes—but I don't want to be anybody else...

MRS PEARSON: Now—stop worrying. It's easier changing back—I can do it any time we want...

MRS FITZGERALD: Well—do it now...

MRS PEARSON: Not likely. I've got to deal with your family first. That's the idea, isn't it? Didn't know how to begin with 'em, you said. Well. I'll show you.

MRS FITZGERALD: But what am I going to do?

MRS PEARSON: Go into my house for a bit—there's nobody there—then pop back and see how we're doing. You ought to enjoy it. Better get off now before one of 'em comes.

MRS FITZGERALD: [*nervously rising*] Yes—I suppose that's best. You're sure it'll be all right?

MRS PEARSON: [*chuckling*] It'll be wonderful. Now off you go, dear.

[*Mrs Fitzgerald crosses and hurries out through the door right. Left to herself, Mrs Pearson smokes away—lighting another cigarette—and begins laying out the cards for patience on the table.*]

After a few moments Doris Pearson comes bursting in left. She is a pretty girl in her early twenties, who would be pleasant enough if she had not been spoilt.

DORIS: [*before she has taken anything in*] Mum—you'll have to iron my yellow silk. I must wear it tonight. [*She now sees what is happening, and is astounded.*] What are you doing? [*She moves down left centre.*]

[*Mrs Pearson now uses her ordinary voice, but her manner is not fluttering and apologetic but cool and incisive.*]

MRS PEARSON: [*not even looking up*] What d'you think I'm doing—whitewashing the ceiling?

DORIS: [*still astounded*] But you're smoking!

MRS PEARSON: That's right, dear. No law against it, is there?

DORIS: But I thought you didn't smoke.

MRS PEARSON: Then you thought wrong.

DORIS: Are we having tea in the kitchen?

MRS PEARSON: Have it where you like, dear.

DORIS: [*angrily*] Do you mean it isn't ready?

MRS PEARSON: Yours isn't. I've had all I want. Might go out later and get a square meal at the Clarendon.

DORIS: [*hardly believing her ears*] Who might?

- MRS PEARSON: I might. Who d'you think?
DORIS: [staring at her] Mum—what's the matter with you?
- MRS PEARSON: Don't be silly.
DORIS: [indignantly] It's not me that's being silly—and I must say it's a bit much when I've been working hard all day and you can't even bother to get my tea ready. Did you hear what I said about my yellow silk?
- MRS PEARSON: No. Don't you like it now? I never did.
DORIS: [indignantly] Of course I like it. And I'm going to wear it tonight. So I want it ironed.
- MRS PEARSON: Want it ironed? What d'you think it's going to do—iron itself?
- DORIS: No, you're going to iron it for me... You always do.
- MRS PEARSON: Well, this time I don't. And don't talk rubbish to me about working hard. I've a good idea how much you do, Doris Pearson. I put in twice the hours you do, and get no wages nor thanks for it. Why are you going to wear your yellow silk? Where are you going?
- DORIS: [sulkily] Out with Charlie Spence.
- MRS PEARSON: Why?
- DORIS: [wildly] Why? Why? What's the matter with you? Why shouldn't I go out with Charlie Spence if he asks me and I want to? Any objections? Go on—you might as well tell me...
- MRS PEARSON: [severely] Can't you find anybody better? I wouldn't be seen dead with Charlie Spence. Buck teeth and half-witted...
- DORIS: He isn't...
- MRS PEARSON: When I was your age I'd have found somebody better than Charlie Spence—or given myself up as a bad job.
- DORIS: [nearly in tears] Oh—shut up!

[Doris runs out left. Mrs Pearson chuckles and begins putting the cards together.

After a moment Cyril Pearson enters left. He is the masculine counterpart of Doris.]

CYRIL: [briskly] Hello — Mum. Tea ready?
 MRS PEARSON: No.
 CYRIL: [moving to the table; annoyed] Why not?
 MRS PEARSON: [coolly] I couldn't bother.
 CYRIL: Feeling off-colour or something?
 MRS PEARSON: Never felt better in my life.
 CYRIL: [aggressively] What's the idea then?
 MRS PEARSON: Just a change.
 CYRIL: [briskly] Well, snap out of it, Ma — and get cracking. Haven't too much time.

[Cyril is about to go when Mrs Pearson's voice checks him.]

MRS PEARSON: I've plenty of time.

CYRIL: Yes, but I haven't. Got a busy night tonight.
 [moving left to the door] Did you put my things out?

MRS PEARSON: [coolly] Can't remember. But I doubt it.

CYRIL: [moving to the table; protesting] Now — look. When I asked you this morning, you promised. You said you'd have to look through 'em first in case there was any mending.

MRS PEARSON: Yes — well now I've decided I don't like mending.

CYRIL: That's a nice way to talk — what would happen if we all talked like that?

MRS PEARSON: You all do talk like that. If there's something at home you don't want to do, you don't do it. If it's something at your work, you get the Union to bar it. Now all that's happened is that I've joined the movement.

CYRIL: [staggered] I don't get this, Mum. What's going on?

MRS PEARSON: [laconic and sinister] Changes.

[Doris enters left. She is in the process of dressing and is now wearing a wrap. She looks pale and red-eyed.]

MRS PEARSON: You look terrible. I wouldn't wear that face even for Charlie Spence.

DORIS: [moving above the table; angrily] Oh — shut up about Charlie Spence. And anyhow I'm not ready yet — just dressing. And if I do look

terrible, it's your fault — you made me cry.
[curious] Why — what did she do?
CYRIL: Never you mind.
DORIS: [rising and preparing to move to the kitchen]
MRS PEARSON: Have we any stout left? I can't remember.
CYRIL: Bottle or two, I think. But you don't want
stout now.
MRS PEARSON: [moving left slowly] I do.
CYRIL: What for?
MRS PEARSON: [turning at the door] To drink — you clot!

[Mrs Pearson exits right. Instantly Cyril and Doris are in a huddle,
close together at left centre, rapidly whispering.]

DORIS: Has she been like that with you, too?
CYRIL: Yes — no tea ready — couldn't care less...
DORIS: Well, I'm glad it's both of us. I thought I'd
done something wrong.
CYRIL: So did I. But it's her of course...
DORIS: She was smoking and playing cards when I
came in. I couldn't believe my eyes.
CYRIL: I asked her if she was feeling off-colour and
she said she wasn't.
DORIS: Well, she's suddenly all different. An' that's
what made me cry. It wasn't what she said
but the way she said it — an' the way she
looked.
CYRIL: Haven't noticed that. She looks just the
same to me.
DORIS: She doesn't to me. Do you think she could
have hit her head or something — y'know —
an' got — what is it? — y'know...
CYRIL: [staggered] Do you mean she's barmy?
DORIS: No, you fathead. Y'know — concussion. She
might have.
CYRIL: Sounds far-fetched.
DORIS: Well, she's far-fetched, if you ask me. [She
suddenly begins to giggle.]
CYRIL: Now then — what is it?
DORIS: If she's going to be like this when Dad comes
home... [She giggles again.]
CYRIL: [beginning to guffaw] I'm staying in for

that—two front dress circles for the first house...

[Mrs Pearson enters right, carrying a bottle of stout and a half-filled glass. Cyril and Doris try to stop their guffawing and giggling, but they are not quick enough. Mrs Pearson regards them with contempt.]

MRS PEARSON [coldly] You two are always talking about being grown-up—why don't you both try for once to be your age? [She moves to the settee and sits.]

CYRIL: Can't we laugh now?

MRS PEARSON Yes, if it's funny. Go on, tell me. Make me laugh. I could do with it.

DORIS: Y'know you never understand our jokes, Mum...



MRS PEARSON: I was yawning at your jokes before you were born, Doris.

DORIS: [almost tearful again] What's making you talk like this? What have we done?

MRS PEARSON: [promptly] Nothing but come in, ask for something, go out again, then come back when there's nowhere else to go.

CYRIL: [aggressively] Look—if you won't get tea ready, then I'll find something to eat myself...

MRS PEARSON: Why not? Help yourself. [She takes a sip of stout.]

CYRIL: [turning on his way to the kitchen] Mind you, I think it's a bit thick. I've been working all day.

DORIS: Same here.

MRS PEARSON: (calmly) Eight hour day!

CYRIL: Yes—eight hour day—an' don't forget it.

MRS PEARSON: I've done my eight hours.

CYRIL: That's different.

DORIS: Of course it is.

MRS PEARSON: [calmly] It was. Now it isn't. Forty-hour week for all now. Just watch it at the weekend when I have my two days off.

[Doris and Cyril exchange alarmed glances. Then they stare at Mrs Pearson who returns their look calmly.]

CYRIL: Must grab something to eat. Looks as if I'll need to keep my strength up. [Cyril exits to the kitchen.]

DORIS: [moving to the settee; anxiously] Mummy, you don't mean you're not going to do anything on Saturday and Sunday?

MRS PEARSON: [airily] No, I wouldn't go that far. I might make a bed or two and do a bit of cooking as a favour. Which means, of course, I'll have to be asked very nicely and thanked for everything and generally made a fuss of. But any of you forty-hour-a-weekers who expect to be waited on hand and foot on Saturday and Sunday, with no thanks for it, are in for a nasty disappointment. Might go off for the week-end perhaps.

DORIS:

MRS PEARSON:

[aghast] Go off for the week-end?

Why not? I could do with a change. Stuck here day after day, week after week. If I don't need a change, who does?

DORIS:

But where would you go, who would you go with?

MRS PEARSON:

That's my business. You don't ask me where you should go and who you should go with, do you?

DORIS:

That's different. . .

MRS PEARSON:

The only difference is that I'm a lot older and better able to look after myself, so it's you who should do the asking.

DORIS:

MRS PEARSON:

Did you fall or hit yourself with something? [coldly] No. But I'll hit you with something, girl, if you don't stop asking silly questions.

[Doris stares at her open-mouthed, ready to cry.]

DORIS:

Oh—this is awful... [She begins to cry, not passionately.]

MRS PEARSON:

[coldly] Stop blubbering. You're not a baby. If you're old enough to go out with Charlie Spence, you're old enough to behave properly. Now stop it.

[George Pearson enters left. He is about fifty, fundamentally decent but solemn, self-important, pompous. Preferably he should be a heavy, slow-moving type. He notices Doris's tears.]

GEORGE:

Hello—what's this? Can't be anything to cry about.

DORIS:

[through sobs] You'll see.

[Doris runs out left with a sob or two on the way. George stares after her a moment, then looks at Mrs Pearson.]

GEORGE:

Did she say 'You'll see'...?

MRS PEARSON:

Yes.

GEORGE:

What did she mean?

MRS PEARSON:

Better ask her.

[George looks slowly again at the door then at Mrs Pearson. Then he notices the stout that Mrs Pearson raises for another sip. His eyes almost bulge.]

GEORGE: Stout?
MRS PEARSON: Yes.
GEORGE: [amazed] What are you drinking stout for?
MRS PEARSON: Because I fancied some.
GEORGE: At this time of day?
MRS PEARSON: Yes—what's wrong with it at this time of day?
GEORGE: [bewildered] Nothing, I suppose, Annie—but I've never seen you do it before...
MRS PEARSON: Well, you're seeing me now.
GEORGE: [with heavy distaste] Yes, an' I don't like it. It doesn't look right. I'm surprised at you.
MRS PEARSON: Well, that ought to be a nice change for you.
GEORGE: What do you mean?
MRS PEARSON: It must be some time since you were surprised at me, George.
GEORGE: I don't like surprises—I'm all for a steady going on—you ought to know that by this time. By the way, I forgot to tell you this morning I wouldn't want any tea. Special snooker match night at the club tonight—an' a bit of supper going. So no tea.
MRS PEARSON: That's all right. There isn't any.
GEORGE: [astonished] You mean you didn't get any ready?
MRS PEARSON: Yes. And a good thing, too, as it's turned out.
GEORGE: [aggrieved] That's all very well, but suppose I'd wanted some?
MRS PEARSON: My goodness! Listen to the man! Annoyed because I don't get a tea for him that he doesn't even want. Ever tried that at the club?
GEORGE: Tried what at the club?
MRS PEARSON: Going up to the bar and telling 'em you don't want a glass of beer but you're annoyed because they haven't already poured it out. Try that on them and see what you get.
GEORGE: I don't know what you're talking about.
MRS PEARSON: They'd laugh at you even more than they do now.

GEORGE: [indignantly] Laugh at me? They don't laugh at me.

MRS PEARSON: Of course they do. You ought to have found that out by this time. Anybody else would have done. You're one of their standing jokes. Famous. They call you Pompy-ompy Pearson because they think you're so slow and pompous.

GEORGE: [horrified] Never!

MRS PEARSON: It's always beaten me why you should want to spend so much time at a place where they're always laughing at you behind your back and calling you names. Leaving your wife at home, night after night. Instead of going out with her, who doesn't make you look a fool...

[Cyril enters right, with a glass of milk in one hand and a thick slice of cake in the other. George, almost dazed, turns to him appealingly.]

GEORGE: Here, Cyril, you've been with me to the club once or twice. They don't laugh at me and call me Pompy-ompy Pearson, do they? [Cyril, embarrassed, hesitates.] [Angrily] Go on—tell me. Do they?

CYRIL: [embarrassed] Well—yes, Dad, I'm afraid they do.

[George slowly looks from one to the other, staggered.]

GEORGE: [slowly] Well—I'll be—damned!

[George exits left, slowly, almost as if somebody had hit him over the head. Cyril, after watching him go, turns indignantly to Mrs Pearson.]

CYRIL: Now you shouldn't have told him that, Mum. That's not fair. You've hurt his feelings. Mine, too.

MRS PEARSON: Sometimes it does people good to have their feelings hurt. The truth oughtn't to hurt anybody for long. If your father didn't go to the club so often, perhaps they'd stop laughing at him.

CYRIL: [gloomily] I doubt it.

MRS PEARSON: [severely] Possibly you do, but what I doubt is whether your opinion's worth having. What do you know? Nothing. You spend too much time and good money at greyhound races and dirt tracks and ice shows...

CYRIL: [sulkily] Well, what if I do? I've got to enjoy myself somehow, haven't I?

MRS PEARSON: I wouldn't mind so much if you were really enjoying yourself. But are you? And where's it getting you? *[There is a sharp hurried knocking heard off left.]*

CYRIL: Might be for me. I'll see.

[Cyril hurries out left. In a moment he re-enters, closing the door behind him.]

MRS PEARSON: It's that silly old bag from next door—Mrs Fitzgerald. You don't want her here, do you? [sharply] Certainly I do. Ask her in. And don't call her a silly old bag either. She's a very nice woman, with a lot more sense than you'll ever have.

[Cyril exits left. Mrs Pearson finishes her stout, smacking her lips. Cyril re-enters left, ushering in Mrs Fitzgerald, who hesitates in the doorway.]

MRS FITZGERALD: Come in, come in, Mrs Fitzgerald. [moving to left centre; anxiously] I—just wondered—if everything's—all right...

CYRIL: [sulkily] No, it isn't.

MRS PEARSON: [sharply] Of course it is. You be quiet.

CYRIL: [indignantly and loudly] Why should I be quiet?

MRS PEARSON: [shouting] Because I tell you to—you silly, spoilt, young piecan.

MRS FITZGERALD: [protesting nervously] Oh—no—surely...

MRS PEARSON: [severely] Now, Mrs Fitzgerald, just let me manage my family in my own way—please!

MRS FITZGERALD: Yes—but Cyril...

CYRIL: [sulky and glowering] Mr Cyril Pearson to you, please, Mrs Fitzgerald. *[Cyril stalks off into the kitchen.]*

MRS FITZGERALD: [moving to the settee; whispering] Oh—
dear—what's happening?

MRS PEARSON: [calmly] Nothing much. Just putting 'em in
their places, that's all. Doing what you ought
to have done long since.

MRS FITZGERALD: Is George home? [She sits beside Mrs
Pearson on the settee.]

MRS PEARSON: Yes. I've been telling him what they think of
him at the club.

MRS FITZGERALD: Well, they think a lot of him, don't they?

MRS PEARSON: No, they don't. And now he knows it.

MRS FITZGERALD: [nervously] Oh—dear—I wish you hadn't,
Mrs Fitzgerald...

MRS PEARSON: Nonsense! Doing 'em all a world of good. And
they'll be eating out of your hand soon—
you'll see...

MRS FITZGERALD: I don't think I want them eating out of my
hand...

MRS PEARSON: [impatiently] Well, whatever you want, they'll
be doing it—all three of 'em. Mark my
words, Mrs Pearson.

[George enters left glumly. He is unpleasantly surprised when he
sees the visitor. He moves to the armchair left, sits down heavily
and glumly lights his pipe. Then he looks from Mrs Pearson to
Mrs Fitzgerald, who is regarding him anxiously.]

GEORGE: Just looked in for a minute, I suppose, Mrs
Fitzgerald?

MRS FITZGERALD: [who doesn't know what she is saying]
Well—yes—I suppose so, George.

GEORGE: [aghast] George!

MRS FITZGERALD: [nervously] Oh—I'm sorry...

MRS PEARSON: [impatiently] What does it matter? Your
name's George, isn't it? Who d'you think you
are—Duke of Edinburgh?

GEORGE: [angrily] What's he got to do with it? Just
tell me that. And isn't it bad enough
without her calling me George? No tea.
Pompy-ompy Pearson. And poor Doris has
been crying her eyes out upstairs—yes,
crying her eyes out.

MRS FITZGERALD: [*wailing*] Oh—dear—I ought to have known...

GEORGE: [*staring at her, annoyed*] You ought to have known! Why ought you to have known? Nothing to do with you, Mrs Fitzgerald. Look—we're at sixes and sevens here just now—so perhaps you'll excuse us...

MRS PEARSON: [*before Mrs Fitzgerald can reply*] I won't excuse you, George Pearson. Next time a friend and neighbour comes to see me, just say something when you see her—Good evening or How d'you do? or something—an' don't just march in an' sit down without a word. It's bad manners...

MRS FITZGERALD: [*nervously*] No—it's all right...

MRS PEARSON: No, it isn't all right. We'll have some decent manners in this house—or I'll know the reason why. [*glaring at George*] Well?

GEORGE: [*intimidated*] Well, what!

MRS PEARSON: [*taunting him*] Why don't you get off to your club? Special night tonight, isn't it? They'll be waiting for you—wanting to have a good laugh. Go on then. Don't disappoint 'em.

GEORGE: [*bitterly*] That's right. Make me look silly in front of her now! Go on—don't mind me. Sixes and sevens! Poor Doris been crying her eyes out! Getting the neighbours in to see the fun! [*suddenly losing his temper, glaring at Mrs Pearson, and shouting*] All right—let her hear it. What's the matter with you? Have you gone barmy—or what? [*jumping up; savagely*] If you shout at me again like that, George Pearson, I'll slap your big, fat, silly face...

MRS PEARSON:

MRS FITZGERALD: [*moaning*] Oh—no—no—no—please, Mrs Fitzgerald... [*Mrs Pearson sits.*]

GEORGE: [*staring at her, bewildered*] Either I'm off my chump or you two are. How d'you mean—"No, no—please, Mrs Fitzgerald"? Look—you're Mrs Fitzgerald. So why are you telling yourself to stop when you're not doing



MRS PEARSON:

anything? Tell her to stop — then there'd be some sense in it. *[Staring at Mrs Pearson]* I think you must be tiddly.

GEORGE:

[starting up; savagely] Say that again, George Pearson.

[intimidated] All right — all right — all right ...
[Doris enters left slowly, looking miserable. She is still wearing the wrap. Mrs Pearson sits on the settee.]

MRS FITZGERALD: Hello — Doris dear!

DORIS:

[miserably] Hello — Mrs Fitzgerald!

MRS FITZGERALD: I thought you were going out with Charlie Spence tonight.

DORIS:

[annoyed] What's that to do with you?

MRS PEARSON:

[sharply] Stop that!

MRS FITZGERALD:

[nervously] No — its all right...

MRS PEARSON:

[severely] It isn't all right. I won't have a daughter of mine talking to anybody like that. Now answer Mrs Fitzgerald properly, Doris — or go upstairs again... *[Doris looks wonderingly at her father.]*

GEORGE:

[in despair] Don't look at me. I give it up. I just give it up.

MRS PEARSON:

[fiercely] Well? Answer her.

DORIS:

[sulkily] I was going out with Charlie Spence tonight — but now I've called it off...

MRS FITZGERALD:

Oh — what a pity, dear! Why have you?

DORIS:

[with a flash of temper] Because — if you must know — my mother's been going on at me making me feel miserable — an' saying he's got buck-teeth and is half-witted...

MRS FITZGERALD:

[rather bolder; to Mrs Pearson] Oh — you shouldn't have said that...

MRS PEARSON:

[sharply] Mrs Fitzgerald, I'll manage my family — you manage yours.

GEORGE:

[grimly] Ticking her off now, are you, Annie?

MRS PEARSON:

[even more grimly] They're waiting for you at the club, George, don't forget. And don't you start crying again, Doris...

MRS FITZGERALD:

[getting up; with sudden decision] That's enough — quite enough.

[George and Doris stare at her bewildered.]

[to George and Doris] Now listen, you two. I want to have a private little talk with Mrs Fitz — [she corrects herself hastily] with Mrs Pearson, so I'll be obliged if you'll leave us alone for a few minutes. I'll let you know when we've finished. Go on, please. I promise you that you won't regret it. There's something here that only I can deal with.

GEORGE: [rising] I'm glad somebody can — 'cos I can't. Come on, Doris.

[George and Doris exit left. As they go Mrs Fitzgerald moves to left of the small table and sits. She eagerly beckons Mrs Pearson to do the same thing.]

MRS FITZGERALD: Mrs Fitzgerald, we must change back now — we really must...

MRS PEARSON: [rising] Why?

MRS FITZGERALD: Because this has gone far enough. I can see they're all miserable — and I can't bear it...

MRS PEARSON: A bit more of the same would do 'em good. Making a great difference already... [She moves to right of the table and sits.]

MRS FITZGERALD: No, I can't stand any more of it — I really can't. We must change back. Hurry up, please, Mrs Fitzgerald.

MRS PEARSON: Well — if you insist...

MRS FITZGERALD: Yes — I do — please — please.

[She stretches her hands across the table eagerly. Mrs Pearson takes them.]

MRS PEARSON: Quiet now. Relax.

[Mrs Pearson and Mrs Fitzgerald stare at each other. Muttering; exactly as before. *Arshatta dum — arshatta lam — arshatta lamdumbona...*

They carry out the same action as before, going lax and then coming to life. But this time, of course, they become their proper personalities.]

MRS FITZGERALD: Ah well — I enjoyed that.

MRS PEARSON: I didn't.

MRS FITZGERALD: Well, you ought to have done. Now — listen.



Mrs Pearson. Don't go soft on 'em again, else it'll all have been wasted...

MRS PEARSON: I'll try not to, Mrs Fitzgerald.

MRS FITZGERALD: They've not had as long as I'd like to have given 'em—another hour or two's rough treatment might have made it certain...

MRS PEARSON: I'm sure they'll do better now—though I don't know how I'm going to explain...

MRS FITZGERALD: [severely] Don't you start any explaining or apologising—or you're done for.

MRS PEARSON: [with spirit] It's all right for you, Mrs Fitzgerald. After all, they aren't your husband and children...

MRS FITZGERALD: [impressively] Now you listen to me. You admitted yourself you were spoiling 'em—and they didn't appreciate you. Any apologies—any explanations—an' you'll be straight back where you were. I'm warning you, dear. Just give 'em a look—a tone of voice—now an' again, to suggest you might be tough with 'em if you wanted to be—an' it ought to work. Anyhow, we can test it.

MRS PEARSON: How?

MRS FITZGERALD: Well, what is it you'd like 'em to do that they don't do? Stop at home for once?

MRS PEARSON: Yes—and give me a hand with supper...

MRS FITZGERALD: Anything you'd like 'em to do—that you enjoy whether they do or not?

MRS PEARSON: [hesitating] Well—yes. I—like a nice game of rummy—but, of course, I hardly ever have one—except at Christmas...

MRS FITZGERALD: [getting up] That'll do then. [She moves towards the door left then turns] But remember—keep firm—or you've had it. [She opens the door. Calling] Hoy! You can come in now. [Coming away from the door, and moving right slightly. Quietly] But remember—remember—a firm hand.

[George, Doris and Cyril file in through the doorway, looking apprehensively at Mrs Pearson.]

I'm just off. To let you enjoy yourself.

[The family looks anxiously at Mrs Pearson, who smiles. Much relieved, they smile back at her.]

- DORIS: [anxiously] Yes, Mother?
 MRS PEARSON: [smiling] Seeing that you don't want to go out, I tell you what I thought we'd do.
 MRS FITZGERALD: [giving a final warning] Remember!
 MRS PEARSON: [nodding, then looking sharply at the family] No objections, I hope?
 GEORGE: [humbly] No, Mother—whatever you say...
 MRS PEARSON: [smiling] I thought we'd have a nice family game of rummy—and then you children could get the supper ready while I have a talk with your father...
 GEORGE: [firmly] Suits me. [He looks challengingly at the children.] What about you two?
 CYRIL: [hastily] Yes—that's all right.
 DORIS: [hesitating] Well—I...
 MRS PEARSON: [sharply] What? Speak up!
 DORIS: [hastily] Oh—I think it would be lovely...
 MRS PEARSON: [smiling] Good-bye, Mrs Fitzgerald. Come again soon.

MRS FITZGERALD: Yes, dear. 'Night all—have a nice time.

[Mrs Fitzgerald exits left and the family cluster round Mother as—
 the curtain falls.]

READING WITH INSIGHT

1. This play, written in the 1950s, is a humorous and satirical depiction of the status of the mother in the family.
 - (i) What are the issues it raises?
 - (ii) Do you think it caricatures these issues or do you think that the problems it raises are genuine? How does the play resolve the issues? Do you agree with the resolution?
2. If you were to write about these issues today what are some of the incidents, examples and problems that you would think of as relevant?

3. Is drama a good medium for conveying a social message? Discuss.
4. Read the play out in parts. Enact the play on a suitable occasion.
5. Discuss in groups plays or films with a strong message of social reform that you have watched.

'Mother's Day'

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CLASSMATE

Date :

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- ⇒ J.B. Priestley's 'Mother's Day' is a humorous and satirical play. But the play deals with some serious issues. The most important of them is the status or position of mothers in the family.
- ⇒ The play was written more than fifty years ago in 1950s. The position of mothers in the family was in every way inferior to that of men. They were exploited and intimidated not only by their husbands but also by their children. It raises another issue. Are mothers just the beasts of burden? They work in kitchens cooking meals for the family. They iron the clothes. They prepare tea when their husbands arrive home from work or outside. Mrs. Pearson is such a woman of forty. Overburdened with her familial responsibilities she has neither rest nor peace. She has no freedom. She is always dancing to the tunes of her son, Cyril and daughter, Doris. She can't have any fun. Mothers like Mrs. Pearson are marginalised and neglected.
- ⇒ The play raises real issues. It doesn't merely caricature them. The problem it raises are genuine. Millions of women have to lead such a miserable life as Mrs. Pearson is forced to lead. Their husbands and children care only for themselves, their interests and entertainment.

→ The play also resolves the issues. Women can set their spoilt children and arrogant husband by asserting themselves. Self denial will lead them nowhere. They must change the dominating behaviour of their husbands and children. Only by refusing more than they do, they can find some time for leisure, fun and rest. They must make their husbands and children learn to help themselves.

J.B. Priestley effectively uses drama as a powerful medium. He uses the dramatic art very convincingly to highlight the basic issue of the exploitation of housewives and mothers of the families. Mrs. Pearson is a typical mother. She is a devoted housewife who enjoys serving her husband and children. She is ignored and made to work throughout the day. She is ill-treated, neglected and exploited by her family. Poor Mrs. Pearson doesn't know how to deal with them either. Mrs. Pearson is helped by Mrs. Fitzgerald, her neighbour. Mrs. Fitzgerald is a fortune teller. She learnt the art of magic from the East, where her husband served ~~there~~ when in army. Mrs. Fitzgerald wants Mrs. Pearson to let her set the members of her family right. She knows how to change personalities through magic. She mutters "Arshatta" in Arshatta. After the spell is spoken the personalities change bodies. Mrs. Pearson is now ^{with} Mrs. Fitzgerald's personality. She becomes bold and dominating.

She becomes the boss of the family. She takes Doris and Cyril to task for their inaction. She asks them to help themselves. She doesn't spare even her husband. She reminds George how people laugh at him behind his back. They call him "Pompy - Ompy Pearson". On the other hand, Mrs. Fitzgerald (actually ^{Mrs} Pearson) becomes soft, pleasant and timid. Mrs. Pearson and Mrs. Fitzgerald are two contrasting characters in every way. The familial issues and problems find a good expression through this drama. Not only that Priestley also reveals the tender heart of a mother. When Mrs. Fitzgerald shouts at Mr. Pearson "I'll slap your big fat silly face", the wife in Mrs. Pearson revolts. She realises that this drama "has gone far enough". She tells her frankly that she can't bear it any more. They must change back and come to their real selves. But Mrs. Fitzgerald is firm, solid and result-oriented. She sets all the spoilt members of Mrs. Pearson's family right. Before changing back personalities she advises Mrs. Pearson to be tough with them all, otherwise everything will go waste. She tells her that by remaining firm, she can make them work for themselves. In the end, it is the 'Mother's Day'. Mrs. Pearson carries the day. She succeeds in setting

all the members of her family right. There is a total change in them. They are no more haughty and overbearing. They are now ready to share the household work with her. The children speak politely and meekly. They agree to get supper ready while she enjoys conversation with their dad.

⇒ The play ends with a social message. The message is the message of equality. Equal work for men and women. 'Forty hour week for all now' says Mrs. Pearson (actually Mrs. Fitzgerald).

✱ Title is quite apt and justified.

✱ J. B. Priestley has titled his one-act play 'Mother's Day'. The title conveys a message. Husbands and children must respect wives and mothers in their families. They must not order and keep them running all the time doing one work or the other. Mrs. Pearson with Mrs. Fitzgerald's help succeeds in setting her spoilt children and husband right. The mother carries the day and wins over all the members of the family to her side. Hence, the title is quite apt and justified.

—X—