

The Day Arnold Came

Adapted by Jane Thomson from a story by Elsie Locke

CHARACTERS

MUM BRUNO, 13
DAD GERRY, 15
JOAN, 11 ARNOLD (a friend of Mum's)

SCENE. MUM is rolling out pastry on the kitchen table. JOAN is sitting at the table. She suddenly looks over to the window.

JOAN. Mum, someone's coming.

MUM. Well, look who's here! Open the door, and tell him to come in, Joan, while I wash my hands.

MUM goes out, and JOAN goes to the door.

ARNOLD (coming in). Well! You must be Beryl's eldest.

JOAN. Youngest.

ARNOLD. Oh, that's right, I remember now.

MUM (coming back in). Joan, this is Arnold.

ARNOLD. Hello, Joan. (Turning to mum.) Beryl, you've got to come! She's starting in ten minutes. You've got to see her – it's *you* all over again! It's amazing - your style, absolutely!

MUM (weakly). But... how can I? Look at the time. I've got to get dinner

ARNOLD. Joan can cook the dinner, can't you, Joan?

JOAN. How do *you* know?

ARNOLD. I can tell. Come on, Beryl. No time to lose.

MUM. Would you, Joan? There's just the pastry to put on the pie. The oven's ready, the veges are there, and I've salted the stew.

JOAN. Of course I can get the dinner, Mum. I've done it often enough before.

ARNOLD. Good girl. Come on, Beryl.

They go out the door.

JOAN (calling). But what will I tell Dad and Gerry and Bruno when they get home?

MUM (calling back). Tell them I've gone with Arnold. Your father will know.

JOAN begins putting pastry on the pie. BRUNO comes in. JOAN goes on putting things on to cook while talking.

BRUNO. What's this? You cooking?

JOAN. What do you think I'm doing! Will you give us a hand, Bruno? You can wipe the table, and set it.

BRUNO. We'd better hurry. Dad'll be home soon, and you know what he'll say

JOAN AND BRUNO (together). "How's dinner coming on?"

JOAN. And the next thing he'll say will be, "Where's Beryl?"

BRUNO. Where is Mum? Is she sick or something?

GERRY comes in, and sits down to sort some things from his bag.

JOAN (grimly, working busily). She went out in a car, with Arnold.

GERRY. With Arnold? Who's Arnold?

JOAN. That's just it, Gerry. That's what I'd like to know. He came round for her.

BRUNO. I don't get it. Has someone died? Have we got an uncle or something called Arnold? A rich, old uncle?

JOAN. He wasn't old. About Mum's age.

GERRY. I've never heard of any Arnolds in the family. Didn't Mum say who he was?

JOAN. They didn't give me a chance to ask. (Bursts out suddenly.) Oh, Gerry, who do you think it could be? Mum had her best blue dress on. She must have been expecting him. It couldn't be... an old boyfriend, could it?

GERRY. What did they say exactly?

JOAN. Something about, "She's starting in ten minutes, you've got to see her... ." But who's "she"? Mum never goes out anywhere special without us or Dad.

BRUNO. Dad'll probably know.

JOAN. Carol Brown, her father went off - and Carol said they never knew anything was happening. One day everything was the same as usual, and the next day her father packed a suitcase, left a note, and never came back.

GERRY. Don't be mad. Mum didn't take any suitcase, did she?

JOAN. She didn't even take a jacket or a handbag - I thought that was funny, too

DAD comes in, puts his lunch box on the shelf, and goes to wash his hands.

DAD. How's things, Joan? How's dinner coming on?

JOAN. I think it's ready. Shall I dish up, now?

DAD. Where's Beryl? Getting some parsley?

JOAN. She told me to get the dinner. She went out with Arnold - she said you'd know.

She looks at DAD as if wondering if he'll be upset.

DAD. With Arnold? (Looks astonished, then puts back his head and laughs.) Oh, well, I suppose after all these years it's safe enough.

JOAN begins serving dinner, but goes on listening intently.

GERRY. Dad, who is Arnold?

DAD. Didn't you see him?

JOAN. I did. Is he Mum's old boyfriend?

DAD. Arnold! (Laughs again.) Oh heavens, no.

JOAN Is he a relation, then?

DAD. No. No relation.

GERRY. The question is, when's he going to bring Mum back?

BRUNO. And if he doesn't, will we have to eat Joan's cooking all the time?

JOAN. You'd do your own! I'm helping Mum out, not looking after you!

They begin eating.

GERRY. Tell us, Dad.

DAD (slowly). Arnold is a big drip. I'd be surprised if he's any different after all these years. He can only talk about one thing, and that's tennis. He played doubles with Beryl, and they were winners the same year she was runner-up for the singles tide.

GERRY. What tide? Not the national tide?

DAD. Yes, the national champs.

JOAN. Tennis? We've never even had a tennis racquet in the house.

GERRY. Why did she stop?

DAD (carefully). Because... I said she could take her pick. It was me - or the tennis.

JOAN. Did you stop her from being a champion?

DAD. You shouldn't complain, Joan. If I hadn't put my foot down, you wouldn't be here. We'd been engaged for three years. The wedding was put off again and again. There was always another tournament, or a trip to Australia, or some other tour coming up. She was that crazy on the game. She'd have played at the South Pole, or Timbuktu if they'd asked her!

JOAN. So what did she say when you asked her to choose between you and the tennis?

DAD. She said the only way she could stop was to stop completely. And that's what she did.

GERRY. The tennis champs are on right now, aren't they?

BRUNO. They sure are - and Melanie Downes is playing. She's a wonder girl! Still at school, and beating all the seniors!

JOAN. That's where they've gone then! And she's the new tennis champ.

BRUNO. Don't be stupid. Mum wouldn't even enter. She's too old.

JOAN. No, I didn't mean Mum. Arnold said something like, "She's starting in ten minutes, you've got to see her, it's you all over again." I couldn't make out who "she" was.

GERRY. Melanie Downes.

DAD. No doubt about that. They'll be down at the park, watching. Oh, well, once won't matter.

MUM comes in, looking happy.

MUM. Oh, yes, it will!

JOAN. Mum, you look pretty!

MUM. Pretty indeed! Don't change the subject. I've got something to say to all of you- especially you, Clarrie. (She stands in front of DAD.)

DAD. You look as if you're going to make a speech.

MUM. Clarrie, listen to me. I've never seen anything like what we saw today - Melanie Downes playing to win. Arnold said he had, because he'd watched me so many times. I know you'll say that I can't play now like I did then. I know I can't. But I still know how to play. There wasn't a single move that she made that I didn't know off by heart. I'd never have believed how much was stored inside me. And I haven't even mentioned tennis all these years, because you were afraid I'd get caught up in it. But it doesn't matter now, does it? The boys are in high school, and Joan's eleven. What's to stop me joining a club?

JOAN (after a moment's silence). Have you had dinner, Mum? There's some in the oven.

MUM. Marvellous! It's made me ravenous, just watching. All that energy! What a match! Of course, Melanie won.

GERRY (suddenly). Good on you, Mum!

BRUNO. I thought I was the only superstar in the family! Have you got clippings, Mum? Photos and all that? They must have put you in the paper.

MUM. Yes, they did, often. I've got them somewhere. (Glances at DAD, who is gazing down at the table.) I suppose I could dig them out.

JOAN. Mum, why haven't you ever told us before?

MUM (slowly). I couldn't bear to, I suppose. I didn't want to remind myself. I loved tennis, but I loved all of you more.

GERRY. How come nobody else ever mentioned it?

MUM. We weren't living here when I was playing - nobody here knew me under my married name.

MUM keeps looking at DAD, who keeps looking at the table.

MUM. I've been happy with you all. But now I want something more.

DAD (after a short silence). What's for pudding, Joan?

JOAN. Gooseberry pie.

DAD. If it's as good as the stew, I don't mind keeping you on as cook.

MUM (jumping up and giving him a hug). Oh, Clarrie, you darling!

BRUNO. What about us, having to put up with Joan's cooking all the time! We're growing boys!

JOAN. You be quiet!

MUM You know very well Joan's a good cook. But I don't see why she should do all the cooking - it wouldn't hurt you boys to take turns.

The boys groan.

DAD. And I'll shout us all to a big meal out after your first win!

They all cheer.