

WHAT'S ON YOUR MIND

(A Comedy in Two Scenes)

by

GEORGE FREEK

THE CHARACTERS

JOSEPH, A neat young man in his 20s

ETHELBERT, In his 40s but seedy and looks older

ELMER, 60 rather resembles a cliché leprechaun

MAXINE, Elmer's wife, big and domineering

LANNY, Joseph's wife, a professional wrestler in her 20s

THEO, Maxine's son, a PhD in his 40s

RUTHIE, Theo's wife, a dancer in her 30s

THE SCENE

Maxine's home, conventionally middle-class if slightly careworn

THE TIME

Recently

WHAT'S ON YOUR MIND

Scene 1

(MAXINE's living room: a door in the rear, beside it is a small stand with a plant on it. On the left is a small dining table and to the left a sofa and a couple of chair. There are doorways right and left. A trashcan is center stage down. In the dark, the rear door opens. JOSEPH enters and flips on a light switch)

JOSEPH

(To ETHELBERT, standing off) Come in. Don't be shy. Make yourself at home. (He pulls ETHELBERT into the room. ETHELBERT is dressed shabbily in an old sport jacket and wrinkled trousers. He is in his stocking feet, without shoes) Well, what do you think of the place?

ETHELBERT

(Uneasy) This your place, then?

JOSEPH

(Smiles cheerfully) Yes, I live here. Have a seat. Take a load off.

ETHELBERT

Oh, I don't know about that.

JOSEPH

Go ahead. Make yourself at home. The sofa is extremely comfortable, just mind those springs sticking up, or try one of the chairs.

ETHELBERT

The thing is, I've got to get to Sidcup.

JOSEPH

You mentioned that. But I didn't quite get why.

ETHELBERT

(He wiggles his toes) My shoes, man! They took my shoes!

JOSEPH

What? Who did that?

ETHELBERT

I don't know, do I? I mean if I knew who they was, I wouldn't've let 'em! See, I was spending the night in a sort of—boarding house. I fell asleep and when I woke up, I didn't have no shoes on. Somebody snitched my shoes, I'm telling you. That's why I got to get back there.

JOSEPH

Maybe I could go down and have a look for you.

ETHELBERT

(Hopefully) You go to Sidcup?

JOSEPH

Yes, quite often. They have an institution there, a sort of sanitorium actually. It's quite a splendid piece of architecture, if you like that sort of thing. Anyway, I sometimes go there—(He smiles oddly) to look at it.

ETHELBERT

I know it.

JOSEPH

I'm sure you do. You've worked there, I'll bet. You have the look of a professional man about you.

ETHELBERT

Oh yes, I been there.

(And then ELMER enters. He carries a long thin stick and wears a sort of Irish 'leprechaun' style hat)

ELMER

(Truculently pointing his stick at no one in particular) You daft prat!

JOSEPH

(Pleasantly) Hello. Now watch where you point that. We have company.

ELMER

(Snarls to ETHELBERT) He says watch where I point my stick! I know how to point a stick! Don't you think I don't.

JOSEPH

(Smiling cheerfully) I only meant to be careful. You might break something.

ELMER

I just might break something. I just might break your *head!* (He swings the stick erratically, barely missing a lamp, as ETHELBERT looks on uneasily)

JOSEPH

(With an 'I hate to do this' look at ETHELBERT, he takes the stick from ELMER and breaks it in two) I really didn't want to do that.

ELMER

(Picks up the pieces of the stick, near tears) Now look what I'm lumbered with! Why'd you have to do that? You didn't have to break it, did you?
(Whimpering, he takes out a cigarette) Give me some fire.

JOSEPH

Now, no, you know I can't do that.

ELMER

But for the love of Mike! I can't smoke my fag without a light, can I?

JOSEPH

(Shaking his head, speaking as if to a naughty boy) You know the doctor's orders as well as I do.

ELMER

Doctor's orders! I'll tell you where the doctor can stuff his orders!

JOSEPH

Now, now! That isn't very pretty talk. Remember, we have a guest.

ELMER

(Whimpering) But what about my light—

(Then MAXINE suddenly calls like a trumpet blast from the kitchen)

MAXINE

ELMER! Where are you?

ELMER

Merciful heaven! (Cowering behind JOSEPH, trying to hide) Don't let her get me! Protect me!

MAXINE

(Charging in with a huge hambone in her hand) Where is he? You haven't finished those dirty dishes. Where is that malingering devil hiding? Ah, there you are! Now come back here and don't try to leave again until that kitchen is spick and span! (She grabs him by the ear).

ELMER

Ouch! Aisy, aisy on the ears, my pet!

MAXINE

I'll give you easy! And what's this? *Smoking!* That's the last straw! (She drags him to the trashcan) All right, in you go!

ELMER

(Whimpers) But—but I didn't do a thing, my pet! I've been framed!

MAXINE

And what's that in your hand? No! You were naughty and you know where you go when you've been naughty! Now get in there!

ELMER

But—but how can I finish the dishes when I'm in there?

MAXINE

(She thinks, frowns) Oh, all right, I'll give you one more chance! But watch your step! And no more smoking!

ELMER

(Turning on the 'charm') But I was only fooling, my pet. That's just my foolin' ways.

MAXINE

(To JOSEPH and ETHELBERT, as she pulls him by the ear back to the kitchen) I ask you. What am I going to do with him?

ELMER

Ouch! Aisy, my pet, go aisy on the ear! (They are gone).

JOSEPH

(After a few seconds pause, he smiles awkwardly) The mater and pater—

ELMER

They your parents, are they?

JOSEPH

Yes, and they're great jokers, as you can see. But beneath all that fun they are truly and deeply devoted to one another.

ETHELBERT

I see that. But look, about those shoes—

JOSEPH

We'll see to that. I promise. But for heaven's sakes, I'm forgetting my manners. Please, take a seat.

ETHELBERT

(Nervously) Oh, I don't know about that—

(And then LANNY enters. She is large and muscular, but quite pretty)

LANNY

Oh man, I'm exhausted!

JOSEPH

Have you been working out, dear?

LANNY

Have I? Four solid hours! I must stink to high heaven! I really need a shower.

JOSEPH

But where are my manners? We have a guest. May I introduce you to—

LANNY

(Gasps) Bertie!

JOSEPH

(Surprised) You know him?

LANNY

Great Scott, Joey, you've heard me talk about Bertie, haven't you?

JOSEPH

Not your first husband!

ETHELBERT

(Amazement) What? Now hold on here—

LANNY

Wow! This is a real surprise! How have you been keeping, Bertie?

ETHELBERT

I'm not—Now look here! There's been a mistake—

LANNY

I understand you're upset, but I want you to know how glad I am to see you. I've been so hoping to give you a proper explanation—

ETHELBERT

But you don't know what you're on about—

JOSEPH

(Shaking his head, dumbfounded) Well, I must admit I, for one, am a bit mystified.

LANNY

(To ETHELBERT) I need to explain some things to you. (To JOSEPH) Could you please give us a few minutes alone together, dear?

ETHELBERT

No. No—

JOSEPH

(Apologetically to ETHELBERT) But I really think I should if it will help shed light on this matter. I'll just go into another room. Um, I might go into the washroom, perhaps do some washing up. (He smiles and exits).

LANNY

(After a pause) God, what a bore!

ETHELBERT

That your husband, is it?

LANNY

If you can call him that! But I suppose you can read the whole story just by one look at him. Where did you meet him, by the way? I know! I'll bet you knew he was my husband and you used him to see me again!

ETHELBERT

I—No!

LANNY

You were being sneaky, weren't you? (She chuckles) I really admire that!

ETHELBERT

Now listen here, I don't even know—But anyway, he's all right—

LANNY

Don't try to defend him! How could you? (She chuckles again) But I get it. You're being ironic, aren't you? Oh wow, how I have missed that wonderful sense of humor. I really can't tell you how much I've been hoping to run into you, and it seems you felt the same way!

ETHELBERT

(The utmost frustration) Now look, I don't even know you, lady—

LANNY

But that's my *point*, Bertie. I've changed. Yes, I have! And what I'm trying to say is I want you back. I'm going mad! Please help me, darling! What can we do?

ETHELBERT

But I got—I got to—

LANNY

(Expectantly) Yes? You've got to what?

ETHELBERT

I got to get to Sidcup, to get my shoes!

LANNY

(Looks at his socks, laughing) Oh, you and your shoes! You always were Mr. Fashion Statement.

ETHELBERT

(He begins angrily but is deflated by the end of the speech) Now look, you're making a mistake! I don't know you! I never did know you! I met this man, your, uh, your husband, and he invited me to—to come home with him, to do—something, but he's taking me to Sidcup—to get my shoes— (He peters out, seemingly exhausted by his effort).

LANNY

Okay, I get it, and I understand why you're denying me. I do. But will you allow me to explain? (He is about to protest, but she over-rides him) I did NOT try to kill you. (ETHELBERT looks alarmed) That was just a joke. Okay, maybe you'll say it was in poor taste, and I agree. I apologize from the bottom of my heart, but believe me, I have paid for that little joke! I mean look what I'm lumbered with now, a Boy Scout Troop Leader! There are times when I could honestly kill him! (A thought) Yes! (A light bulb) That is, if I had someone to help me! Someone like *you*! (He stares at her) Think about it, babe! You and me together again, just like the good old days! Now don't say anything yet. Just run it through that fantastic brain, and then come up with a plan—just for the fun of it, okay? And now I have *got* to take a shower. Do I *pong*! (She brushes his cheek with her palm) Wow! You really need a shave, babe! But think about what I said and maybe you'll realize it's not as crazy as it seems. (She blows him a kiss as JOSEPH returns. She smiles sweetly at JOSEPH) I'm going to take a shower, sweetie. Don't go away. I'll be right back. (She exits).

JOSEPH

I see you got everything worked out.

ETHELBERT

(A confused grunt) Uh—

JOSEPH

I'm truly relieved—because beneath that tough wrestler's exterior beats a heart of purest gold. Take my word for it, although I guess you don't have to take my word for it.

ETHELBERT

(In something of a panic) Now look here, about this going to Sidcup—

JOSEPH

I know you're probably getting a little anxious about it, but that's what I wanted to talk to you about. You see I have to admit that I had an ulterior motive inviting you home with me.

ETHELBERT

(Puzzled) An interior motor—

JOSEPH

(Chuckling) You really have a way with words, don't you? Well, I'm going to be completely honest with you. Things between Lanny and I are not as perfect as they seem. I realize I could never hope to fool a man with your perceptivity. The plain truth is I asked you here, hoping you might act as a sort of marriage counselor.

ETHELBERT

Me? No—

JOSEPH

Oh, I realize the situation has altered somewhat, but maybe that's for the best. You might have first-hand knowledge of the problem I face. As you well know, Lanny is a professional wrestler and thus a celebrity. She is often in the limelight, and so I'm afraid she finds life with me a bit dull. But I love her very much, and so I'm asking you, her former husband, to give me some advice.

ETHELBERT

But look here! You got that all wrong!

JOSEPH

(Jumps to the wrong conclusion) I do? You mean to say I've misinterpreted?

ETHELBERT

(Nodding emphatically) Oh yeah—

JOSEPH

So you think I made a foolish mistake and I really do have a chance? Oh, I'm terribly relieved! You don't know what this means to me, my friend! Well, after what you've done for me, please tell me what I can do for you!

ETHELBERT

(Bursting with frustration) SIDCUP!

JOSEPH

Of course! But I still have to give you something for your invaluable advice! (He thinks) I know just the thing! Now you sit on that sofa and hold your horses. (He pushes him onto the sofa) I won't be a minute. (He dashes off, leaving ETHELBERT on the sofa with his head in his hands).

(After a few moments THEO and RUTHIE enter, He stares around fondly. They pay no attention to ETHELBERT who also ignores them)

RUTHIE

(Standing by the door doubtfully) Are you sure this is it?

THEO

Of course this is it. Come on in! This is it! (He pulls her into the room) How do you like it?

RUTHIE

Did you actually *live* here?

THEO

Of course I did. This was my home. It's all coming back to me. I remember those lamps and—those chairs and—(He stares in surprise, picks up the pieces of the stick) Dad's *stick*?

RUTHIE

But it's not like you described it to me.

THEO

(Perplexed) It isn't?

RUTHIE

You said there was a staircase.

THEO

(Looking around, scratching his head) I wonder where the devil it went?

RUTHIE

This isn't the right house.

THEO

(Staring around in confusion) My gosh—I think you're right!

RUTHIE

(Gesturing to ETHELBERT, who maintains a stony pose) Maybe we could ask him?

THEO

Him? He doesn't look very—functional, does he?

RUTHIE

I think we'd better get out of here.

(But as they're about to exit, ELMER emerges from the kitchen, carrying a new stick)

ELMER

(Pointing with his stick) Look what I'm lumbered with!

THEO

Ah. Then this must be yours. (Hands him the pieces, embarrassed) Look, I'm very sorry about this—

ELMER

(At RUTHIE) Sorry, he says—

THEO

We seem to have made a mistake. It appears we've come to the wrong house. (He shrugs with embarrassment).

ELMER

The wrong house! You wouldn't know the wrong house if it hit you in the backside. In my day we knew a thing or two about houses. I used to run with a man called Carey. He was a barber. Carey the barber they called him. He was a holy terror! He could cut your hair right down to the skin. Oh, he was a smooth one, he was! (A pause, in some consternation) The wrong house, did you say?

THEO

It was an honest mistake, I assure you. I really thought this was the house I grew up in, but I've been away—for a while.

ELMER

(He squints at THEO) You're not a relation of Carey, are you?

(JOSEPH now returns to the room with a rather small and wrinkled tuxedo. He takes it to ETHELBERT)

JOSEPH

(Smiling happily) Here it is. I had to find something with which I could repair your incredible kindness. My wife and I felt we owed you something by way of compensation. I hope it fits all right.

ETHELBERT

(He takes the tux, cheering up a bit) Well now, this might do. This looks all right.

ELMER

Here! That's my suit, you daft prat!

JOSEPH

I know, but you've shrunk considerably. I didn't think you'd mind.