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The Fool of the Family.

By MRS. B. M. CROKER.

(Author of "The Catapaw," etc.)

It was a beautiful July evening in the very heart of the country, and Mrs Watts, after the labours of the day—(she was a cottager who took in lodgers)—sallied forth bare-armed to her garden gate, attracted by the animated signals of a neighbour, Mrs Dale (the most voluble, daring, and interesting scandal monger in the village of Silverstream). Surely it would be hard if these two poor industrious women could not enjoy half an hour's relaxation—after their tedious exertions—and nothing refreshed them so completely or raised their flagging spirits to the same pitch as a thoroughly good gossip.

"Well, what is it?" enquired Mrs Watts, in response to her neighbour's jerks of the chin and head—sure portents of some mighty intelligence.

"What do you think?" she answered in a low voice—"I never was so took aback!"

"Go on," urged the other, "I'm waiting here to be took aback—too."

"Them Lavenders are leaving!"

"The Lavenders—of Rosedale?"

"What else—yes, and going to London—"

"And them in the parish this four hundred years—it's not true woman—is it?"

"Well I had it from Susan Baker, who deals with Anne Lavender for eggs and honey—they have given notice to quit—and are off. A party is going to take the lease, and fowls, and bees, and furniture off their hands—and they are away to London in a fortnight—"

"Get along? What is the reason?"

"Aye—that's what everyone will be asking? but no one will get the right answer. Them Lavenders, though only working people, and making a living out of their bit of land and hens, never mix with other village folk—and never forget that they were once the La Venders of Vender Hall."

"Once—a hundred years ago!" sneered Mrs Watts, "it's not what folks were—but what they are themselves, and they are just no better nor you or me now—Ann Lavender—doing her own washing and baking, selling the bees and chickens and honey. Dan doing the digging."

"'Tis all he is fit for!—he is half a fool, and I never myself see reason in the talk of Letty being a great beauty. She's too thin for one thing."

"Yes, that's true," assented Mrs Deal, who weighed fifteen stone—"but some does admire her—Thompson—and Gellings—and—"

"Young Stephen Squire, of Vender Hall," supplemented her listener.

"But his people will never allow it—old John Squire has made his way up from nothing—Oh, he is a hard chap, and he is not one to allow his son to pull down what he has piled up. Young Steve is to marry money—they had Miss Bulger, the brewer's daughter, out from Winchester, staying there—and making much of her."

"They can never make Stephen make love to her. She's too ugly."

"I'm not sure of that—anyhow they can make mischief between Steve and Letty—that's easy—he being jealous—and she touchy. At the Park flower show I noticed the Squire's sisters, with the rich visitor walking between them, pass by Letty Lavender with a great stare—as if they were strangers. I give you my word, if they had been real duchesses they couldn't have done it grander—"

"—And the Lavenders of the Vender were gentry when the Squires were scraping the roads!" ejaculated Mrs Deal.

"That's true," assented Mrs Watts, "and though she is so stand-off, Susan is a nice, quiet, well-schooled woman—it was great nonsense her sending Letty to

school—and I said so—and all she has got by it, is that the girl is ruler in the house and leads her mother by the nose—"

"—And is leading her to London—this time! I hope they may never regret it—but don't I know they will—why, here's Letty herself," cried Mrs Deal—and then (sotto voce), "I'll pick it all out of her."

Letty Lavender was a tall, slight girl with a clear complexion—delicate features and a pair of pretty dark eyes. She walked with a certain air, and carried herself with grace—the sole legacy of the ancient family of La Vender. Letty would have passed the two gossips with a civil good-evening, but Mrs Deal extended a fat arm and held her fast.

"What's this I'm hearing, Letty?"

She stopped, and coloured brilliantly.

"I'm sure I don't know—you hear so much, Mrs Deal."

"Is it true you are leaving Rosedale—and going up to London?"

"Yes—we think we shall like the change."

"This a sudden notion ye took?" put in Mrs Watts.

"Oh, my mother feels the damp in winter—she has bronchitis, you know—and it will be livelier up there—and there is nothing to keep us here—"

"Only that you were born and reared in the place! There is your pretty home—very healthy, too—and everyone your well-wisher," argued Mrs Deal. "Does the Rector know?"

Yes, and everything is settled. A Mr Tonk answered our advertisement—a retired tradesman—he is taking the lease, and stock and furniture, and coming in next month."

"And paying well?" said Mrs Deal, briskly.

"Oh, yes—our own terms."

"But surely to goodness you are not leaving him your old clock, and oak chairs, and chest?"

"No, Mr Dawes will keep them till we are settled, as well as Mop, here," indicating her companion, a bob-tailed sheep dog—"we are taking the cat with us."

"'Tis said to be very unlucky to move a cat!" remarked Mrs Watts, in an impressive tone.

At this instant a dogcart was seen approaching—easily recognised as the Squire's turn-out, by the fine grey slipper in the shafts. Stephen, in a smart summer suit, was driving Miss Bulger (gorgeous in chains and feather, and giggling with overpowering satisfaction)—the two Squire's sisters occupied the back seat, enacting the part of twin geeseberries. As soon as Letty Lavender realised the party, she turned her back pointedly on the quartette, and was proudly unconscious of Stephen's doffed hat, as he and her rival swept by in a cloud of clanky dust.

"So that's settled!" exclaimed Mrs Deal, with a significant nod at her neighbour. "I hear she has six thousand pounds to her fortune—and she'd want it all—but old Squire is mad for the match."

"She's frightful ugly!" said Mrs Watts. "What dost say, Letty, girl?"

"Say? I must be going on, Mrs Watts—I have ever so many errands."

"This move will be a great change for you all, I'm thinking, after such nice work as beekeeping and poultry, and selling out flowers and vegetables—"

"Oh, we shall like London—mother and me—I'm sure—"

"—And Dan?"

"Dan does not care one way or another. He is a little sorry to leave—the bees. Well, good evening!" and with a nod and a smile Letty moved off, closely attended by "Mop."

As she walked away the matrons fol-

lowed her with eyes as effective as two searchlights. Then, as she disappeared, they gravely confronted one another, and Mrs Deal exclaimed:

"There's more than one fool at Rosedale!"

Letty's statement respecting her mother's bronchitis—and the attractions of London—was not strictly veracious—her own proud, sore heart, was the real, true, and only reason for the sudden uprooting of the Lavender family. For years—she and Stephen Squire had been—playmates—friends—and latterly undeclared sweethearts. Stephen had been learning farming—he now managed his father's land—he was a smart, good-looking young yeoman—and his family looked to him to marry well. He would never fulfil their wishes by loitering in the lanes with Letty Lavender, the daughter of a widow in humble circumstances. His sisters could not forgive her for her pretty face, his father could not overlook her empty pockets, but nothing could be said against her family—for it was known that a hundred years ago the Lavenders were great people—and gentlefolk. Gambling and the bottle brought them down to the rank of cottagers in less than three generations; and all that remained to Letty was her beauty, her self-will, and her pride. She was aware that Stephen, her old playmate was "warned off" from her society. His sisters had insulted her in public—while his father had sought out and brought home, an acceptable future daughter-in-law. But still Stephen was staunch—with eager eloquence, he suggested to Letty, that they should marry, and go out to New Zealand and make their home there, but she refused. She would not leave her mother and brother, and make a sort of runaway match. Then she and Stephen had sharp words. He was, he said, ready to sacrifice his family, and all his prospects, but Letty would not even meet him quarter way—and she was so cold and distant, he believed she did not care a straw about him. At this crisis, Miss Bulger appeared on the scene—Stephen was seen in her company—at church—and flower show—and the breach was complete.

Letty felt that she could not endure to remain in Silverstream—receiving the compassion of the villagers. After a final scene with Stephen, when she was proud and jealous—and he was hot and hasty, she made up her mind to es-

cape from her old life—make a fresh start elsewhere. As a dressmaker in London, for instance! Her mother would not listen to the word "separation." If Letty went, they would all go. Dan—the lanky, shock haired boy, was of no importance in family councils. Letty's imagination was active, she planned the move entirely. When the place was duly advertised and a purchaser found—she decided that they would take a nice little flat in London (where marketing was cheap, and everything was so convenient). She would go into the dressmaking business—with a little premium, or work at home—with her machine; her mother could help her, and Dan might get some nice night job, on fine days they would all go into the beautiful parks, and hear the bands. On wet days, there were picture galleries and free libraries—and on Sundays Westminster Abbey, and St. Paul's. It would be a new and delightful existence—every hour filled with enjoyment and occupation—occupation that would employ her mind, and act as an anodyne. In London she would forget Stephen.

Mrs Lavender, a thin fair woman—Dan, her shock headed, half-witted son of 10, and Letty—her pretty, enterprising daughter, came to London in the month of August, accompanied by Muff the cat. They took two furnished rooms in a house near the Vauxhall-road, and prepared to enter on their kingdom.

London was hot and airless—all the "world" was out of town, and every kind of business was slack. The letter of introduction given by the rector was not delivered—the lady who might be useful to Letty, and find her employment, was abroad. She must therefore wait.

The two rooms were dusty and stuffy after the fine air and spacious accommodation at Rosedale—here Dan slept in the sitting-room, and though he carried water, went errands, and cleaned boots, the rent was eight shillings a week. The family resolved to move in to better rooms, as soon as Letty had secured "a connection" and Mr Tonk had paid the balance of the purchase money. Meanwhile they made the best of circumstances—they walked round St. James' Park, and admired the ducks and penguins—they explored Trafalgar Square, the National Gallery, and made one great expedition to Hampton Court.

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