



The Friend of the Family

by Arthur Train



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"HERE'S a letter from mother," exclaimed Mrs. Fenker, looking up from her morning's mail. "And she's coming this afternoon!"

She glanced at her husband with the fatuous expression commonly assumed by communicators of evil tidings who hope by an amiable distortion of the facial muscles to temper the wind of circumstances to the shorn lamb of destiny.

"Oh, Lord!" groaned Fenker, throwing down his napkin.

"I knew you'd say that!" answered his wife, as if somehow this extraordinary foreknowledge on her part rendered his ejaculation the more reprehensible.

"Then she'll be here for our dinner to the Bumsteads to-night! What does she want to come again for, anyhow? She was here only five weeks ago," he continued.

"I suppose she wants to get away from Brooklyn," replied Mrs. Fenker. "Of course it does seem as if she might have chosen some other time. But she hasn't—and she'll be here—at 5 o'clock!"

"Confound it all!" Fenker almost shouted. "I wish she was in Alaska or South America—or that we were. Why, she positively lives here."

"Oh! you mustn't mind mother," coaxed his wife. "You ought to be used to her by this time."

"I should say I ought!" he retorted. "Mustn't mind mother! Ha-ha! Mustn't mind mother! Why, she drives me to drink!"

"I don't think you're at all nice about her," she answered poutingly. "I'm sure I don't ask her!"

"I know, dear! I know!" he agreed more gently. "But I do so like to spend the evenings alone and undisturbed with you, dearie!"

"Sweetheart!" murmured Mrs. Fenker, her eye in the teacup, forgetful of long hours during which her husband smoked in stolid silence and dozed over the evening paper.

"Couldn't you telegraph her," he suggested, "and 'stall' her off until next week some time?"

"Oh!" she gasped, a frightful look coming into her face. "I couldn't! I shouldn't dare! Would you?"

"No," he retorted, "I shouldn't! Why, she'd kick up such a row we'd never hear the last of it! And it wouldn't stop her, either. I bet she sits at home and makes elaborate calculations as to just what time in the month would put us out the most. She never liked me, anyhow!"

"Oh! yes, she did," expostulated Mrs. Fenker.

"If you'd only have a little courage," he continued, "I'm sure you could cut her down to four times a year. She's got so now she's here more than half the time! It ain't fair! It breaks up our home!"

"It is too bad, William!" admitted Mrs. Fenker. "I hate it just as much as you do. But nobody could stop mother!"

This, alas, was indeed true. Nobody could possibly have stopped mother, unless it were a charge of dynamite. Even then it is doubtful if she would have been more than delayed. For Mrs. Nelson Wellington Ironsides, the mother of Mrs. Fenker, was one of those masterful women who with an unswerving and blind faith in their own theories feel that death itself should not interfere with putting them into execution. She regarded Fenker as something less than a spineless worm, and a spineless worm he was so far as she was concerned. In her presence he felt like a small boy before a terrible birching head master. His conversation shrank to yea, yea, and nay, nay. He slunk into the house and out of it like a criminal cat, and spent long hours at his business office rather than confront her august and powerful personality. Could he

have once risen up and thrown off the yoke!—could he have assumed even for one brief hour to assert himself, all might have been well. But the Creator had not favored him even with a modicum of temerity. One glance from his mother-in-law and he ran. He did not even wait until he could see the whites of her eyes!

"Well, we're just up against it once more!" he sighed. "Anyhow, she's not landed here yet! Maybe we could put off the dinner—what do you think?"

"We couldn't do that," replied Mrs. Fenker. "It would make a lot of talk and mother might hear of it."

"Yes," he ground out savagely, "mother would hear of it, you can bet your life on that!"

"Well, I've got to go downtown and order the things for dinner," said Mrs. Fenker, getting up and moving toward the door. "I do hope we shan't have any trouble with the servants to-day. I suppose you'll take the 8.15?"

"Yes," answered Fenker, looking at the clock, which pointed to 7.55. "I'll smoke about ten minutes longer, I guess."

Neither were they disappointed, for Mrs. Fenker had hardly left the room before Maggie entered imperiously and fixed Fenker with a stern and relentless glance.

"Ye'll have to get in another girl to help to-day," she announced authoritatively. "Somebody's got to freeze the ice cream."

"Ye-es?" stammered Fenker. "Couldn't you possibly find time to freeze it? After lunch, say?"

She pinned him in the circumambient air with a look.

"Me, is it? Freeze the ice cream! Wid all I've got to do? A-ha!"

"Can't Patrick freeze it?" inquired her master mildly.

"Patrick says he's too busy!" she snapped. "I'm thinkin' o' gettin' in me cousin, Mrs. Murphy—Nora Callahan that was. She'll be glad of the chance to earn a couple of dollars."

Fenker knew very well that this was but a subterfuge for the most obvious extortion, that Maggie had seized the opportunity to put on the screws, and that she should have been firmly told to do the work herself. But as usual

But Patrick had no sooner departed than the humiliation swept over him. "Coward!" he groaned, clenching his fist and grinding his teeth in the direction of the door. "Worm! Jelly-fish! 'Fraid cat! Mollycoddle! Nin-compoop! Why can't you be a man and run your own house?"

At this interesting juncture Mrs. Fenker thrust her head through the door on her way out.

"You still here, William? I thought you were going to take the 8.15? It's 8.11 now. You can't possibly catch it."

"Is it?" inquired Fenker indifferently. "Well, I had to interview some of the servants. Fact is, I told Maggie she could get in her cousin Nora to help her with the ice cream. She told me she could get her to come for a couple of dollars."

"A couple of dollars!" retorted his wife. "I should think she could! A couple of dollars for freezing ice cream! William, you are a—"

"Well, what could I do?" he inquired feebly. "You'd have done the same thing!"

"Nothing of the kind," she answered



"He released the spring. Instantly a female voice began to address Mrs. Ironsides."

People often wondered how the Fenkers got along in life as well as they did, considering their self-effacing characters. Servants, grocerymen, plumbers, cab drivers, neighbors rode roughshod over them without their uttering a word of protest. Mrs. Fenker herself was the antithesis of her mother and took everything that came her way with uncomplaining meekness. It was torture for her to engage a cook, utterly impossible for her to discharge one. Yet oftentimes their souls rebelled.

Only pride and the fear of a permanent military occupation of their establishment prevented their calling upon "mother" to run the house for them and attend to all their domestic affairs.

There was Patrick, the hired man, for instance. Fenker was sure he stole his cigars and everybody knew he was the laziest man in town. Yet Fenker could by no possibility either have reprimanded or discharged him. So, too, the cook, a militant Irish lady, who arose when she pleased, did what she pleased and went out when she chose. In order to induce her to cook a dinner for more than three or four the Fenkers had to begin weeks beforehand gradually to accommodate her mind to the idea of making the extra effort. Both trembled at her approaching tread and wilted before the menacing gleam of her large, oyster-like gray eye.

Maggie, the "second" girl, was equally terrifying. No one knew why she was called the "second" girl, as there was no first, never had been and never would be. But though she was pert and independent, wore Mrs. Fenker's shoes and purloined her ribbons and stockings, she rested secure in the knowledge that neither her master nor her mistress would dare to say anything to her. To-day, especially, both of them expected trouble.

he was speechless before her and disgracefully capitulated.

"Oh, very well. As you think best. By the way, will you please ask Patrick if he minds coming in here a moment?"

A few minutes later Patrick, red-faced and tousled, and smelling strongly of cigars, made his appearance. Fenker at first made a ridiculous bluff at not seeing him, until, having mustered his courage, he looked up and began in a conciliatory manner.

"Oh, that you, Patrick? Yes, I sent for you—what was it, now? Oh, yes, my wife's mother, Mrs. Ironsides, is coming on the afternoon train and I want you to harness up the dogcart and go to meet her."

Patrick's face turned a deeper shade of red and then slowly to purple. He seemed to control his emotions with difficulty.

"Look here, Mither Fenker!" he burst forth. "Shure and how have I time to be harnessing dogcarts and going to the station to meet your mother-in-law—me wid the lawn to mow and the drive to rake and clean up? I'd have to change all me clothes and wash down the wagon besides. Shure, 'tis only a quarter av a mile—she can walk. 'Twill do her good!"

Fenker, fully aware that he ought to arise and blasphemously send Patrick packing, found himself unable to stir. Neither could he think of even the most obvious retort. He quailed before Patrick as he quailed before Maggie, Bridget and all their kind. Usually when he started out to upbraid them for their sloth and impertinence he ended by sympathizing with them and raising their wages.

"Oh, well," he assented meekly, "I suppose it would sort of mix things up. It will be all right. I can telephone to the livery stable for a hack to meet her."

firmly. "I should have sent her about her business. A couple of dollars indeed! Why can't you assert yourself! and stand up to these people? If you'd only have a little spunk and put them back where they belong!"

At this moment a thundering tread outside interrupted the thread of her remarks and the massive form of Bridget filled the doorway.

"I'll be needing some more help," she declared in a bass voice, a trifle husky in the lower register. "I've entirely too much work on me hands to be cookin' for a lot of extry people as haven't any more sense than to be settin' around talkin' and playin' cards. What wid the laundry an' standin' on me pore feet at the tubs all day yesterday me old bones was so sore I could hardly get out av bed at all this morning. If ye can't send over to the pastry cook's for yer on-tray and dessert it's no dinner ye'll be havin' to-day if ye want me fer yer cook."

"Why, Bridget!" expostulated Mrs. Fenker. "You!"

"There's enough work for tin people in this house, and only three to attend to it all. 'Tis a job for nayers, not for Christian white folks. Either ye get in a helper or I'll be packin' me trunk and takin' the first train for New York."

"For heaven's sake, Bridget! You mustn't leave us like this! Not to-day at any rate! Why, my mother is coming to visit us!" exclaimed her mistress.

"The devil she is!" cried Bridget. "Then it's lavin' I am—anyhow!"

"Well, well, get what help you need," hastily agreed Mrs. Fenker. "We must get through with our dinner and then we'll talk the matter over."

looked up as if she were going to cry. "Never mind!" he consoled. "The trouble with us is we're just too kind-hearted. But I'd rather be easy than as mean as some folks I know of. You have to humor these ignorant people. You wouldn't be anywhere if you didn't. Life is a struggle, and it's better to duck some of the responsibilities than to break your spinal column trying to shoulder them."

"It seems as if we were ducking all the time!" sighed his wife. "Well, goodby, William. Don't miss the 8.45."

Fenker sat disconsolately, wondering what good he was in the world anyhow. He knew that his tradesmen cheated him right and left. He didn't have the courage to question a single item on one of their bills. The landlord went on raising the rent year after year and he couldn't bring himself to protest. And at the office—they hadn't increased his salary for five years, while less valuable men were shoved on, up and up. Why hadn't the Creator given him more of what his old father had been accustomed to term as "guts"? Could he ever expect to bring himself to face his own servants and put them in their places? Mournfully he told himself that he could not. He was, as he had just said, a coward, a jellyfish, a worm!

With these depressing thoughts crowding in upon him he went up to his room to get ready for the train. As the master of a household he was a joke and he knew it.

"Man to see ye!" called Maggie from halfway up the stairs.

"Who 's it?" he shouted down, nervously brushing his coat. He hated strange people.

"How do I know?" she retorted. "Here's his card."

Fenker glanced at it hastily. RUFUS RICHARDSON

"The Friend of the Family"—Broadway, New York.

"Tell him I'm just leaving the house," he directed. "I real' haven't a moment. I've missed one train now."

"Well, ye can't tell me yerself," remarked Maggie, "for he's in the dining room already and I'm up to me neck in work."

The blood rushed to Fenker's slender neck, and for a moment he felt the fierce desire to kill. Then he patiently descended the stairs, preparing himself politely yet forcibly to send his visitor away. A tall, smooth-shaven man with a goatee, dressed in a linen duster, stood surveying the etchings on the walls. On the table beside him lay a tall hat and a mahogany box, one on its top and the other on its bottom. A benignant smile crossed his face at the sight of the owner of the house.

"Have I the honor of addressing Mr. William Fenker?" he inquired with the air of a grand seigneur.

"That's me," admitted Fenker. "What do you want?"

"Only your good will," answered the visitor pleasantly. "Nothing more."

"No money?" asked Fenker. "You don't want me to buy anything, do you?"

"Not at all! Not at all!" replied the stranger. "My name is Rufus Richardson. I am an inventor and I desire to enlist your sympathy, interest and influence in a project which needs the backing of just a few independent, strong, resourceful men like yourself. Mine is the most marvellous invention of the age."

"No money, eh?" queried his still suspicious host.

"Not a cent! A kindly word now and then! That is all!"

"Well," said Fenker, trying to take courage. "What's your proposition?"

Mr. Richardson waved his hand toward his mahogany box, a highly polished affair some eighteen inches square.

"Inside yonder box," he announced softly, "is concealed the solution of the domestic problem."

"What?" said Fenker sharply.

"Of the whole domestic problem," repeated Richardson.

"How's that?" inquired Fenker, interested. "Sit down. Have a cigar?"

He handed Richardson the box and took one himself. "The domestic

problem! Ha! ha!"

"By means of this innocent looking box all the disagreeable duties of domestic life, so offensive to men and women of sensitive natures, are performed automatically," announced the inventor.

"Automatically?"

"Auto-matically!" repeated Richardson.

"What do you mean?" incredulously asked Fenker.

"Listen!" whispered the other impressively. "Do you dislike to discharge the cook?"

"Do I?" muttered Fenker.

"Does your nature rebel at having to scold the children?"

"It certainly does!"

"Do you shrink from calling down the hired girl?"

"Sure thing!" chirped Fenker.

"Does it bore you to discourage peddlers and book agents? To drive off insurance men? To keep the neighbors' children out of the garden?"

"You bet!" exclaimed Fenker.

"To remonstrate with your wife? To induce your mother-in-law to end her visit?"

"Yes—yes—YES!" shouted Fenker wildly, springing to his feet in his excitement.

"All these things and more," announced Rufus Richardson solemnly, "are done for you by the mere pressure of a spring."

"Impossible!" almost shrieked Fenker.

"Nothing of the kind!" replied the inventor, opening his grip and disclosing a row of cylinders. "This beautiful mahogany box upon the table, the face of which is ingeniously made to resemble a clock, contains the ordinary mechanism of the phonograph or graphophone, reinforced by an invention of my own known as an 'intensifier,' which so acts upon any roll or cylinder placed inside that the resemblance to the human voice is increased a thousandfold. It is impossible to detect at a distance of even a few feet that the voice proceeds from a larynx but from a machine. It is startling in its verisimilitude. My plan is to utilize the phonograph (by means of my intensifier) for the performance of all those unpleasant household duties so galling to sensitive natures, such as discharging the cook, scolding the children, calling down the hired girl and so forth. Here are twenty rolls. Take your choice! Each is adapted to some crisis or emergency of domestic existence, and is labelled appropriately. No. 1: 'How to call the dog.' No. 2: 'How to fire the office boy.' No. 3: 'How to get rid of a male caller.' No. 4: 'How to get rid of a female caller.' No. 5: 'How to call down your mother-in-law'—"

"Say that again!" said Fenker with feeling.

"How to call down your mother-in-law," repeated Richardson with good nature.

"Ah!" exclaimed Fenker.

"This set of 'mother-in-law' rolls comes in a graduated scale: (a)—How to call down your mother-in-law gently. (b)—'Severely.' (c)—'How to soak it to her.' (d)—'How to get rid of her entirely.'"

"Magnificent!" cried Fenker with enthusiasm.

"I tell you," said Richardson, beaming upon him, "it's the marvel of the twentieth century. The biggest boon ever conferred upon mankind. I call it 'The Friend of the Family.'"

"It's well named," agreed Fenker devoutly.

"Let me give you a demonstration," urged Richardson. "What will you have? Will you call the dog or scare the burglar?"

"I think," said Fenker, "I'll remonstrate a little with mother!"

"All right," answered the inventor. "How will you give it to her? Gently? Severely? Or—"

"Oh, soak it to her!" burst out Fenker.

"Good!" nodded Richardson. "No. 6-C."

He removed a roll from his grip, lifted up the top of the box, inserted the roll, closed the box again and held his thumb suspended for a moment.

"You press the button. It does— for mother-in-law!"

He pressed a spring. There was a click, followed by a whirring noise. Then at Fenker's very elbow, so life-like in its sarcasm and bitterness that he was convinced some invisible human being was uttering the words, a voice began to "soak it" to an equally invisible but clearly unwelcome female relative.

"E-e-e— Oh—you—do, do you! Well, let me tell you right now that you don't know anything about it. We can get on all right without you! No one invited you to come, anyway! Why don't you stay at home some of the time? Instead of minding your own business you come butting in here and raising the devil—I say raising the devil! And setting the whole house topsy-turvy. It's the limit. Oh, I know you're my wife's mother! I've heard nothing else since I was married! I don't care if you were my grandmother! I'm sick of you and your interference in my affairs! I won't stand it! I won't have it! I'm boss here. And you can either hold your tongue and behave yourself or—m-m-m-s-s—"

"Marvellous! Marvellous!" cried Fenker, capering around delighted.

"What a pity the old lady wasn't here? What a waste of good ammunition?"

"Eh?" said Richardson innocently. "What old lady?" Then after a pause: "The rolls last forever and are adapted for every emergency!"

"Wonderful!" reiterated Fenker. "Simply wonderful!"

Richardson removed the roll and put it back in the grip.

"Every machine," explained its owner, "carries with it an assortment of ten rolls for general domestic use. This includes 'Discharging the Cook,' 'Scolding the Children,' &c. Of course, if you prefer, you can make a selection. You can have 'Scolding the Cook' and 'Discharging the Children'— arrange it any way you choose. Ten rolls you get for nothing and we supply the others in order."

"Do—do—the mother-in-law rolls come with the machine?" asked Fenker.

"Certainly. Our No. 6-A, 'How to Call Her Down Gently,'" assented Richardson.

"Well, you can cut that out," exclaimed Fenker, "and give me the last two, including the grand boost."

"Just as you like. Now how about the others?"

"Oh! Give me how to call down the second girl and hand a few to the hired man—and fire the cook."

"Yes. What else?"

"By the way," said Fenker, "you better give me some of those mother-in-law rolls in female."

"Yes, it's just as well to have 'em in either sex," assented the other.

"By thunder," muttered he after his visitor had departed. "I've lost that second train, too. Stuck here now until 9.45. However, maybe I can try 'The Friend of the Family' on somebody!"

He sat down at the table and began toying with the rolls.

"I wonder who I can try it on first?" thought he. Just then there came a violent knock upon the window, Patrick's customary method of announcing that he desired to speak to either his master or his mistress. With a grim smile Fenker slipped in one of the rolls and then strode across and threw open the window.

"There's something the matter wid the lawn mower," he announced in a fatigued manner. "I'm just goin' to step down to the village to get her fixed."

This was a polite formula to express the fact that he needed to slack his throat at the hotel bar.

"Come in here a moment, Patrick," said Fenker with unusual firmness.

"All right, I don't mind," answered Patrick accommodatingly.

Fenker braced himself and took a strategic position behind the table as the hired man entered belligerently.

"I have decided to have you harness that dogcart, Patrick," continued his master.

Patrick looked at him in dumb bewilderment.

(Continued on Succeeding Page.)



"Me freeze the ice cream! Wid all I got to do?"