

THE CRONE OF CROPLEY

A play for Young Audiences
by Matt Buchanan

CHARACTERS

(In Order of Appearance)

The Crone of Cropley—a mysterious, poor old woman

The Mayor of Cropley

Bert Chandler—a dairyman

Mrs. Figg—a widow who keeps hens

John Hadley—a ten-year-old boy

Mary Butler—a twelve-year-old girl

Arthur Hadley—John’s fifteen-year-old brother

Bob Shropshire—a farmer

Alice Marley—a baker

Fred Hanson—a miller

Amelia Hadley—mother of John and Arthur, owner of a small duck pond

Constance Butler, Mary’s mother, an innkeeper

Townspeople (if desired)

SCENE ONE

The Cropley town square. Shops, thatch-roofed houses, a pillory, etc. A communal well sits down center. Everything has a slightly dilapidated appearance. The Mayor’s house is center stage. All is quiet. It is early morning, and no one is about. After a moment of complete peace, the Crone of Cropley enters. She is a very old and feeble woman, dressed almost in rags. She carries a very shabby, nearly empty burlap bag. She hobbles across the stage, poking into corners with her walking stick but finding nothing, and exits. After another moment’s silence, the door to the Mayor’s house opens slowly and the Mayor himself peers out, as if to check if the “coast is clear.” Seeing no one, he ventures forth into the square. He is dressed prosperously, as befits one of exalted rank, but even he looks slightly shopworn. He stands in the square and inhales a breath of morning with an air of self-satisfaction. It doesn’t last long. From either side of the stage come two agitated townrs. They are Bert Chandler and Mrs. Eleanor Figg. Bert is a young, strapping dairyman in his working clothes. Mrs. Figg is a prosperous widow who keeps hens. She is dressed for Market Day, and carries a cat in a basket. About both of them hangs the same shabbiness that seems to pervade everything in this town. They are both agitated.

BERT

Me Lord Mayor! Me Lord Mayor! A word with you, me Lord!

MRS. FIGG

(Practically simultaneously) Mister Mayor! I need to speak with you right away! Mayor!

The Mayor considers retreating to his house but it is too late—they are upon him.

BERT

Me Lord Mayor, I wanna talk to you about my milk cows. They've almost stopped givin' milk!

MRS. FIGG

Ladies first! Mister Mayor, about my hens. Why, last week they laid only seven eggs among them! Seven! What am I to take to market? If this keeps up, I'll have to eat one of the hens, and then what? Soon I'll have none!

MAYOR

Well, I'm truly sorry, Widow Figg, but I'm not sure what you want me to do about it. Just what is wrong with your hens, that they won't lay?

MRS. FIGG

(Offended.) Wrong?! Nothing's wrong with them. The finest laying hens in all of Cropley—in all of England, maybe. Nothing's wrong with them. They don't lay because they don't eat. I have no more corn to give them. You can't expect a laying hen to lay eggs without corn to eat! It's not reasonable!

BERT

That's just what I complain of! My cows are the finest milking cows in three counties, but they won't give milk, and for why? Because I have no corn to feed them. How can they give milk with no corn to eat? And no water to drink! I ask you!

MRS. FIGG

I'll tell you what it is—this town is unlucky. That's what it is. Cropley is an unlucky town!

MAYOR

Er—I hardly think—

MRS. FIGG

And that's your responsibility! Are you the Mayor or aren't you?

MAYOR

Er—

MRS. FIGG

Is it or is it not your responsibility to make things work around here?

BERT

That's right! You're the Mayor around here, not us! If this town's cursed, it's up to you to do somethink.

MAYOR

Well, now, I'm not sure the town is cursed—

MRS. FIGG

What else would you call it? I'm sure I haven't done anything wrong. I've never cheated anyone, or lied, or stolen. Why should my hens starve?

BERT

Or my cows, neither!

MRS. FIGG

And what about the rats? You can't say they're not a curse! Why, even if I had any corn, my hens would never get it—the rats would eat it first! There are so many, soon they'll be eating my hens!

MAYOR

Well, perhaps a cat—

MRS. FIGG

Don't talk to me about cats! Cats I had—a dozen or more. But they all ran away. And why? Because I had no milk to give them. This is the only one I have left (*indicating the cat in her basket*) and she's got no teeth. She couldn't catch a cold, let alone a rat. How do you expect me to keep cats if I've got no milk to give 'em?

MAYOR

(*To Bert.*) Well—er—perhaps you—

BERT

What, give 'er some o' my milk! I can just see myself! Why, I'm as honest a businessman as anyone, but you don't catch me giving nobody somethink for nothink. Besides, I've barely enough for myself.

MRS. FIGG

I would give you some eggs, if cats came back and killed the rats and my hens started laying again.

BERT

Oh, now please! Come now! Lemme get this straight: you want me to give you some o' my precious milk—to give it to you—and you say that mebbe, if, you might someday pay me back with some eggs. Do I look like I was born yesterday?

MAYOR

(*Trying to avoid a scene.*) Yes, well it certainly is a problem. I can assure you I'll be looking carefully into the matter of this town curse. Yes sir, carefully into the matter.

MRS. FIGG

I should hope so. I will be leaving you now. Fancy—market day, and nothing to market! Humph!

BERT

I'll bid you good day as well, me Lord Mayor— (*darkly*) —for now.

They exit in opposite directions. John Hadley and Mary Butler enter. John is about ten and Mary about twelve. Mary carries a wounded bird in her apron. (The bird may be a puppet of some kind, or indeed it may be simply pantomimed.)

JOHN

Be careful, Mary!

MARY

I am!

JOHN

I think it's got a broken wing.

MARY

The poor thing! Poor little bird!

JOHN

Hurry—put it down!

They sit on the ground with the bird between them. It flops helplessly.

MARY

(*Almost in tears.*) Oh, the poor, poor thing!

JOHN

Its wing is broken, I think. And it's neck, too. It can't survive.

MARY

But it has to.

JOHN

Mary! It can't. What good is a bird with a broken wing? It's kinder just to help it die.

MARY

Help it die! What do you mean?

JOHN

I don't know! Do you think I know? But it's suffering—you can see that.

MARY

It's in pain—oh, the poor thing!

JOHN

My brother will know what to do. My brother knows most everything.

MARY

He's kind of cute, too.

JOHN

(Somewhat miffed.) Well, I wouldn't know about that. But he's sure to know what to do.

MARY

Let's go find him. *(To the bird.)* You wait right here, and don't worry. We'll bring help.

JOHN

I'll still bet he says we should help it die. Put it out of its misery, like.

They lay the bird carefully on the ground under a tree and run off. After a moment the Crone of Cropley enters, walking painfully with her stick and still carrying her bag. She sees the bird.

CRONE

Dear me, what have we here? And why aren't you flying about in the trees where you belong?

Painfully she gets down on the ground and takes the bird into her lap, examining it carefully but gently.

Nothing seems to be broken. Just stunned, I think. And frightened and hungry. Here—

She takes a small parcel from her bag, unwraps it, and feeds the contents to the bird.

This was supposed to be my supper, but you need it more than me. There, now. Just get your strength back. That's right. You'll be good as new in a minute. Maybe next time you'll pay better attention to the glass in people's windows, eh?

John and Mary return, accompanied by John's older brother, Arthur Hadley. Arthur is fifteen and strong for his age. He carries a shovel, intending to use it to put the bird out of its misery. They stop when they see the Crone, and hold back. She doesn't appear to notice them.

MARY

Shhh! Look!

CRONE

There, now, that's better. Off you go now, my pretty thing.

And to the wonderment of the three young people, the bird flies off. The Crone gets painfully to her feet and shuffles off stage, perhaps nodding to the youngsters as she passes. They watch her go in silence. Finally, Mary speaks.

MARY

Did you see that?

JOHN

It just flew away!

MARY

It can't have! Its neck was broken!

JOHN

You saw it! So did Arthur!

ARTHUR

Now, look here—are you sure its neck was broken?

MARY

It couldn't fly! I'm sure it couldn't!

JOHN

She made it better! She did! And we saw it.

MARY

Oh, my lord! Do you suppose she's a witch?

JOHN

She must be!

MARY

A good witch, obviously.

JOHN

Wait'll we tell people!

MARY

A good witch, right in Cropley! Why, she'll be able to help with all kinds of problems!

ARTHUR

(Seriously concerned.) Now, you both want to be careful with that kind of talk.

JOHN

But Arthur, it must be true. We saw it with our own eyes!

ARTHUR

Well, now, maybe we did and maybe we didn't. I need to think more about this. But you young 'uns best keep it to yourself until I decide what's best to do.

JOHN

Us "young 'uns!" You're only fifteen yourself!

ARTHUR

And that's half again what you are—so that makes me the wiser. You'd best mind what I say.

MARY

Oh, get off it anyway, Johnny! You said yourself not half an hour since that Arthur knows most everything!

ARTHUR

Well, now, Miss Mary, not everything—but I knows more than what this little toad does, and that's a fact. *(To John.)* You just hold your tongue 'til I've had a chance to think more on this. With folks feeling the way they do in this town, nobody needs to be hearing the word "witch" unless you're very sure of your ground. Very sure indeed.

JOHN

I suppose you're right.

MARY

Of course he's right. Come on, Johnny—let's go. We're already late for school anyway.

JOHN

(Resigned.) Right-oh.

John and Mary exit. Arthur watches them go, still with a concerned look on his face. Then he shakes his head, takes his shovel, and exits. After a moment the Mayor enters, worried and talking to himself.

MAYOR

A curse! What nonsense! I don't know what they expect me to do anyway. I mean, I can't make chickens lay eggs, can I?

Enter variously Bob Shropshire, Alice Marley and Fred Hanson. Bob is a farmer in his working clothes, Alice a baker in her apron, and Fred a miller, also in an apron, but this one of leather. Like everyone in Cropley they look a little shopworn, and all three are agitated. As before, the Mayor contemplates retreat but finds his way blocked on every side.

BOB

Your honor--

ALICE

Mr. Mayor, sir---

FRED

Mayor, my good man--

MAYOR

For the love of mike, one at a time!

BOB

Look ‘ere, your honor—what are you goin’ ter do about this ‘ere curse?

ALICE

It’s terrible, Mr. Mayor! Just terrible!

FRED

It’s your duty to stop this sorcery!

MAYOR

Curses! Sorcery! That’s all so much nonsense!

FRED

No, it jolly well isn’t nonsense! Look at my mill!

ALICE

And look at my bakery!

BOB

Me crops is dyin’ on the ground!

ALICE

I’ve got nothing to bake!

FRED

And I’ve got nothing to grind up in my mill!

BOB

Yer can’t say Cropley ain’t cursed!

MAYOR

Now, I’m sure there’s a reasonable explanation--

Enter Amelia Hadley and Constance Butler. Both are hard working mothers dressed in poor but neat attire. Amelia keeps ducks and Constance runs a small inn. They may be accompanied by a few additional Townspeople.

AMELIA

Mayor! I need a word with you!

CONSTANCE

I need a word with you!

MAYOR

(Growing increasingly flustered.) Ladies—

CONSTANCE

How am I supposed to feed my customers with this curse on? My inn is losing money every day!

MAYOR

There isn't any—

AMELIA

My Arthur and my John are growing boys! What are they supposed to eat? Never mind my ducks!

MAYOR

I don't—

CONSTANCE

I haven't had bread on my table in almost a week! My Mary is skin and bones! My little Huxley hasn't had milk in days! And as for eggs—

AMELIA

Please! Forget eggs! It's the curse, I tell you!

MAYOR

(With the first vestige of authority we have yet seen) Wait, wait, wait!

Everyone stops and looks at him in mild surprise.

We're getting terribly muddled. There has to be a logical explanation for all this if we can just find it out.

BOB

Sure there's a logical argument! The town's cursed!

ALICE

It's so obvious!

MAYOR

Yes, yes, all right, if you insist, have it your way, but why?

FRED

How do we know?

BOB

(Simultaneously) I dunno, do I?

MAYOR

Let's think this thing out. You two—*(indicating Amelia and Constance)* what exactly is your complaint?

CONSTANCE

We've got no bread to feed our children. Or my customers.

AMELIA

Because she (*indicating Alice*) won't sell us any.

CONSTANCE

She says she hasn't got any.

ALICE

I haven't! How can I make bread without flour? Not to mention eggs and milk. I've barely got enough bread to feed myself!

MAYOR

And why haven't you got any flour?

ALICE

(*Indicating Fred*) Ask him!

FRED

It's no good blaming me! Can I make flour with no grain? (*Looking meaningfully at Bob*) No, I cannot!

BOB

'Ere—don't go looking at me like that, Fred Hanson! 'Ow can I grow anythink with no water? It ain't rained in a donkey's age. I can barely grow enough corn and grain for myself.

MAYOR

Er--the well.

FRED

(*Disgusted.*) Pah. That dried up a week ago Tuesday.

ALICE

We've been carrying water from the well in Dibley, but that'll probably dry up soon too.

CONSTANCE

Amelia Hadley (*looking at her*) has a pond. That hasn't dried up.

AMELIA

Oh, no! I'm not having Bob Shropshire nor any other smelly farmer draining my duck pond! What would happen to my ducks?

BOB

Don't matter anyhow. 'Ow would I get the water to me crops? Magic?