

EVERETT-GREEN EVELYN

**ESTHER'S CHARGE: A  
STORY FOR GIRLS**

Evelyn Everett-Green

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# Evelyn Everett-Green

## Esther's Charge: A Story for Girls

### CHAPTER I

#### A LITTLE MANAGER

"Where is Miss Esther, Genefer?"

"I think she's at the linen-press, marm, putting away the things from the wash."

"Tell her to come to me when she has done that. I want to speak to her."

"Yes, marm, I will. Can I do anything else for you?"

"No, thank you. I have all I want. But send Miss Esther to me quickly."

Mrs. St. Aiden was lying on a couch in a very pretty, dainty, little room, which opened upon a garden, blazing with late spring and early summer flowers. The lawn was still green, and looked like velvet, and the beds and borders of flowers were carefully tended, as could be seen at a glance. The gravel paths were rolled and weeded, and everything was in exquisite order, both within and without the house. Everything also was on a very small scale; and the lady herself, who was clad in deep widow's weeds, was small and slim also, and looked as if she were somewhat of an invalid, which indeed was the case.

Rather more than a year ago her husband had died after a very short illness, and she had never been well since, although she was not exactly ill of any disease. She was weak and easily upset, and she had to depend a good deal upon her servants and her only daughter. She had never been accustomed to think for herself. Captain St. Aiden had always done the thinking and the managing as long as he lived, and the poor lady felt very helpless when he was taken from her.

When the servant had gone she took up again a letter which she had been reading, and kept turning the leaves of it over and over again, sighing, and seeming troubled and perplexed. She also kept looking across the room towards the door at short intervals, sometimes saying half aloud as she did so, —

"I wish Esther would come!"

Presently the door opened, and a little girl came into the room with very quiet steps. She was dressed daintily in a white frock, with black sash and bows. She had a grave little face, that was generally rather pale, and looked small beneath the wide brow and big gray eyes. Perhaps it looked smaller for the flowing mass of wavy hair, a dusky chestnut color, that flowed over the child's shoulders and hung below her waist. It was very beautiful hair, soft and silky, with a crisp wave in it that made it stand off from her face like a cloud. It looked dark in the shadow, but when the sun shone upon it, it glistened almost like gold. Mrs. St. Aiden was very proud of Esther's hair, and considered it her chief beauty; but it was a source of considerable trouble to the little girl herself, for it took a great deal of brushing and combing to keep it in order, and tangled dreadfully when she played games. Then often the weight and heat of it made her head ache, especially at night; and she used to long to have a cropped head like other little children she sometimes saw, or, at least, to have only moderately long hair, like her two little friends at the rectory, Prissy and Milly Polperran.

"Did you want me, mama?" asked Esther, coming forwards towards the couch.

"Yes, dear, I did. I want to talk to you about something very serious. I have a letter here from your Uncle Arthur. He wants to send his two little boys here for three years, because he has just got an appointment that will take him out of the country all that time. I don't know what to think about it; it is so very sudden."

It was sudden, and Mrs. St. Aiden looked rather piteously at Esther. It seemed so hard for her to have to decide upon such a step in a hurry, and her brother wanted an answer at once. He had to make his own arrangements very quickly.

Esther was quite used to being her mother's confidante and adviser. Even in her father's lifetime she had often been promoted to this post during his frequent absences. When he lay dying, he had taken Esther's hands in his, and looking into her serious eyes, so like his own, had told her to take great care of mama always, and try to be a help and comfort to her. Her father had often called her his "wise little woman," and had talked to her much more gravely and seriously than most fathers do to their young children. Esther, too, having no brothers or sisters, had grown up almost entirely with her elders, and, therefore, she had developed a gravity and seriousness not usual at her age, though she was by no means lacking in the capacity for childish fun on the rare occasions when she was free to indulge in it.

She was ten years old at this time, and she was not taller than many children are at seven or eight; but there was a thoughtful look upon the small face and in the big gray eyes which was different from what is generally to be seen in the eyes of children of that age.

"Two little boys!" repeated Esther gravely; "they will be my cousins, I suppose. How old are they, and what are their names, mama?"

"The elder is nine, and the other rather more than a year younger. He does not mention their names, but I know the elder is called Philip, after our grandfather. I'm not quite sure about the second. Arthur is such a very bad correspondent, and poor Ada died when the second boy was born. You see it was like this, Esther. The grandmother on the mother's side kept house for him, and took care of the children after their mother died – she was living with him then. She died a year ago, and things have been going on in the same groove at his house. But now comes this appointment abroad, and he can neither take the boys nor leave them at home alone. They are not fit for school yet, he says. Of course they are not ready for public school, but I should have thought they might – well, never mind that. What he says is that they want taking in hand by a good governess or tutor, and suggests that they should come to me, and that I should find such a person, and that you should share the lessons, and get a good start with your education."

Esther's eyes began to sparkle beneath their long black lashes. She had an ardent love of study, and hitherto she had only been able to pick up such odd crumbs as were to be had from the desultory teaching of her mother, or from the study of such books as she could lay hands upon in that little-used room that was called the study, though nobody ever studied there save herself.

In her father's lifetime Esther had been well grounded, but since his death her education had been conducted in a very haphazard fashion. She had a wonderful thirst after knowledge, and in her leisure hours would almost always be found poring over a book; but of real tuition she had now hardly any, and the thought of a regular governess or tutor made her eyes sparkle with joy.

"O mama! could we?"

"Could we what, Esther?"

"Have a governess or tutor here as well as two boys?"

"Not in the house itself, of course. But he or she could lodge in the place, I suppose, and come every day. Your uncle is very liberal in his ideas, Esther. He is going to let his own big house. He has had an offer already, and he suggests paying over three or four hundred pounds a year to me, if I will undertake the charge of the two boys. Of course that would make it all very easy in some ways."

Esther's eyes grew round with wonder. She knew all about her mother's affairs, and how difficult it sometimes was to keep everything in the dainty state of perfection expected, upon the small income they inherited. To have this income doubled at a stroke, and only two boys to keep and a tutor's salary to pay out of it! Why, that would be a wonderful easing of many burdens which weighed heavily sometimes upon Esther's youthful shoulders. She had often found it so difficult to satisfy her delicate

mother's wishes and whims, and yet to keep the weekly bills down to the sum Genefer said they ought not to exceed.

"O mama, what a lot of money!"

"Your uncle is a well-to-do man, my dear, and he truly says that terms at good private schools, where the holidays have to be provided for as well, run into a lot of money. And he does not think the boys are fit for school yet. He says they want breaking in by a tutor first. They have had a governess up till now, but he thinks a tutor would be better, especially as there is no man in this house. I hope he does not mean that the boys are very naughty and troublesome. I don't know what I shall do with them if they are."

The lady sighed, and looked at Esther in that half helpless way which always went to the little girl's heart. She bent over and kissed her brow.

"Never mind, mama dear. I will take care of the boys," she said, in her womanly way. "They are both younger than I. I think it will be nice to have regular lessons again. I think papa would have been pleased about that. And perhaps I shall like having boys to play with too; only it will be strange at first."

"We could keep a girl, then, to help Genefer and Janet," said Mrs. St. Aiden. "The boys will have to have the big attic up at the top of the house, and the study to do lessons in. I hope they will not be very noisy; and there is the garden to play in. But they must not break the flowers, or take the fruit, or spoil the grass, or cut up the gravel. You will have to keep them in order, Esther. I can't have the place torn up by a pair of riotous boys."

"I will take care of them, mama dear," answered Esther bravely, though her heart sank just a little at the thought of the unknown element about to be introduced into her life. She had had so little experience of boys – there was only little Herbert at the rectory who ever came here, and he was quite good, and under the care of his elder sisters. Would these boys let her keep them in order as Bertie was kept by Prissy and Milly? She hoped they would, and she said nothing of her misgivings to her mother.

"Do you think you will say 'yes' to Uncle Arthur?"

"I think I must, my dear. I don't like to refuse; and, of course, there are advantages. Your education has been a difficulty. I have not the health myself, and we cannot afford a governess for you, and this is the first time Arthur has ever asked me to do anything for him. And, really, I might be able to keep a little pony carriage, and get out in the summer, with this addition to our income. I always feel that if I could get out more I should get back my health much quicker."

Esther's eyes sparkled again at these words, and a little pink flush rose in her cheeks. It was the thing of all others she had always wished for her mother – a dear little pony, and a little low basket carriage in which she could drive her out.

In father's days they had had one, and Esther had been allowed to drive the quiet pony when she was quite a little child. But that belonged to the old life, before the father had been taken away and they had come here to live, right down in Cornwall, at this little quaint Hermitage, as the house was called. Since then no such luxury could be dreamed of. It had been all they could do to make ends meet, and keep the mother content with what could be done by two maids, and one man coming in and out to care for the garden. And even so, Esther often wondered how they would get on, if it were not for all that Mr. Trelawny did for them.

"O mama!" she cried, "could we really have a pony again?"

"We will think about it. I should like to, if we could. It seems a pity that that nice little stable should stand empty; and there is the little paddock too. The pony could run there when he wasn't wanted, and that would save something in his keep. I have always been used to my little drives, and I miss them very much. But, of course, I shall not make up my mind in a hurry. I should like to see Mr. Trelawny about it all even before I write to Uncle Arthur."

A little shadow fell over Esther's face. She felt sure she knew what was coming.

"I wish, dear, you would just run up to the Crag and ask Mr. Trelawny if he would come down and see me about this."

The shadow deepened as the words were spoken, but Esther made only one effort to save herself the task.

"Couldn't Genefer go, mama? It is so hot!"

"It will be getting cooler every hour now, and there is plenty of shade through the wood. Have you had a walk to-day?"

"No, mama; I have been busy. Saturday is always a busy day, you know."

"Then a walk will do you good, and you will go much quicker than Genefer. Bring Mr. Trelawny back with you if you can. You can tell him a little about it, and he will know that it is important. You have time to go and come back before your tea-time."

Esther did not argue the matter any more. She had never betrayed to any living creature this great fear which possessed her. She was half ashamed of it, yet she could never conquer it. She was more afraid of Mr. Trelawny than of anything in the world beside. He was like the embodiment of all the wizards, and genii, and magicians, and giants which she had read of in her fairy story-books, or of the mysterious historic personages over whom she had trembled when poring over the pages of historical romance.

He was a very big man, with a very big voice, and he always talked in a way which she could not fully understand, and which almost frightened her out of her wits.

It was the greatest possible penance to have to go up to his great big house on the hill, and she never approached it without tremors and quakings of heart. She fully believed that it contained dungeons, oubliettes, and other horrors. She had been told that the crags beneath were riddled with great hollow caves, where monks had hidden in times of persecution, and where smugglers had hidden their goods and fought desperate battles with the excise officers and coast-guardsmen. The whole place seemed to her to be full of mystery and peril, and the fit owner and guardian was this gigantic Cornish squire, with his roiling voice, leonine head, and autocratic air.

He was always asking her why she did not oftener come to see him, but Esther would only shrink away and answer in her low, little voice that she had so much to do at home. And then he would laugh one of his big, sonorous laughs, that seemed to fill the house; and it was he who had given her the name of the "little manager," and when he called her by it he did so with an air of mock homage which frightened her more than anything else. At other times he would call her "Goldyllocks," and pretend he was going to cut off her hair to make a cable for his yacht, which lay at anchor in the bay; and he would tell her a terrible story about a man who sought to anchor in the middle of a whirlpool, the cable being made of maidens' hair – only the golden strand gave way, and so he got drowned instead of winning his wife by his act of daring boldness. This story was in verse, and he would roll it out in his big, melodious voice; and she was always obliged to listen, for the fascination was strong upon her. And then in the night she would lie shivering in her bed, picturing Mr. Trelawny and his yacht going round and round in the dreadful whirlpool, and her own chestnut-brown hair being the cable which had failed to hold fast!

And yet Mr. Trelawny was a very kind friend to them. He was a relation, too, though not at all a near one, and had been very fond of Esther's father, who was his kinsman. When the widow and child had been left with only a small provision, Mr. Trelawny had brought them to this pretty house at the foot of the hill upon which his big one stood. He had installed them there, and he would not take any rent for it. And he sent down his own gardener several times a week to make the garden trim and bright, and keep it well stocked with flowers and fruit.

Once a week he always came down himself and gave an eye to everything. Mrs. St. Aiden looked forward to these visits, as they broke the monotony of her life, and Mr. Trelawny was always gentle to the helpless little widow. But Esther always tried to keep out of the way when she could,

and the worst of it was that she was afraid Mr. Trelawny had a suspicion of this, and that it made him tease her more than ever.

However, she never disobeyed her mother, or refused to do what was asked of her, and she knew that such a step as this one would never be taken without Mr. Trelawny's approval. Indeed, she saw that he ought to be asked, since the house was his; and, perhaps, he would not like two boys to be brought there. Esther had heard that boys could be very mischievous beings, and, though she could not quite think what they did, she saw that the lord of the manor had a right to be consulted.

The Hermitage lay nestling just at the foot of a great craggy hill, that was clothed on one side with wood – mostly pine and spruce fir; but on the other it was all crag and cliff, and looked sheer down upon the tumbling waves of the great Atlantic.

Near to the Hermitage, along the white road, lay a few other houses, and the little village of St. Maur, with its quaint old church and pretty village green. There were hills and moors again behind it, wild, and bleak, and boundless, as it seemed to the little girl whenever she climbed them. But St. Maur itself was a sheltered little place; the boom of the sea only sounded when the surf was beating very strong, and it was so sheltered from the wind that trees grew as they grew nowhere else in the neighborhood, and flowers flourished in the gardens as Esther had never seen them flourish in the other places where she had lived. Geraniums grew into great bushes, and fuchsias ran right up the houses as ivy did in the north, and roses bloomed till Christmas, and came on again quite early in the spring, so that they seemed to have flowers all the year round. That was a real delight to the little girl, who loved the garden above any other place; and with a book and an apple, crouched down in the arbor or some pleasant flowery place, she would find a peace and contentment beyond all power of expression.

As she climbed the path through the pine woods leading to Mr. Trelawny's great house, she began to wonder what it would be like to have her precious solitude invaded by a pair of little boys.

"I wish they were rather littler, so that I could take care of them," said Esther to herself. "I should like to be a little mother to them, and teach them to say their prayers, and wash their hands and faces, and keep their toys nice and tidy. But perhaps they are too big to care for being taken care of. If they are, I don't quite know what I shall do with them. But we shall have lessons a good part of the day, I suppose, and that will be interesting. Perhaps I shall be able to help them with theirs. Only they may know more than I do."

Musing like this, Esther soon found herself at the top of the hill, and coming out of the wood, saw the big, curious house right in front of her. She never looked at it without a little tremor, and she felt the thrill run through her to-day.

It was such a very old house, and there were such lots of stories about it. Once it had been a castle, and people had fought battles over it; but that was so long, long ago that there was hardly anything left of that old building. Then it had been a monastery, and there were lots of rooms now where the monks had lived and walked about; and the gardens were as they made them, and people said that at night you could still see the old monks flitting to and fro. But for a long time it had been a house where people lived and died in the usual way, and Trelawnys had been there for nearly three hundred years now.

Esther had a private belief that this Mr. Trelawny had been there for almost all that time, and that he had made or found the elixir of life which the historical romances talked about, so that he continued living on and on, and knew everything, and was strange and terrible. He always did seem to know everything that had happened, and his stories were at once terrifying and entrancing. If only she could have got over her fear of him, she would have enjoyed listening; as it was, she always felt half dead with terror.

"Hallo, madam! and whither away so very fast?" cried a great deep voice from somewhere out of the heart of the earth; and Esther stopped short, with a little strangled cry of terror, for it was Mr. Trelawny's voice, and yet he was nowhere to be seen.

"Wait a minute and I'll come!" said the voice again, and Esther stood rooted to the spot with fear. There was a curious little sound of tap, tap, tapping somewhere underground not far away, and in another minute a great rough head appeared out of one of those crevices in the earth which formed one of the many terrors of the Crag, and a huge man dragged himself slowly out of the fissure, a hammer in his hand and several stones clinking in one of his big pockets. He was covered with earth and dust, which he proceeded to shake off as a dog does when he has been burrowing, whilst Esther stood rooted to the spot, petrified with amazement, and convinced that he had come up from some awful subterranean cavern, known only to himself, where he carried on his strange magic lore.

"Well, madam?" he said, making her one of his low bows. When he called her madam and bowed to her Esther was always more frightened than ever. "To what happy accident may I attribute the honor of this visit?"

"Mama sent me," said Esther, seeking to steady her voice, though she was afraid to speak more than two or three words at a time.

"Ah, that is it – mama sent you. It was no idea of your own. Alas, it is ever so! Nobody seeks the poor old lonely hermit for his own sake. So mama has sent you, has she, Miss Goldylocks? And what is your errand?"

"Mama asks if you will please read this letter, and then come and see her and advise her what to do."

Mr. Trelawny took the letter, gave one of his big laughs, and looked quizzically at Esther.

"Does your mama ever take advice, my dear?"

Esther's eyes opened wide in astonishment.

"Yes, of course she does. Mama never does anything until she has been advised by everybody."

The big, rolling laugh sounded out suddenly, and Esther longed to run away. She never knew whether she were being laughed at herself, and she did not like that thought.

"May I say you will come soon?" she asked, backing a little way down the hillside.

"Wait a moment, child; I will come with you," answered the big man, turning his fossils out of his pocket, and putting them, with his hammer, inside a hollow tree. "Do you know what this letter says?"

"Oh yes; mama read it to me."

"Ah, of course. The 'little manager' must be consulted first. Well, and what does she say about it?"

"Mama? Oh, I think –"

"No, not mama; the 'little manager' herself. What do you want to do about it?"

Esther summoned up courage to reply sedately, —

"I think perhaps it might be a good plan. You see, I should get a good education then, and I should like that very much. It would be a great advantage in many ways –"

But Esther left off suddenly, for Mr. Trelawny was roaring with laughter again.

"Hear the child!" he cried to the empty air, as it seemed; "she is asked if she likes boy-playfellows, and she replies with a dissertation on the advantages of a liberal education! Hear that, ye shades of all the sages! A great advantage! – Yes, my dear, I think it will be a great advantage. You will learn to be young at last, perhaps, after being grown-up ever since you were shortened. A brace of boys will wake you up a bit, and, if I read between the lines correctly, this pair are going to turn out a precious pair of pickles."

Esther understood very little of this speech, but she tingled from head to foot with the consciousness that fun was being poked at her.

"I think mama will do as you advise about it," she said, not being able to think of anything else to say.

The big man in the rough clothes was looking down at her with a twinkle in his eyes. He got hold of her hand and made her look up at him.

"Now tell me, child – don't be afraid to speak the truth – do you want these young cubs to come, or don't you? Would it make life pleasanter to you or only a burden?"

"I don't think I can quite tell till I've tried," said Esther, shaking all over, but striving to keep her fears to herself; "but I think it might be nice to have two little boys to take care of."

"To take care of, eh? You haven't enough on your hands as it is?"

"I used often to wish I'd a brother or a sister to play with; that was before papa died. Since then I haven't had so much time to think about it, but perhaps it would be pleasant."

"You do play sometimes then?"

"Yes; when the little Polperrans come to see me, or when I go to see them."

"And you know how to do it when you try?"

Esther was a little puzzled, and answered doubtfully, —

"I know how to play the games they play. I don't know any besides."

Mr. Trelawny suddenly flung her hand away from him and burst into a great laugh.

"I think I shall advise your mother to import these two young monkeys," he said over his shoulder; and to Esther's great relief, she was allowed to walk the rest of the way home by herself, Mr. Trelawny striding on at a great rate, and muttering to himself all the while, as was his habit.

Later on, when he had gone back again, and Esther crept in her mouse-like fashion to her mother's side, she found her closing a letter she had just written.

"Mr. Trelawny advises me to have the boys, dear," she said; "so I have been writing to your uncle. I suppose it is the best thing to do, especially as Mr. Trelawny has undertaken to find a suitable tutor. That would have been difficult for me; but he is a clever man, and knows the world. He will be sure to select the right person."

"Yes, mama," said Esther gently; but she shook in her shoes the while. A tutor selected by Mr. Trelawny might surely be a very terrible person. Suppose he came from underground, and was a sort of magician himself!

## CHAPTER II

### THE BOYS

It was growing very exciting. The life of the little house, which had hitherto run so quietly in its grooves, now seemed all at once changed and expanded. There was an air of bustle pervading the upper regions. Genefer, and a stout young maid lately engaged as joint-helper to her and the cook, were busy for two whole days in turning out a great attic which formed the top story of the little house, making room in other holes and corners for the boxes and odds and ends which had been stored there, and furbishing up this place as a bedroom for the boys, who were expected in a week's time.

Esther was immensely interested. She had always thought the big attic a very charming place, only when it was dusty and dark there had not been much to attract her there.

Now the dormer windows stood open to sun and air, and commanded wide views in many directions over the valley in which St. Maur stood. Two little white beds and the needful furniture did not take up a great deal of space, and there would be ample room for the boys to frisk about, collect treasures, and range them on the various shelves and ledges, without inconveniencing anybody, or bringing disorder into the rest of the house.

Moreover there was an access to the attic from the back staircase, so that nothing dirty or disagreeable need be brought into the mistress's part of the house at all.

Genefer regarded this arrangement as a great boon, though Esther sometimes wondered why. The answer she got to her questions was generally the same, though it did not greatly enlighten her.

"Boys will be boys, all the world over, Miss Esther," Genefer would say with a shake of the head; and when she repeated this aphorism to her mother, Mrs. St. Aiden would sometimes sigh and say rather plaintively, —

"Oh, I hope we shall not find we have made a great mistake!" and that used to set Esther wondering still more.

For her own part, she looked forward to the advent of these cousins with a great amount of interest. She had told the little Polperrans all about it, and they were greatly excited too.

"I am glad they are younger than you," said Prissy, as they walked home from church together. When Esther's mother was not able to get to church, Esther sat in the rectory pew, and her little friends generally walked with her as far as her own gate, which was about a quarter of a mile farther off than the rectory. "You will be able to keep them in order. Boys want that. They get obstreperous if they are left alone. Bertie is sometimes a little bit like that, but I never let him get the upper hand. It would never do."

Prissy was twelve years old, and had helped her mother at home and in the parish for quite a long time now. She was more grown-up in her ways than Esther, though not perhaps so thoughtful. She used to tell Esther that when she was old enough she meant to marry a clergyman and have a parish of her own; and Esther would listen with a sense of great respect and admiration, for she certainly felt that she should be very sorry to have a parish to care for. It was quite enough to have to help her mother to manage one little house.

"I hope they will be good boys," she said rather timidly; "I should think they are. They have had a grandmother and a governess as well as their father."

"I think grandmothers often spoil boys," Prissy answered, with her customary air of decision. "Ours does; I don't much like when she comes. She is often quite rude to me, and doesn't listen to what I say; but she pets Bertie, and gives him things, and lets him talk to her as much as he likes. I call that showing favoritism; I don't approve of it at all. In the parish mother never lets that sort of thing be."

"Who was that funny man in spectacles sitting in Mr. Trelawny's pew?" asked Milly, who was walking in front with Bertie, but who suddenly turned back to ask the question.

Esther had not even noticed him. She never looked towards Mr. Trelawny if she could help it. Often his great, deep-set eyes would be fixed upon her face, and that made her blush and tremble, and so she never glanced his way willingly. She had not even seen that there had been a stranger with him.

"I don't know," answered Prissy, as Esther evidently had no information to give; "I've never seen him before. I suppose he's a friend of Mr. Trelawny's, but he doesn't often have a visitor at the Crag. He's a queer man, mother says; though father always likes him."

"The other man looked like an owl; his spectacles were quite round," remarked Herbert; "most people's are oval. When the sun got on them they looked as if they were made of fire – like a big cat's eyes shining in the dark."

"Oh, don't," cried Esther quickly.

"Don't what?" asked Herbert, staring.

Esther colored and looked half ashamed.

"I don't know quite. I felt afraid. I always do feel a little afraid of Mr. Trelawny. I wonder who the other gentleman is."

Esther was soon to know.

She had spent her Sunday afternoon curled up in the garden with a book, and she had not even heard the bell when it rang. She had no idea there were visitors with her mother, and when she came in at half-past four to pour out her afternoon tea, which on Sunday they shared together, she gave a great jump and dropped her book, for there was Mr. Trelawny sitting beside her mother, and a strange gentleman standing looking out of the window, and he had on round spectacles, just such as Herbert had described.

He stepped forward and picked up Esther's book, and gave it into her hands with a smile; and as she stepped timidly forward to shake hands with Mr. Trelawny, she heard him say, —

"This is one of your future pupils, Earle."

So this was the tutor. It had never occurred to Esther that he would come so soon, or that he would be a friend of Mr. Trelawny's. Somehow the whole thing frightened her a good deal. She was shaking all over as she gave her hand to Mr. Earle; and he seemed to notice it, for he laughed and said, —

"So you seem to think that tutor spells ogre, little Miss Esther. We shall have to see if we can't get over that impression somehow."

Then Mr. Trelawny's great laugh rang out through the room, and he exclaimed in his big voice,

—

"Oh, you won't have much trouble with her ladyship here. She will only want the birch-rod occasionally. She's a mighty hand at books, as it is – quite a budding blue-stocking, if that isn't a mixed metaphor. It's the boys you'll want that cane of mine for. – Eh, Esther? A pair of young pickles, I take it, that will take a deal of breaking-in. You tell them when they come that I've a fine array of sticks and canes from all parts of the world for Mr. Earle to take his choice of. He'll thrash some discipline into them, never you fear. You shan't have all the breaking-in to do. He's a fine hand at swishing, you'll see."

Then the other gentleman said something in a language Esther did not understand, at which Mr. Trelawny broke out into one of his rolling laughs, and Esther got away behind the tea-table, and began pouring out the tea with very shaking hands; and though Mr. Earle came and took the cups, and talked to her quite kindly, her heart was all in a flutter, for she thought he was like the cruel old witch in the fairy-tale, who was so kind to the little boys and girls till she had got them into her house and into the cage, and then began to beat and starve them.

The thought of the array of sticks and canes up at the Crag, of which the tutor was to have the choice, seemed to swim before her eyes all the while.

"It is a pity you are always so shy and awkward with Mr. Trelawny, Esther," said her mother a little plaintively when the gentlemen had gone. "He is really very kind, and would make a great

pet of you if you would let him; but you're always so cold and distant, and seem frightened out of your wits. It's really very silly of you. And you never will call him uncle, though he has asked you more times than I can count."

"I can never remember," answered Esther in a very small voice. "It always goes out of my head. Besides, he isn't my uncle."

"No, not exactly; but he's a kind of cousin, and you might just as well do as he asks. It vexes me when your manners are so bad just when he comes. I thought you were going to cry or to faint just now. It is so silly to be frightened when gentlemen have a little bit of fun. It doesn't mean anything."

There were tears in Esther's eyes, but she held them bravely back.

"I can't help being frightened at Mr. Trelawny, mama. I know he is kind but he does frighten me. Is Mr. Earle a friend of his? And is he really our tutor?"

"He will be soon. But the boys are to have a week to settle down first before beginning lessons. Yes, Mr. Earle is the son of an old friend of Mr. Trelawny's; and he is very clever, and a great lover of the same things that interest Mr. Trelawny so much. So, for a time, at least, he will live up at the Crag, and come down every day for your lessons. The rest of the time he and Mr. Trelawny can spend together in their laboratory, or whatever they call it. There are a lot of experiments they want to make together."

Esther tried hard to subdue the tremor which took hold of her at this thought, but it really was rather terrible to think that their tutor would be another of those mysterious magicians, such as she had read about in romances, who lived all day, when they could manage it, shut up with crucibles and other strange things, trying all sorts of experiments, and seeking after the elixir of life, or other mysterious compounds, that would change everything into gold, or give them power such as no men possessed before.

But it was no use trying to seek sympathy from her mother, or even from Genefer. They could not understand her fear of Mr. Trelawny. They did not believe that he had subterranean places where he lived when he was alone, or that he could see through the earth, and come up just where he chose, and know everything that was going on overhead.

Grown-up people never seemed to understand these things. Even Prissy would say, "Oh, nonsense!" when Esther tried to explain the source of her fears. But Millie and Bertie would listen open-mouthed; and when the children met the next day, Prissy being with her mother, the little boy broke out at once with a piece of startling intelligence.

"He's Mr. Earle, and he's going to be your tutor; and he's very clever, and he's found out a great many things, and he's going to find out a lot more with Mr. Trelawny. I heard father say they were going to have an electric eye, that could see through walls and things. I expect he's got electric eyes in his head now, and that's why he wears those funny spectacles. I suppose he's going to make a pair for Mr. Trelawny, and then he'll be able to see everything too. It won't be any use trying to run away from them then. Why, they'll see you right through the hillside."

Esther began to quake all over.

"O Bertie, they couldn't!"

"But they can!" he argued stoutly. "I heard father trying to explain to mother. He said they had things that went right through the hill, and could ring bells or something on the other side. But you can't see it. I suppose it's a sort of familiar spirit that does it, but the electric eye has got something to do with it. It's going to be very queer up there, I think. Perhaps they'll want children's blood for some of their experiments, like the old wizard of the mountains. I'll lend the book to you again, if you like. It tells you lots of things about him."

"No, please, don't," said Esther, who already remembered more than she desired of the blood-curdling story; "besides, I thought your mother had taken the book away."

"Yes, but we found it again when the house was cleaned, and it's in our cupboard now. I like it awfully."

"I don't," replied Esther, whose imagination was considerably more vivid than that of the stolid and horror-loving Herbert. "I don't want to read it any more. Mr. Trelawny's quite bad enough alone."

"Only he's not alone any more," said Milly; "he's got your tutor with him."

Esther went home in a very subdued frame of mind. She had so looked forward to regular lessons with a tutor, who could really explain things to her, and teach her the things she longed to know; and it was hard that he should turn out to be a strange and mysterious being, second only in terrors to Mr. Trelawny himself. That's what came of trusting him with the task of choosing the tutor. Oh dear! it seemed as though life were going to be rather a hard thing for Esther in the future.

However, there really was not much time to think about it all, for the boys were coming. They would be here very soon, and the preparations for their arrival filled up every bit of spare time, and occupied the whole household.

Then came the afternoon upon which they were to arrive. They were to leave London very early in the morning, their father putting them in charge of the guard of the train, who was to see them safely to their journey's end; and Mr. Trelawny had volunteered to drive as far as the junction, twelve miles away, and save them the little slow piece upon the local line.

The boys' father had hoped to have time to bring them down himself, but at the last it had proved impossible. However, they were to be dispatched under official escort, and were bound to turn up safe and sound.

It was with a very fluttering heart that Esther stood at the gate looking down the stretch of white road which led up to the house. She pitied the little boys being met by the terrible Mr. Trelawny, and pictured them crouched up in the carriage like a pair of frightened mice watched over and guarded by a monster cat. Her mother had suggested that she should go to meet them also, but Esther's courage had not been equal to the ordeal of the long drive with Mr. Trelawny. So there she was waiting at the gate, her heart in her mouth each time the roll of wheels was heard upon the road, running indoors now and then, just to see that everything was in readiness for the travelers' tea, when the little fellows should have arrived, but never long away from her post beside the gate.

At last she heard the unmistakable sound of the beat of a pair of horses' feet upon the hard road. That must be the carriage. The color came and went in her cheeks. She called out to Genefer that they were really coming at last, and then stood with the gate wide open behind her, whilst the odd-job man stood a little in the rear, ready to help with the luggage.

Round the bend in the road dashed the carriage. Esther heard a clamor of voices before it had stopped. There were two heads poked far out of the window, and two shrill voices were exchanging a perfect hurricane of comment and question. She saw that each boy was being held from behind by a hand upon his collar; then the carriage stopped, and the voices became audible.

"Let go, Old Bobby!" cried one voice. "Here we are!"

"The carriage can't get through the gate," shrieked the other. "Oh, drive on, drive on, coachman, and let us stick fast. It would be such fun!"

"There, get out with you, you young pickles!" spoke Mr. Trelawny's deep bass from within the carriage. "I'm thankful to deliver you up with sound skins and whole bones. Don't you see your cousin Esther waiting to speak to you? Take off your caps, and behave like little gentlemen, if you know how to."

The boys were out in a trice, but they had not even a look for Esther. Both had darted round to the horses, and stood under their noses, reaching up to stroke them, perfectly fearless, and asking the coachman a hundred questions about them.

Mr. Trelawny came behind and took them each by the collar once more.

"Didn't you hear me tell you to go and speak to your cousin?"

"Oh, she's only a girl, and she'll always be there. I like horses best," remarked one youngster in a perfectly audible voice; and sensitive little Esther bit her lip, though she felt no anger in her heart. After all, she was only a girl.

"I don't want to stay in this poky little house. I'll go on with you, and live in your house instead."

The next moment, to Esther's unspeakable astonishment and dismay, both the boys had scrambled back into the carriage, and were clinging tightly to the seats, shrieking out to the coachman,

"Drive on! drive on! This isn't the house! We're going to live with the bobby man!"

Esther stood perfectly aghast, unable either to speak or move. She did not know which impressed her most – the extraordinary behavior of her cousins, or their perfect fearlessness towards Mr. Trelawny, whom they treated without a particle of respect.

His face was rather grim, though there was a humorous gleam in his eyes as he put out his long, strong arms, and hauled the obstreperous boys out of the carriage, amid much squealing, and kicking, and roars of laughter.

It was all play, but a sort of play that Esther did not understand in the least. With a boy held fast in each hand, Mr. Trelawny turned to the grave-faced little girl and said, —

"I had meant to present these two young gentlemen to your mother myself, but I think the only thing I can do is to get away as fast as I can. Perhaps they will come to their senses then;" and so saying, he made a sudden dive into the carriage, which had now been relieved of the luggage with which it had been piled.

The boys were after him like a shot, and Esther was in terror lest they should be run over before the carriage got safely away; but at last this was achieved, after much shouting and bawling and scrimmaging; and though both boys set off in pursuit like a pair of street Arabs, the horses soon left them behind, and they returned panting and breathless to the little gate.

"He's a jolly old buffer," said one of the boys; "I'd like to have gone with him."

"I shall go and see him every day," remarked the other. "He said he lived close by."

Then they reached the gate once more, and held out their rather smutty paws to Esther.

"How d'ye do? Hadn't time to speak to you before. Are we all going to live in this funny little box of a place?"

"It's our house," answered Esther shyly, much more afraid of the boys than they of her; indeed they did not seem to know what fear or shyness was. "I think you'll find there's plenty of room inside; and we have a very nice little garden."

"Call this a garden!" said the boy, with a look round; "I call it a pocket-handkerchief!"

Then they both laughed, and Esther laughed too, for there was something infectious about their high spirits, though they did talk in a fashion she had never heard before.

"Come and see mama first," she said, "and then I'll take you up-stairs to wash your hands, and then we'll have tea together. I daresay you are hungry."

They followed her into the little drawing-room where Mrs. St. Aiden lay. On her face there was a look of some perplexity, for she had heard a great deal of shouting and laughing, and was in some anxiety to know what it could mean.

Now she was looking upon a couple of little boys, in plain dark-blue knickerbocker suits, both having round faces and curly hair, though that of the elder boy was dark brown, and his eyes were a bright hazel; whilst the younger was blue-eyed, his hair the color of burnished gold, and his face, when at rest, wore a sort of cherubic expression that went to his aunt's heart.

"My dears, I am very glad to see you," she said. "Come and kiss me, and tell me which is Philip and which is Percy."

The boys looked at each other, and a gleam came into their eyes.

"We'll kiss you to-day," said the elder one, advancing, and speaking with the air of one making a great concession, "because we've just come, and Crump said we were to. But we're not going to kiss every day. That's like women and girls. Boys don't kiss like that. So you won't expect it, you know."

Then the pair advanced simultaneously; each gave and received a kiss, and stood back again, the younger one wiping the salute from his face with the cuff of his jacket.

"I hope you're not a kissing girl," he said in a low voice to Esther, who stood behind lost in amaze, "because I shan't let you kiss me."

"And which is Philip and which is Percy?" asked Mrs. St. Aiden again, more disposed to be afraid of the boys than they of her.

"Oh, we don't call ourselves by these affected names – nobody does," said the elder of the pair in lofty tones. "I suppose I'm Philip, but really I hardly know. They all call me Pickle, and him Puck. You'll have to do the same."

"I am not very fond of nicknames," said Mrs. St. Aiden, not quite pleased. "I shall call you by your right names whilst you are in my house."

"Call away; we shan't answer!" cried Pickle, with one of the ringing laughs which took off just a little from the bluntness of his speech. – "Come along, Puck, we've done it all now. – Oh, one thing more. Crump sent his love to you, and was sorry he couldn't come down and see you. I think that's all."

"But I don't understand. Who is Crump?" asked Mrs. St. Aiden rather breathlessly.

"Oh, only father," answered Puck, as he sidled out at the door; and then making a dash across into the dining-room, he set up a great whoop of delight, for there was a splendid tea set out – chicken, and ham, and tarts, and Devonshire cream, and several kinds of cake and jam; and the boys had scrambled on to their chairs in a twinkling, and were calling out to somebody to make haste and give them their tea, as they were just starving.

"But you haven't washed your hands," said Esther aghast.

They contemplated their grubby little paws with great equanimity.

"Mine aren't dirty to speak of," said Pickle.

"Mine are quite clean," asserted Puck, with an angelic smile.

"We're not like cats and girls, who are always washing," added Pickle. "Do give us our tea. We're so hungry and thirsty!"

"But you haven't said grace!" said Esther, whereupon the boys began to laugh.

"Grown-up people don't say grace now. It's not the fashion. But fire away if you want to. Crump used to make us try, but we always burst out laughing in the middle, so we gave it up."

Esther said grace gravely, and the boys did not laugh that time. Then she helped them to what they wanted, regarding them rather in the light of wild animals, upon whose next acts there was no depending. And yet it was rather interesting, and she wanted to know more about them and their odd ways.

"Why do you call your father Crump?" she asked tentatively.

"Well, we have to call him something," said Pickle, with his mouth full, and they both began to giggle.

"It's my name," said Puck, after a short pause. "I thought of it in bed one night. We laughed for nearly an hour afterwards. We've called him it ever since."

"Does he like it?"

They stared at her round-eyed and amazed.

"I don't know. We never asked him. We've always got some name for him. You've got to call people something."

"Why don't you call him father?" asked Esther mildly; but at that question they both went off into fits of laughter, and she felt herself getting red without knowing why.

"What's your name?" asked Puck, when he had recovered himself; but his brother cut in by saying, —

"You know it's Esther – Old Bobby told us that."

"So he did; and he said you were frightened at him, and that we should have to teach you better. Fancy being frightened at an old buffer like that – a jolly one too!"

Esther sat in silent amaze. She knew they were talking of Mr. Trelawny, but she was dumfounded at their audacity, and it was rather disconcerting to hear that he was aware of her feelings towards him. She hoped that he took her silence for a grown-up reserve.

"You mustn't call Mr. Trelawny names," she said. "He's quite an old gentleman, and you must treat him with respect."

"I said he was a nice old buffer," said Puck, as though after that nothing more could be expected of him.

"But you call him 'Old Bobby,' and I can't think how you dare. It isn't at all respectful. I wonder he lets you."

"Well, he shouldn't play the bobby on us then," answered Pickle. "He said he'd come to carry us off, and he marched us out of the station like a pair of prisoners. We had to call him bobby after that. I want to go and see his house. Can we go up after tea?"

Esther shook her head. She was not prepared for such a move.

"You'd better wait for another time for that," she said. "I'll show you our house when you're done with tea."

"All right; but there isn't much to show, I should think. It's the funniest little box I was ever in. But perhaps we'll get some fun out of it, all the same. Crump said the sea was quite near. That'll be jolly fun. I like the sea awfully."

"I don't go there very often," said Esther. "Mama does not care about it. The coast is rather dangerous, you know."

But both boys began to laugh, as they seemed to do at whatever she said; and Esther let them finish their tea in silence, and then took them the round of the small premises.

They liked their attic, which was a comfort; and they liked the stable and little coach-house, and the bit of paddock and orchard beyond; and they looked with great approval at the pine wood stretching upwards towards the craggy heights between them and the sea, where Esther told them Mr. Trelawny's house stood. It could not be seen from there, but she showed them the path which led up to it and they cried, "Jolly, jolly, jolly!" and hopped about from one foot to another, and Esther wondered if it would be possible for them to go to that strange old house upon the summit of the crag, and not feel afraid of it.

It was a comfort to Esther that they were not unkind to her cat. They were rather disgusted that there was no dog belonging to the house; but they seemed kind-hearted boys, and left the cat in peace by the kitchen fire.

They had been up so early that morning that they were sleepy before their usual bed-time; and Esther was rather relieved when, at last, they were safely shut into their room for the night, having indignantly declined the offices of Genefer as nursery-maid, saying that they could do everything for themselves and each other.

Esther showed them up to their room herself, half fascinated, half repelled by their odd words and ways. Their parting good night, shouted through the door to her, was characteristic in the extreme.

"We're going to call you Tousle," one of them bawled through the key-hole; "you've got such a mop of hair hanging down, you know."

## CHAPTER III

### AN ANXIOUS CHARGE

"How quiet they are!" thought Esther, as she dressed herself next morning. "I daresay they are fast asleep still. They must be tired after that long journey yesterday. They shall sleep as long as they like this morning. I will tell Genefer not to call them. They are funny boys, but I think I shall soon get fond of them. Puck is so pretty, and looks as though he could be very good by himself. I hope we shall be happy together soon. I shall take care of them, and show them everything; and perhaps they will teach me some new games."

Genefer came in at this moment to brush out Esther's mane of hair. The little girl had dispensed with other help at her toilet, but the great, thick, waving mass of curly hair was beyond her strength, and Genefer took great pride in brushing and combing it. She was almost as proud of Esther's hair as Mrs. St. Aiden herself.

"O Genefer," said the little girl, "I think we won't call the boys yet. They seem quite quiet, and I daresay they are asleep. We will let them have their sleep out this first morning."

Genefer made a sound between a snort and a laugh.

"Lord love you, miss, them boys have been up and out this two hours! They were off before ever I was down, and I'm no lie-a-bed. They had got the door opened and were away to the pine wood. Old Sam he saw them scuttling up the path like a pair of rabbits. There'll be no holding that pair, I can see. Boys will be boys, as I always did say."

Esther's face was full of anxiety and trouble.

"O Genefer! and they don't know their way about a bit! And all the holes, and crags, and rocks on the other side! Perhaps some harm will come to them, and I promised to take care of them! Oh, please, let me go, and I'll run after them and see if I can't fetch them home! They said something about the sea last night. Suppose they fall into one of the pools and get drowned!"

But Genefer only gave another snort.

"You take my word for it. Miss Esther, them boys isn't born to be drowned. Now don't you worrit so, child. They'll be all right. That sort never comes to any harm. You might as well go looking for a needle in a haystack, as for a boy out on the spree, as they call it. You go down and get your breakfast, and take up your mama's. We'll have them down again safe and sound, and as hungry as hunters, before you're done. It's not a bit of good your worriting after them. They can take good care of themselves, as one can see with half an eye."

Esther always submitted to Genefer's judgment, but it was with an anxious heart that she went down-stairs, and gazed up at the pine-clad hillside, hoping to see some signs of the returning boys. But there was nothing visible, and she went into the dining-room with a grave face, feeling as though she had somehow been unfaithful to her charge.

Breakfast at the Hermitage was at nine o'clock, and Esther always took up the tray to her mother's room. Mrs. St. Aiden seldom came down-stairs before noon, though she talked of getting up earlier now that the summer was coming. But Esther was fond of waiting on her, and she liked being waited upon. Afterwards Esther would eat her solitary breakfast, with a book propped up in front of her on the table; and she never thought of being lonely, especially as Smut always sat on a chair beside her, and had his saucer of milk replenished each time she poured out her own tea afresh.

But to-day Esther did not get her book; she was much too anxious, and kept rising and walking over to the window every few minutes, rather to the discomfort of the placid cat, who could not think what had come to his little mistress that day.

Esther was thankful that her mother had not seemed much alarmed by the news that the boys had gone out for a walk before breakfast.

"Boys like that sort of thing, I suppose," she said. "Their father said they were active and independent, and that we must not make ourselves anxious over them needlessly." Then she had taken up her letters and begun to read them; and Esther stole away, wishing she could be as calm and tranquil over the disappearance of the boys as other people were.

"I'm sure they have gone up to the Crag," she kept saying to herself, "and they may have got into some awful place, and all sorts of things may be happening!"

Esther could not have explained to Genefer or anybody grown up her horror and misgiving respecting the vicinity of the Crag; but it was a very real terror to her, and it had become greater since she had heard Bertie's account of the electric eye, and other awful things which were likely to be going on there now. Mr. Trelawny had an assistant now, and was going to do still stranger things. Suppose he wanted blood, or brains, or something human for his experiments! She shivered at the bare thought.

Suddenly she jumped up with a stifled cry. Through the open window she heard the sound of steps and voices; but before she had time to reach it again, the sunlight was darkened by the approach of a tall figure, and Esther saw that the missing boys were being led home by Mr. Earle, who had his hand upon the collar of each, as though he had found them a slippery pair of customers, and was resolved that they should not escape him.

"Here are your boys, Miss Esther," he remarked, walking in and depositing each of them upon the chair set ready at table for him. "I hope you have not been anxious about this pair of young rascals; and will you tell your mother, with my compliments, that I am ready to begin regular study with you all any day she may like to send word! You need not wait till next week unless you like."

There was rather a grim smile upon Mr. Earle's face, and the round spectacles glinted in the sunshine till Esther thought they must certainly be "electric eyes" – though what electric eyes were she had not the faintest notion, which, however, did not tend to allay her uneasiness.

"Thank you, sir," she said rather faintly; "I will tell mother." Then she plucked up her courage to add, "May I give you a cup of coffee after your walk?"

"Thank you; but I have breakfasted already," answered Mr. Earle with a smile, which made Esther just a little less afraid of him. "We keep early hours up at the Crag; and a good thing too for these young sinners!" and he threw a scathing look at the boys, who were sitting marvelously quiet in their places, looking exceedingly demure, not to say sheepish, though they stole glances across the table at each other, showing that the spirit of mischief within them was only temporarily in abeyance.

Mr. Earle nodded to them all and walked off through the window, and Esther looked curiously at her two charges as she poured out the coffee.

"Where did you go?" she asked.

"Why, up to Old Bobby's of course!" answered Pickle, his mouth full of bread and butter. "Why can't we live up there, instead of in this little band-box? It's no end of a jolly place. Do you go often?"

"Not very," answered Esther with a little shiver.

"That's what he said," remarked Puck indistinctly, "but you'll have to come oftener now."

"Why?"

"Oh, because he said we might come as often as you brought us. I want to go every day."

"I don't think Mr. Trelawny would like that."

"Oh, he wouldn't mind. He said he didn't mind how many visits you paid him. He said little girls were worth twice as much as boys, but that's all tommy rot."

Esther's eyes opened rather wider.

"I don't know what tommy rot is," she said.

Puck burst out laughing.

"She doesn't know much, does she, Pickle?" he cried. "I wonder why Old Bobby likes girls better than boys?"

"Perhaps they're nicer to eat," suggested Pickle; and the two boys went off into fits of laughter, whilst Esther shook silently, wondering if that could have anything to do with it.

To judge by their appetites, the boys were none the worse for their morning's walk – they put away the food in a fashion that astonished Esther; but as she sat watching them at their meal, she noticed some very queer marks upon their clothes, which she did not think had been there last night – stains, and little holes, looking rather like burns; and presently she asked, —

"What have you been doing to yourselves?" and pointed to the marks.

Puck began to giggle, and Pickle answered boldly, —

"Oh, I suppose that must have been some of the stuff that smelt so nasty in the tanks."

"What tanks?"

"Don't you know? Haven't you ever been down there? In that jolly old cave under Old Bobby's house."

Esther felt a cold thrill creeping through her.

"I don't know what you mean," she said faintly.

"Well, you must be a precious ninny!" laughed Pickle, with a good-humored contempt; "fancy living here all these years, and not knowing that!"

"We haven't been here so very long," said Esther.

"Well, you've been here longer than we have anyhow. And we've found it out already."

She was shivering a little, yet was consumed by curiosity.

"Tell me about it," she said.

Pickle was quite ready to do that. He had appeased his first hunger, and he loved to hear himself talk, especially when he had an appreciative audience; and Esther's eager and half-frightened face bespoke the keenness of her interest.

"Well, you see, we woke up early, and didn't see any fun in lying in bed; so we got up and dressed and went out, and there was the path up through the wood, and we knew Old Bobby's house was somewhere up there. So it seemed a good plan just to go and look him up, you know."

"We often go out early at home," added Puck, "and look people up. Sometimes we wake them up throwing things into their windows, or at them, if they're shut. Sometimes they throw water at us, and that's awful fun. One old fellow did that, and we went and got the garden-hose, and his window was wide open, and we just soused his room with water. You should have seen him rushing to shut it up! But there isn't always a hose and pump handy," and he looked pathetic for a moment.

"Well," continued Pickle, "we got up the hill easy enough, and it was a jolly place. We forgot all about going to the house, there was such lots to see and explore. That was how we found the cave – poking about all over. There are no end of little crevasses and things – places you can swarm down and climb up again. We had a fine time amongst them; and then we found this one. We climbed down the chimney, but there are two more ways of getting in. Old Bobby came by one, and turned us out by the other."

"I've heard him speak of an underground place," said Esther in a low voice. "He said he'd show it to me, but I didn't want to go."

Puck stared at her in amaze.

"Why on earth not?" he asked.

"I thought it would be dark," she said, not caring to explain further; and both boys laughed.

"It is rather dark; but not so very when you've got used to it," said Pickle, "and boys don't mind that sort of thing. I don't know where the light gets in; but there are cracks, he said. Anyhow we got down a queer, narrow hole like a chimney, and dropped right down into a sort of huge fireplace – big enough to cook half a dozen men."

"O Pickle!"

"Well, it was. I expect, perhaps, they did cook men there in the olden times – when people were persecuted, you know, and they had places for torturing them," remarked Pickle, who had a boy's relish for horrors. "That sort of place would be just the very thing. And afterwards smugglers had it, and I daresay they murdered the excisemen in there if they got a chance. I never saw such

queer marks as there were on the stones – did you, Puck? I should think they must be human blood. You know that won't wash out if it has once been spilt when there's a murder. I've read lots of stories about that. If you only cut yourself, it doesn't seem to leave a stain; but that's different from murder."

Esther's face was as white as her frock. Pickle enjoyed the impression he was producing.

"Well, I don't know what they use the cave for now, but something very queer anyhow. I never saw such odd things as they have got; it was just like the places you read of about wizards and magicians and the things they do. And there were tanks with lids, and we took off the lids and looked in, and they did smell. We put our fingers into some of them, and they smelt worse. And one of them burnt me!" and Pickle held up a couple of bandaged fingers as though in proof of his assertion.

"Old Bobby tied them up," said Puck. "He said it served Pickle right for meddling. He was in a rage with us for getting in and looking at his things. I expect he's got his enemies pickling in those tanks. I expect he's lured them to his cave and murdered them, and hidden them away, so that the stuff will eat them all up, and nobody will find their bodies. That's what I should like to do to all the nasty people when I'm a man. When you have a sort of castle on a crag, with underground caves to it, you can do just as you like, you know."

"How did Mr. Trelawny find you?" asked Esther, who was all in a tremor at this confirmation of her own suspicions – suspicions she had scarcely dared to admit even to herself.

"Well, I'm coming to that," said Pickle; "it wasn't very long after we'd been down. We heard a funny scrunching noise somewhere up overhead, and then a sort of hollow echoing sound. We couldn't make it out at first, but soon we knew what it must be. It was steps coming down-stairs – tramp, tramp, tramp – nearer and nearer."

"O Pickle! weren't you frightened?"

"Well, not exactly; but we thought we'd better hide in case it might be smugglers, or murderers, or something. There wasn't time to get up the chimney again, and I'm not sure if you can get out that way, though you can get down easy enough. Anyhow it would take some time. So we crouched behind a big stone and waited; and there were two men coming down talking to each other, and their voices echoed up and down and made such funny noises; and when they got down into the cave, it was Old Bobby himself, and that owl fellow who brought us home."

"Mr. Earle," said Esther.

"Earle or owl – what's the odds? I shall call him the Owl; he's just like one with those round gig-lamps. Well, they came down together, and then, of course, we knew it was all right; so out we jumped with a screech – and I say, Puck, didn't we scare them too?"

Both boys went off into fits of laughter at the recollection of the start they had given their seniors, and then Pickle took up the thread of the tale.

"But Old Bobby was in a jolly wax too. He boxed both of us on the ears, and told us we'd no business there – "

"He was afraid we'd found out something about the pickled corpses," interrupted Puck. "People never like that sort of thing found out; but, of course, we shouldn't go telling about it – at least only to a few special people.

"He went on at us ever so long, calling us little trespassers and spies, and wondering we had not killed ourselves; and then he led us along a funny sort of passage, and out through a door in the hillside right under the house. But they hadn't come in that way. They had come down a lot of steps; so we know that the cave is just under the house, and that Old Bobby and the Owl get to it by a private way of their own. But I could find the door we went out by easily, though there is a great bush in front of it, and you can't see it when you've got a few paces off."

"And there's a path right down to the sea," cried Puck. "It's a regular smugglers' den. He got less cross when we were out, and told us a lot of things about smugglers. But he said we weren't ever to come there again – at least not alone. He said you might bring us, if we'd give our word of honor

to obey you. He seemed to want you to come, Touse. I'm sure I don't know why, for girls are no good in jolly places like that."

"I don't think I want to go," answered Esther, putting it as mildly as possible; "I don't like underground places."

But she wanted the boys to enjoy themselves; and after breakfast she asked leave to take them as far as the fishing village that nestled under the crags upon which Mr. Trelawny's house stood. Of course there was another way to it along the road, which, though longer, was easier walking than climbing the hill and scrambling down the crags on the other side. The boys were willing to go the less adventurous way, as they had explored the cliff already, and Esther felt more light of heart, thinking that along the road they could not come to any harm.

But she was soon to realize that some boys find facilities for mischief and pranks wherever they are. The mercurial spirits of her charges kept her in a constant flutter of anxiety. They would get under horses' feet, climb up into strange carts to chat with the carters, jump over brooks, heedless of wet feet, chase the beasts at pasture as fearlessly as they chased butterflies, and make the acquaintance of every dog they met, whether amiable or the reverse. They even insisted upon taking an impromptu ride upon a pony out at grass, and enjoyed a gallop round the field on its bare back.

Esther, whose life until recently had been passed mainly in garrison towns, and who had not acquired the fearlessness of the country child, looked on in wondering amaze at these pranks, and listened with a sense of wonder and awe as the boys described their exploits at their own home, the things they did, and the things they meant to do.

Down by the shore there was no holding the pair. They tore about the little quay and landing place in the greatest excitement. They got into the boats lying beneath, and scrambled from one to the other, rocking them in a fashion that sent Esther's heart into her mouth. She felt like a hen with ducklings to rear. She had not courage to follow the boys into the swaying boats, and could only stand watching them with anxious eyes, begging them to be careful, and not to fall into the water.

"Bless your heart, missie!" said an old fisherman whom Esther knew, because he often brought them fish and lobsters in his basket fresh from the sea, "they won't come to no harm. Bless you! boys allers will be boys, and 't isn't no good fur to try and hold them back. Them's not the kind that hurts. You sit here and watch them comfortable like. They're as happy as kings, they are."

The old man spoke in the soft, broad way which Esther was getting to understand now, but which puzzled her at first, as it would puzzle little people if I were to write it down the way the old man spoke it. She rather liked the funny words and turns of expression now, and she enjoyed sitting by old Master Pollard, as she called him, watching the boys and listening to his tales, which he was always ready to tell when he had a listener.

The boys had a glorious morning, paddling and shrimping with some of the fisher lads of the place. They only returned to Esther when they were growing ravenous for their dinner.

She was glad to get them home quickly, driven by the pangs of hunger; and she told them that Master Pollard had said he would take them out fishing one of these days, and show them how the lobster-pots were set, and various other mysteries.

Esther knew something about lobster-pots, having been with the old man to visit his sometimes; so she rose in the estimation of her cousins, especially as some of the lads had told them that "old Pollard were once a smuggler himself, long ago, when he was a lad," though this Esther was disposed indignantly to deny.

"Well, I hope he was, anyhow," said Puck; "I shall ask him to tell us all about it. I wonder if he knows all about the cave, and whether they pickled corpses up there in his time."

The boys would have gone down to the shore again after their early dinner, but their aunt had another suggestion to make.

"Mrs. Polperran has been in, and wants you all to go to the rectory for the afternoon, and have tea in the garden. I said I would send you all, so that you can make friends with your little playfellows."

"Who is Mrs. Poll-parrot?" asked Pickles, with a sly look in his eyes.

"Polperran, dear. Mr. Polperran is our clergyman, and his children are Esther's little friends, and will be your friends too."

"The Rev. Poll-parrot," said Puck under his breath; and then both boys went off into fits of laughter.

"I don't think you ought to speak like that, Puck," said Mrs. St. Aiden, with mild reproof. "You must remember he is a clergyman, and you must be respectful."

Puck's blue eyes twinkled. It did not seem as though he had very much respectfulness in his composition; but he did not reply. Both the boys treated the gentle invalid with more consideration than they seemed disposed to bestow upon anybody else. They did nothing more free and easy than to dub her "Aunt Saint," and though Mrs. St. Aiden suggested that Aunt Alicia would be better, she did not stand out against the other appellation.

"You look like a saint on a church window," Pickle remarked judicially, "so it seems to fit you better;" and Mrs. St. Aiden smiled indulgently, for it was less trouble to give way than to insist.

It was with some trepidation that Esther conducted her young charges to the rectory that day. The little Polperrans had been so very well brought up, and were so "proper behaved" – as Genefer called it – themselves, that she was fearful of the effect that might be produced upon them by the words and ways of the newly-imported pair.

Mrs. Polperran herself came out to welcome them upon their approach, and Pickle, when introduced, went boldly up to her with outstretched hand.

"How do you do, Mrs. Poll-parrot? Is this the cage you live in?"

Now Mrs. Polperran was just a little hard of hearing, so that she only caught the drift of the speech, and not the exact words, and she smiled and nodded her head.

"Yes, dear; this is my house, and that is the garden where you will often come and play, I hope; and there is an orchard beyond with a swing in it; and here are your little friends all ready to make your acquaintance," and she indicated her three children, who had been close beside her all the time.

Prissy's face was rather red, and Bertie had his handkerchief tucked into his mouth in a very odd way, whilst Milly was looking divided between the desire to laugh and the fear of Prissy; however, Mrs. Polperran did not observe these small signs, but told her children to take care of their little guests, and sailed back to the house herself, where there was always work to be done.

"Pretty poll! pretty poll! Scratch a poll, polly!" cried Puck softly, capering on the grass-plot as the lady disappeared.

"You are a very rude little boy," said Prissy with an air of displeasure and a glance at Esther, as much as to ask her why she did not reprove such impertinence; but Bertie made a dash at Puck, seized him by the hand, and cried out, —

"Come along! come along! Oh, won't we have some fun now!"

Immediately the three boys dashed off together full tilt, and Milly, after a wavering glance in the direction of her sister and Esther, rushed headlong after them. The elder pair were left for the moment alone, and Prissy looked inquiringly into Esther's flushed face.

"I don't think your cousins are very nice boys," she remarked with some severity; "I should think they have been very badly brought up."

Esther felt a little tingle of vexation at hearing her cousins thus criticised, though after all she was not quite sure that she could deny Prissy's charge.

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