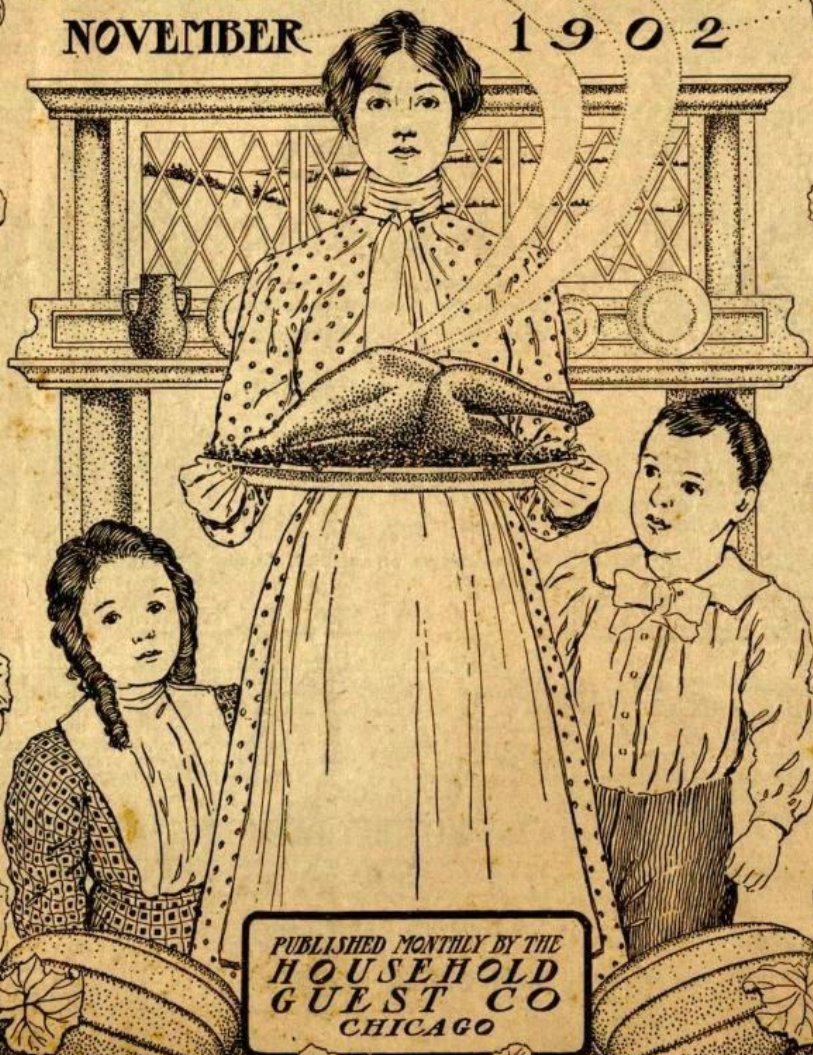


THE CHICAGO HOUSEHOLD GUEST

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Why Mr. Cropper Changed His Mind

L. M. Montgomery

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ell, Miss Maxwell, how did you get along to-day?" asked Mr. Baxter affably, when the new teacher came to the table.

She was a slight, dark girl, rather plain looking, but with a smart, energetic way. Mr. Baxter approved of her; he "liked her style," as he would have said.

The summer term had just opened in the Maitland district. Esther Maxwell was a stranger, but she was a capable girl, and had no doubt of her own ability to get and keep the school in good working order. She smiled brightly at Mr. Baxter.

"Very well for a beginning. The children seem bright and teachable and not hard to control."

Mr. Baxter nodded.

"There are no bad children in the school except the Cropper boys—and they can be good enough if they like. Reckon they weren't there to-day?"

"No."

"Well, Miss Maxwell, I think it only fair to tell you that you may have trouble with those boys when they do come. Forewarned is forearmed, you know. Mr. Cropper was opposed to our hiring you. Not, of course, that he had any personal objection to you, but he is set against female teachers, and when a Cropper is set

there is nothing on earth can change him. He says female teachers can't keep order. He's started in with a spite at you on general principles, and the boys know it. They know he'll back them up in secret, no matter what they do, just to prove his opinions. Cropper is sly and slippery, and it is hard to corner him."

"Are the boys big?" queried Esther anxiously.

"Yes. Thirteen and 14 and big for their age. You can't whip 'em—that is the trouble. A man might, but they'd twist you around their fingers. You'll have your hands full, I'm afraid. But maybe they'll behave all right after all."

Mr. Baxter privately had no hope that they would, but Esther hoped for the best. She could not believe that Mr. Cropper would carry his prejudices into a personal application. This conviction was strengthened when he overtook her walking from school the next day and drove her home. He was a big, handsome man with a very suave, polite manner. He asked interestedly about her school and her work, hoped she was getting on well, and said he had two young rascals of his own to send soon. Esther felt relieved. She thought that Mr. Baxter had exaggerated matters a little.

"That plum tree of Mrs. Charley's is loaded with fruit again this year," remarked Mr. Baxter at the tea table that evening. "I came past it to-day on my way 'cross lots home from the woods. There will be bushels of plums on it."

"I don't suppose poor Mrs. Charley will get one of them any more than she ever has," said Mrs. Baxter, indignantly. "It's a burning shame, that's what it is! I just wish she could catch the Croppers once."

"You haven't any proof that it is really them, Mary," objected her husband, "and you shouldn't make reckless accusations before folks."

"I know very well it is them," retorted Mrs. Baxter, "and so do you, Adoniram. And Mrs. Charley knows it, too, although she can't prove it—more's the pity! I don't say Isaac Cropper steals those plums with his own hands. But he knows who does—and the plums go into Mehitable Cropper's preserving kettle; there's nothing surer."

"You see, Miss Maxwell, it's this way," explained Mr. Baxter, turning to Esther. "Mrs. Charley Cropper's husband was Isaac's brother. They never got on well together, and when Charley died there was a tremendous fuss about the property. Isaac acted mean and scandalous clear through and public opinion has been down on him ever since. But Mrs. Charley is a pretty smart woman, and he didn't get the better of her in everything. There was a strip of disputed land between the two farms, and she secured it. There's a big plum tree growing on it close to the line fence. It's the finest one in Maitland. But Mrs. Charley never gets a plum from it."

"But what becomes of them?" asked Esther.

"They disappear," said Mr. Baxter, with a significant nod. "When the plums are anything like ripe Mrs. Charley discovers some day that there isn't one left on the tree. She has never been able to get a scrap of proof as to who took them, or she'd make it hot for them. But nobody in Maitland has any doubt in his own mind that Isaac Cropper knows where those plums go."

"I don't think Mr. Cropper would steal," protested Esther.

"Well, he doesn't consider it stealing, you know. He claims the land and says the plums are his. I don't doubt that he is quite clear in his own mind that they are. And he does hate Mrs. Charley. I'd give considerable to see the old sinner fairly caught, but he is too deep."

"I think Mr. Baxter is too hard on Mr. Cropper," said Esther to herself later on. "He has probably some private prejudice against him."

But a month later she had changed her opinion. During that time the Cropper boys had come to school.

At first Esther had been inclined to like them. They were handsome lads, with the same smooth way that characterized their father, and seemed bright and intelligent. For a few days all went well, and Esther felt decidedly relieved.

But before long a subtle spirit of insubordination began to make itself felt in the school. Esther found herself powerless to cope with it. The Croppers never openly defied her, but they did precisely as they pleased. The other pupils thought themselves at liberty to follow this example, and in a month's time poor Esther had completely lost control of her little kingdom. Some complaints were heard among the ratepayers and even Mr. Baxter looked dubious. She knew that unless she could regain her authority she would be requested to hand in her resignation, but she was baffled by the elusive system of defiance which the Cropper boys had organized.

One day she resolved to go to Mr. Cropper himself and appeal to his sense of justice, if he had any. It had been an especially hard day in school. When she had been absent at the noon hour all the desks in the schoolroom had been piled in a pyramid on the floor, books and slates interchanged and various other pranks played. When questioned every pupil denied have done or helped to do it. Alfred and Bob Cropper looked her squarely in the eyes and declared their innocence in their usual gentlemanly fashion, yet Esther felt sure that they were the guilty ones. She also knew what exaggerated accounts of the affair would be taken home to Maitland tea tables, and she felt like sitting down to cry. But she did not. Instead she set her mouth firmly, helped the children restore the room to order, and after school went up to Isaac Cropper's house.

That gentleman himself came in from the harvest field looking as courtly as usual,

even in his rough working clothes. He shook hands heartily, told her he was glad to see her and began talking about the weather. Esther was not to be turned from her object thus, although she felt her courage ebbing away from her as it always did in the presence of the Cropper imperviousness.

"I have come up to see you about Alfred and Robert, Mr. Cropper," she said. "They are not behaving well in school."

"Indeed!" Mr. Cropper's voice expressed bland surprise. "That is strange. As a rule I do not think Alfred and Robert have been troublesome to their teachers. What have they been doing now?"

"They refuse to obey my orders," said Esther faintly.

"Ah, well, Miss Maxwell, perhaps you will pardon my saying that a teacher should be able to enforce her orders. My boys are high-spirited fellows and need a strong, firm hand to restrain them. I have always said I considered it advisable to employ a male teacher in Maitland school. We should have better order. Not that I disapprove of you personally—far from it. I should be glad to see you succeed. But I have heard many complaints regarding the order in school at present."

"I had no trouble until your boys came," retorted Esther, losing her temper a little, "and I believe that if you were willing to co-operate with me that I could govern them."

"Well, you see," said Mr. Cropper, easily, "when I send my boys to school I naturally expect that the teacher will be capable of doing the work she has been hired to do."

"Then you refuse to help me?" said Esther in a trembling voice.

"Why, my dear young lady, what can I do? Boys soon know when they can disobey a teacher with impunity. No doubt you will be able to secure a school easier to control and will do good work. But here, as I have already said, we need a firm hand at the helm. But you are not going yet, Miss Maxwell? You need some refreshment after your long walk. Mrs. Cropper will bring you in something."

"No, thank you," said poor Esther. She felt that she must get away at once or she would burst into heartsick tears under those steely, bland blue eyes. When she got home she shut herself up in her room and cried. There was nothing for her to do but resign, she thought, dismally.

On the following Saturday Esther went for an afternoon walk, carrying her kodak with her. It was a brilliantly fine autumn day and woods and fields were basking in a mellow haze. Esther went across lots to Mrs. Charley Cropper's house, intending to make a call. But the house was locked up and evidently deserted, so she rambled past it to the back fields. Passing through a grove of maples she came out

among leafy young saplings on the other side. Just beyond her, with its laden boughs hanging over the line fence, was the famous plum tree. Esther looked at it for a moment. Then an odd smile gleamed over her face and she lifted her kodak.

Monday evening Esther called on Mr. Cropper again. After the preliminary remarks in which he indulged, she said, with seeming irrelevance that Saturday had been a fine day.

"There was an excellent light for snap-shots," she went on coolly. "I went out with my kodak and was lucky enough to get a good negative. I have brought you up a proof. I thought you would be interested in it."

She rose and placed the proof on the table before Mr. Cropper. The plum tree came out clearly. Bob and Alf Cropper were up among the boughs picking the plums. On the ground beneath them stood their father with a basket of fruit in his hand.

Mr. Cropper looked at the proof and from it to Esther. His eyes had lost their unconcerned glitter, but his voice was defiant.

"The plums are mine by right," he said.

"Perhaps," said Esther, calmly, "but there are some who do not think so. Mrs. Charley, for instance—she would like to see this proof, I think."

"Don't show it to her," cried Mr. Cropper, hastily. "I tell you, Miss Maxwell, the plums are mine. But I am tired of fighting over them and I had decided before this that I'd let her have them after this. It's only a trifle, anyhow. And about that little matter we were discussing the other night. Miss Maxwell, I have been thinking it over, and I admit I was somewhat unreasonable. I'll talk to Alfred and Robert and see what I can do."

"Very well," said Esther, quietly. "The matter of the plums isn't my business and I don't wish to be involved in your family feuds, especially as you say that you mean to allow Mrs. Charley to enjoy her own in future. As for the school, we will hope that matters will improve."

"You'll leave the proof with me, won't you?" said Mr. Cropper eagerly.

"Oh, certainly," said Esther, smiling, "I have the negative still, you know."

From that time out the Cropper boys were models of good behavior, and the other turbulent spirits, having lost their leaders, were soon quelled. Complaint died away, and at the end of the term Esther was re-engaged.

"You seem to have won old Cropper over to your side entirely," Mr. Baxter told her that night. "He said at the meeting to-day that you were the best teacher we had ever had and moved to raise your salary. I never knew Isaac Cropper to change his opinions so handsomely."

Esther smiled. She knew it had taken a powerful lever to change Mr. Cropper's opinion, but she kept her own counsel.

TRANSCRIBER NOTES

Mis-spelled words and printer errors have been fixed.

[The end of *Why Mr. Cropper Changed His Mind* by L. M. (Lucy Maud) Montgomery]