Helping your children choose books they will love



Lovereading4kids.co.uk is a book website created for parents and children to make choosing books easy and fun

opening extract from

Clover Twig and the Perilous Path

written by

Kaye Umansky

published by

Bloomsbury Publishing

All Text is Copyright © of the Author and/or Illustrator

please print off and read at your leisure.

Lovereading4kids.co.uk



Chapter One

She's Got a Visitor

It was Saturday morning, and Clover Twig was walking through the woods, on her way back from the village of Tingly Bottom. Her basket was heavy with all the things she needed for breakfast.

Mrs Eckles always insisted on a thumping great fry-up on Saturdays, because on Fridays she was up all night doing the Protection Ritual – a long-winded business involving chalked diagrams, smelly potions and endless hours of mystic muttering. Clover had stayed up once to watch her do it, but kept falling asleep out of boredom.

Clover didn't really like being involved in the magical side of things. Oh, *some* of it was interesting, but she had enough to do as it was. Keeping house for a witch is hard work.

She had got up bright and early to make the trip, leaving Mrs Eckles rattling the rafters with her snores. It had taken the best part of an hour to reach the village and another hour to get served by Old Trowzer – one half of the pair of Old Trowzers who ran the shop. He had a puffy purple face and moved maddeningly slowly, like a snail swimming in jelly. He talked slowly too. He made people twitch and want to finish his sentences for him. His name suited him. He was pants at the job.

Clover was the only customer, so he really took his time. He weighed each sausage separately. He dribbled milk into the can drop by precious drop. When Clover ordered a bag of strawberry chews, he spent ten minutes finding the jar, ten minutes getting it down and another ten unscrewing the top. One by one he placed the sweets into the bag, while Clover tried not to fidget. He enquired if business was good for Mrs Eckles and tried to pry a bit, but Clover kept her answers short. She was glad to escape.

She was enjoying the walk back, though. Speckled sunlight filtered through the trees, the birds were singing and everything smelled of summer. Best of all, tomorrow was her day off!

The trees thinned – and there it was. The cottage. Hunched and waiting in the middle of a small

clearing. Staring at her with its dark windows in a *knowing* sort of way. Letting off a ghostly trickle of black smoke from its twisty chimney, although the fire wasn't lit. Generally giving off a bad impression. Mrs Eckles said that bad first impressions were important.

Hefting her basket, Clover walked up to the gate.

'Open up,' she said.

'What, *again*?' snapped the gate rudely. Clover made a mental note to give it a squirt of oil. Not too much, or it got over-polite, which was worse.

'*Yes*, again. Quick, this is heavy.'

'Open, shut, open, shut,' grumbled the gate. 'I'm sick of it . . .'

'Look,' said Clover, 'you've got a choice. Oil later or a kick right now. Which is it to be?'

Reluctantly, shedding rust, creaking, squeaking and generally making a great to-do, the gate edged open. She was just about to slip through, when it said sulkily, 'She's got a visitor.'

'She has? Who?'

Clover was surprised. Mrs Eckles rarely had visitors apart from Wilf, the delivery boy, who didn't count. There was the odd punter, of course. From time to time, nervous-looking locals would come sidling round to the back door, asking for a jar of

ointment or a bottle of tonic or a tea-leaf reading. But today was Saturday. Mrs Eckles never worked on Saturdays.

'Wouldn't *you* like to know?' sneered the gate. Clover ignored it and stepped through. She would find out soon enough.

The front garden looked much the same as the day she had first come to work for Mrs Eckles, back in the spring. Clover was always trying to smarten it up. Forever sneaking out to hack back ivy and pull up weeds. She had even tried planting a tub with daffodils. But it was pointless. The daffodils wilted and the weeds always grew back.

She didn't bother with the front door, which was permanently sealed and just for show. Instead, she crunched up the path and went around the side, past the privy and the log pile, to the back garden.

The back garden! My, what a contrast! Flowers bloomed and chickens scratched and the sun shone and birds sang in the cherry tree. Mrs Eckles' voice rang out from the open door.

'. . . Clover's 'er name. Jason Twig's daughter, the one who reckons he's got a bad back. Props up the bar in The Crossed Axes. She does the cookin', keeps the place tidy. Good little worker. Uses 'er brains.'

Clover stopped and listened. She couldn't help it. It's always interesting hearing about yourself.

'Dunno if you heard, but I had a bit o' trouble with my sister a while back. I was away at the time, at the May Fayre over in Palsworthy. Did you go this year? No? Just as well, rained out, total disaster. Anyway, I left Clover to mind the cottage. Well, she seemed sensible. And I'd doubled up the security, told 'er the threshold rule about not invitin' anyone in, all that. Thought I 'ad everythin' covered. Never crossed my mind there'd be a problem . . .'

Mrs Eckles broke off as Clover appeared in the doorway. She was sitting at the kitchen table opposite her visitor, still in her dressing gown, clearly not long out of bed.

The visitor was a vision in wintry grey. She had iron-grey curls, chilly grey eyes and a tight little mouth. Despite the warmth of the day, she was muffled up in a variety of grey shawls and thick overcoats. Atop her head was a pointy hat, also grey. A large, serious-looking handbag sat on her lap.

'Here she is!' cried Mrs Eckles, clearly relieved. 'Just who I was talkin' about! Clover, this is Mrs Dismal, all the way over from Piffle.'

Ah. Right. Granny Dismal, the witch from the next village. Clover had never met her, but Mrs

Eckles had spoken of her in highly unflattering terms. *Face like a wet week. Drinks her own special blend of tea out of her own personal cup, which she carries around in her handbag. Bit of a stirrer. Pretends to be uninterested in anything you've got to say, but takes it all in, then uses it against you. Keen on magical technology. Don't get her going on that – she'll bore you rigid. Always ordering the latest newfangled gadget from catalogues when everyone knows the old ways are best. Far-seeing telescopes, floating pens – all that rubbish. Collects Crystal Balls. Spends an unhealthy amount of time snooping on them, hoping for a crossed line.* That sort of thing.

Mind you, it wasn't just Granny Dismal. Mrs Eckles didn't have time for any of the witches from the outlying villages and it seemed that the feeling was mutual. Mrs Eckles said that even the annual Light Buffet Supper was an unfriendly do, where everyone brought potato salad and left early.

'Hello,' said Clover, dropping a polite little bob.

Granny Dismal said nothing. Her bleak eyes flickered briefly over Clover, then wandered past and fixed on a rafter.

'So you won't stay for a cuppa, Ida?' enquired Mrs Eckles, clearly hoping she wouldn't.

'No,' said Granny Dismal in a voice like a wet day in February. 'I'm all right.'



'Of course, I was forgettin', you only drink yer own Special Blend,' said Mrs Eckles rather waspishly. 'Out of yer Special Cup.'

'That's right.'

'You didn't bring it? The Cup?'

'No. I'm not stopping.' Granny Dismal's expressionless eyes were moving slowly around the kitchen. You could tell she was taking it all in. Clover was glad she had left things tidy.

'Well then . . .' Mrs Eckles scrambled to her feet, all ready and eager to show her out.

'I said I'd stay for ten minutes,' said Granny Dismal. 'There's three to go.'

So Mrs Eckles sat down again. A heavy silence fell. The grandfather clock ticked.

'Well,' said Clover, taking pity. 'I'll make *you* some, shall I, Mrs Eckles?'

'There's a good girl!' cried Mrs Eckles. 'I'm that dry with all the conversation.'

If she was being sarcastic, it was wasted on Granny Dismal. Clover busied herself with the kettle.

'Anyway, I was tellin' you about what 'appened back in the spring . . .' began Mrs Eckles.

'No need,' said Granny Dismal. 'I heard. Your sister tried to snatch the cottage. Mother Flummox told me.'

'Oh. Right.'

Clover poured the milk. Behind her, the silence rolled out.

'So did you get yourself that new Crystal Ball you was wantin'?' enquired Mrs Eckles, desperately clutching at straws. 'You was talkin' about it at the last Buffet, before we all walked out. The one with – what was it? Extra pixie stations?'

'Pixelation,' said Granny Dismal. For the first time, she showed a hint of animation. 'The Ballmaster Multidimensional Mark Six with extra pixelation.'

'Right. Good, is it?'

'State of the art. All automatic, no hand gestures required. Perfect picture, self-adjusting. Boldly goes where no Ball has gone before. Don't require a receiving Ball. Any reflecting surface will do.'

'Mmm,' said Mrs Eckles, none the wiser. 'I don't go in for Balls meself.'

'I know. It's very inconvenient. Folks have to drag themselves round in the flesh.'

'Well, I'm sorry, but I just don't trust 'em. All them pesterin' calls. Spyin' eyes. Crossed lines. Never know who's snoopin', do you? My sister's got one and I ain't riskin' –'

'She's smaller than I thought,' interrupted Granny

Dismal suddenly. She spoke directly to Mrs Eckles, as though Clover wasn't there. 'The girl. Living in, you say?'

'Yep. Got a bed up in the attic.'

'I couldn't be doing with that. Somebody living above. Coming in late, banging about.'

'She don't come in late. She's a good girl.'

'They are to *start* with. Then they start taking advantage. Acting cheeky.'

Clover had had enough of this. She placed the milk jug on the table with a little more force than was necessary, and said, 'I am *here*, you know.'

'You see?' said Granny Dismal, picking up her handbag and rising. 'Just what I was talking about.'

'Well, ta-ta then, Ida,' said Mrs Eckles, springing up and hurrying to the door. 'See you sometime. Oh – thanks for the warnin'.'

'Someone's got to do it,' said Granny Dismal, turning up her many coat collars and adjusting her various shawls. 'I'll contact the rest by Ball.'

Mrs Eckles watched Granny Dismal waddle off around the side of the cottage. She seemed to move inside her own miserable weather system.

'Mind the gate!' shouted Mrs Eckles. 'It'll go for your fingers!' She shut the door, leaned against it with closed eyes and said, 'Give me strength!'

'Hard going, was it?'

'Too right. Thought she'd be in an' out, but she hung around waitin' to get a look at you.'

'I don't know why,' said Clover rather crossly. 'She just looked right through me.' She spooned tea leaves into the pot and added, 'So what was the warning?'

'Eh?'

'You said thanks for the warning. About what?'

'Ah, tell you later.'

'Why not now?'

''Cos some tales don't go with sunshine an' sausages. Some tales are better told over the fire on nights when the cold wind's a-howlin' in the eaves.'

'It's summer,' pointed out Clover. 'There won't *be* a howling wind.'

'There will be if I want one,' said Mrs Eckles firmly. 'Wind's easy. Did you get the sausages?'

'I did. The herby ones, your favourite.'

'Get the fryin' pan out, then. Ah, 'ere he comes!' Mrs Eckles' voice went all gooey. ''Ere's Mother's baby – *ooh*! *Bad* boy!'

Neville the cat came leaping through the window with a bewildered baby bird clamped between his jaws. The next few minutes were filled with flying feathers, scoldings, panicky chirps and . . . finally . . .

happy airborne flappings, followed by feline sulks, eventual forgiveness and bowls of milk. Then came the sound of sizzling sausages as Clover sliced mushrooms and dropped eggs in the skillet while Mrs Eckles slurped tea and talked about gardening.

After breakfast – a long, serious affair, accompanied by demands for extra mustard and more toast – Clover's real work began. There was washing-up to be done and floors to mop and eggs to collect and logs to be carted and lamp wicks to trim and the gate to oil and all the other hundred and one jobs that always need doing when you are keeping house for a witch.

The witch herself showed no signs of doing anything much. Still in her dressing gown, she wandered out into the garden, inspected the flowers, chatted to Flo and Doris, the chickens, filled the bird feeder in the cherry tree, sat on a bench, did a row of knitting, then snoozed in the sunshine.

Clover forgot all about her question until the evening. Supper was over and the fire was banked high because, funnily enough, a chilly wind was coming up. The curtains were drawn, the lamps glowed, and Mrs Eckles was rambling on about running low on herbs and needing to go out picking sometime

soon. She said the same thing most nights and Clover was feeling sleepy and not really listening. Until two words made her open her eyes and sit up.

'What? What did you just say?'

'The Perilous Path,' said Mrs Eckles. You could hear the capital letters. 'It's back. That's what Ida came to warn me about. Says she saw the glow over the trees through her telescope. Reckon I'll leave the pickin' for a few nights.'

The fire spat, making Clover jump and shadows leap. The kitchen suddenly seemed darker. Outside, the wind moaned.

'I didn't know there was a Perilous Path,' said Clover. 'Where does it lead?' She thought she knew all the paths in the woods. Some were muddier than others and some had nasty potholes or low branches that clonked your head, but she knew Mrs Eckles wasn't talking about those.

'Nowhere good.' Mrs Eckles' green eyes gleamed in the firelight. Far away, out in the dark woods, a lone wolf began howling.

'I think the wolf's a bit too much,' said Clover.

'You do? All right, I'll tone it down.' Mrs Eckles twiddled her fingers and the howl cut off.

'Go on,' said Clover. 'About this Path. Have *you* been down it?'

'Not likely. Got more sense. Never 'eard the old saying? *Woe! Seven Times Woe Betide All Ye Who Walk the Perilous Path!*'

'Woe?' said Clover. 'Why woe? What woe?' There was something about Mrs Eckles' doomy tones and the wind and the wolf and everything that made her want to giggle. But in a slightly nervous way.

'Don't laugh,' said Mrs Eckles. 'I'm serious. I'm talkin' about troubles an' dangers an' temptations an' all kinds o' time-wastin' malarkey you can do without. Your worst nightmares come true.'

'I don't have nightmares.'

'Everyone has nightmares. You've probably forgotten 'em.'

The wind whistled in the chimney. Neville hissed in his sleep and flicked his tail.

'Who made the Path?' asked Clover.

'Nobody *made* it. It just – *is*.'

'Have you seen it?'

'Come across it a few times.'

'So what's it like? Is it – *magical*-looking?'

'Can be. Depends who it's tryin' to attract. It's crafty. Oh, it can put on a proper show when it wants. Kinda sparkles an' shines in an allurin' way. Some folks is easily dazzled. Or it can catch you off guard. Creeps up on you, disguised like a normal path.'

'How d'you mean?'

'You know. Pathy. Dirt, bushes, trees, what else? Look, it's after sunset, right, and you're walkin' along some old track you've walked a hundred times before. Stoppin' to pick a herb or two. Everythin' seems normal. Until you gets to the bridge.'

'Bridge?'

'You hears the sound o' runnin' water and suddenly there's a river, see? A river that shouldn't be there, with a bridge over it. That's 'ow it all starts. With the bridge. And Barry.'

'Who?'

'Old Barry the Troll. He's the bridge keeper. All smelly an' stinkin' an' covered in slime.'

'R-i-i-i-ght,' said Clover. 'Yes, I suppose that'd be a pretty big clue.'

'Can't miss 'im, he's gotta tree growin' out of 'is head. That's his idea of a hairdo.' Mrs Eckles gave a disapproving sniff. 'Never prunes it, lets it go wild. Gives you a turn when he leaps out roarin'. He can't help it, they all do that. It's a Troll thing.'

'Uncon*troll*able, then,' said Clover – quite wittily, she thought. But Mrs Eckles didn't laugh. 'Sorry, go on, I'm listening.'

'Give 'im a minute, then he'll calm down and get down to business.'

'What business?'

'He asks you three questions. Or *Questions Three*, as he likes to put it. Get 'em right and you can cross the bridge.'

'What if you get them wrong?'

'You can't, it's common knowledge. He asks you 'is name, 'is favourite colour and what he 'ad for breakfast. The answers are Barry, Brown and Fish. Anyone can get by. He's stupid as a brick.'

'So why bother having him?'

'Probably just for show. He's bloomin' ugly.'

Clover thought about this for a bit. Mrs Eckles sometimes came out with the most surprising bits of information.

'This Path,' said Clover. 'It comes and goes, does it?'

'Yep. Might not see it for years, or it might turn up three nights runnin'. Never in the same place twice. You're hurryin' along, thinkin' you're nearly 'ome, then all of a sudden Old Barry's in yer face. You can do without it, especially when you're dyin' for the privy.'

'So what do you do? Answer the questions?'

'Absolutely not,' said Mrs Eckles firmly. 'Do Not Engage. You 'ave a choice, see. You gotta *choose* to take the Path. It can't make you. If you speak, you'll

get *involved*. Just button yer lip, turn round and backtrack. Don't look past Barry whatever you do or you'll want to know what lies over the bridge. Curiosity killed the cat.' Neville gave another little shiver in his sleep.

'What *does* lie over the bridge?' asked Clover.

'You see?' Mrs Eckles chuckled and leaned over to poke the fire. 'You're curious. But don't ask me. Like I say, I've never walked the Perilous Path. Well, only as far as Barry, for research purposes. But no further.'

'I don't blame you. Why put yourself in peril?'

'It's not so much that. It's more – well, it's a dodgy road to take, if you're a witch. It can *change you*. Bring out the worst side. Go too far along and there's a good chance you'll end up as one of the perils yerself. My grandmother went some way along it once. When my sister and me was kids, before she retired.'

'Did she?' Clover wasn't surprised. She had only met Mrs Eckles' incredibly ancient, exceedingly scary grandmother once, quite briefly, but that was more than enough. Even on short acquaintance, you could tell she was the type to experimentally walk a Perilous Path. 'Did she say what it was like?'

'Nope. Never talked about it. But I remember she was in a funny mood when she returned. Shut 'erself

away for days, writin' stuff down in 'er private spell book. Threw trays at the footmen, shouted a lot. I 'ad a feelin' she didn't want to come back. It ain't a good road, Clover. So don't take it.'

'I wasn't planning to. I'm never out in the woods after sundown.'

'I know. Anyway, enough o' that. I've told you, and now you know. Saturday night – time you got your wages.'

Mrs Eckles twiddled her fingers. Instantly, the lamps brightened. The fire crackled as cheerful flames caught a log. Neville rolled over to have his tummy tickled. Outside, the wind cut off mid-blow and suddenly everything was back to normal. Mrs Eckles heaved herself from her chair, took an old, cracked teapot from the mantelpiece and counted out six pennies into Clover's palm.

'There. Four for yer ma, two for you, right?'

'Thanks,' said Clover.

'You're off to see 'em all tomorrow, right?'

'First thing in the morning.'

'Take 'em a few eggs. I'll give you a bottle o' my special tonic for yer ma – the proper stuff, not the sugar water. And tell you what, I'm feelin' generous. You can have that leftover apple pie.'

'Well, that's very good of you,' said Clover, 'seeing

as how I made it.'

'Don't be sarky. Well, I'm off to bed. I'll leave you to damp the fire an' lock up. I'll see you tomorrow night. Don't be late comin' back. Before sunset, you hear?'

'Before sunset,' promised Clover. At that point, she meant it.