

## The Parents

When Miss Honey emerged from the Headmistress's study, most of the children were outside in the playground. Her first move was to go round to the various teachers who taught the senior class and borrow from them a number of text-books, books on algebra, geometry, French, English Literature and the like. Then she sought out Matilda and called her into the classroom.

"There is no point", she said, "in you sitting in class doing nothing while I am teaching the rest of the form the two-times table and how to spell cat and rat and mouse. So during each lesson I shall give you one of these text-books to study. At the end of the lesson you can come up to me with your questions if you have any and I shall try to help you. How does that sound?"

"Thank you, Miss Honey," Matilda said. "That sounds fine."

"I am sure," Miss Honey said, "that we'll be able to get you moved into a much higher form later on, but for the moment the Headmistress wishes you to stay where you are."

"Very well, Miss Honey," Matilda said. "Thank you so much for getting those books for me."

What a nice child she is, Miss Honey thought. I don't care what her father said about her, she seems

very quiet and gentle to me. And not a bit stuck up in spite of her brilliance. In fact she hardly seems aware of it.

So when the class reassembled, Matilda went to her desk and began to study a text-book on geometry which Miss Honey had given her. The teacher kept half an eye on her all the time and noticed that the child very soon became deeply absorbed in the book. She never glanced up once during the entire lesson.

Miss Honey, meanwhile, was making another decision. She was deciding that she would go herself and have a secret talk with Matilda's mother and father as soon as possible. She simply refused to let the matter rest where it was. The whole thing was ridiculous. She couldn't believe that the parents were totally unaware of their daughter's remarkable talents. After all, Mr Wormwood was a successful motor-car dealer so she presumed that he was a fairly intelligent man himself. In any event, parents never *underestimated* the abilities of their own children. Quite the reverse. Sometimes it was well nigh impossible for a teacher to convince the proud father or mother that their beloved offspring was a complete nitwit. Miss Honey felt confident that she would have no difficulty in convincing Mr and Mrs Wormwood that Matilda was something very special indeed. The trouble was going to be to stop them from getting over-enthusiastic.

And now Miss Honey's hopes began to expand even further. She started wondering whether per-

mission might not be sought from the parents for her to give private tuition to Matilda after school. The prospect of coaching a child as bright as this appealed enormously to her professional instinct as a teacher. And suddenly she decided that she would go and call on Mr and Mrs Wormwood that very evening. She would go fairly late, between nine and ten o'clock, when Matilda was sure to be in bed.

And that is precisely what she did. Having got the address from the school records, Miss Honey set out to walk from her own home to the Wormwood's house shortly after nine. She found the house in a pleasant street where each smallish building was separated from its neighbours by a bit of garden. It was a modern brick house that could not have been cheap to buy and the name on the gate said COSY NOOK. Nosey cook might have been better, Miss Honey thought. She was given to playing with words in that way. She walked up the path and rang the bell, and while she stood waiting she could hear the television blaring inside.

The door was opened by a small ratty-looking man with a thin ratty moustache who was wearing a sports-coat that had an orange and red stripe in the material. "Yes?" he said, peering out at Miss Honey. "If you're selling raffle tickets I don't want any."

"I'm not," Miss Honey said. "And please forgive me for butting in on you like this. I am Matilda's teacher at school and it is important I have a word with you and your wife."



"Got into trouble already, has she?" Mr Wormwood said, blocking the doorway. "Well, she's your responsibility from now on. You'll have to deal with her."

"She is in no trouble at all," Miss Honey said. "I have come with good news about her. Quite startling news, Mr Wormwood. Do you think I might come in for a few minutes and talk to you about Matilda?"

"We are right in the middle of watching one of our favourite programmes," Mr Wormwood said. "This is most inconvenient. Why don't you come back some other time."

Miss Honey began to lose patience. "Mr Wormwood," she said, "if you think some rotten TV programme is more important than your daughter's future, then you ought not to be a parent! Why don't you switch the darn thing off and listen to me!"

That shook Mr Wormwood. He was not used to being spoken to in this way. He peered carefully at the slim frail woman who stood so resolutely out on the porch. "Oh very well then," he snapped. "Come on in and let's get it over with." Miss Honey stepped briskly inside.

"Mrs Wormwood isn't going to thank you for this," the man said as he led her into the sitting-room where a large platinum-blonde woman was gazing rapturously at the TV screen.

"Who is it?" the woman said, not looking round. "Some school teacher," Mr Wormwood said. "She says she's got to talk to us about Matilda." He crossed to the TV set and turned down the sound but left the picture on the screen.

"Don't do that, Harry!" Mrs Wormwood cried out. "Willard is just about to propose to Angelica!"

"You can still watch it while we're talking," Mr Wormwood said. "This is Matilda's teacher. She says she's got some sort of news to give us."

"My name is Jennifer Honey," Miss Honey said. "How do you do, Mrs Wormwood?"

Mrs Wormwood glared at her and said, "What's the trouble then?"

Nobody invited Miss Honey to sit down so she chose a chair and sat down anyway. "This", she said, "was your daughter's first day at school."

"We know that," Mrs Wormwood said, ratty about missing her programme. "Is that all you came to tell us?"



Miss Honey stared hard into the other woman's wet grey eyes, and she allowed the silence to hang in the air until Mrs Wormwood became uncomfortable. "Do you wish me to explain why I came?" she said.

"Get on with it then," Mrs Wormwood said.

"I'm sure you know", Miss Honey said, "that children in the bottom class at school are not expected to be able to read or spell or juggle with numbers when they first arrive. Five-year-olds cannot do that. But Matilda can do it all. And if I am to believe her . . ."

"I wouldn't," Mrs Wormwood said. She was still ratty at losing the sound on the TV.

"Was she lying, then," Miss Honey said, "when she told me that nobody taught her to multiply or to read? Did either of you teach her?"

"Teach her what?" Mr Wormwood said.

"To read. To read books," Miss Honey said. "Perhaps you *did* teach her. Perhaps she *was* lying. Perhaps you have shelves full of books all over the house. I wouldn't know. Perhaps you are both great readers."

"Of course we read," Mr Wormwood said. "Don't be so daft. I read the *Autocar* and the *Motor* from cover to cover every week."

"This child has already read an astonishing number of books," Miss Honey said. "I was simply trying to find out if she came from a family that loved good literature."

"We don't hold with book-reading," Mr Wormwood said. "You can't make a living from sitting



on your fanny and reading story-books. We don't keep them in the house."

"I see," Miss Honey said. "Well, all I came to tell you was that Matilda has a brilliant mind. But I expect you knew that already."

"Of course I knew she could read," the mother said. "She spends her life up in her room buried in some silly book."

"But does it not intrigue you", Miss Honey said, "that a little five-year-old child is reading long adult novels by Dickens and Hemingway? Doesn't that make you jump up and down with excitement?"

"Not particularly," the mother said. "I'm not in favour of blue-stocking girls. A girl should think about making herself look attractive so she can get a good husband later on. Looks is more important than books, Miss Hunky . . ."

"The name is Honey," Miss Honey said.



"Now look at me," Mrs Wormwood said. "Then look at you. You chose books. I chose looks."

Miss Honey looked at the plain plump person with the smug suet-pudding face who was sitting across the room. "What did you say?" she asked.

"I said you chose books and I chose looks," Mrs Wormwood said. "And who's finished up the better off? Me, of course. I'm sitting pretty in a nice house with a successful businessman and you're left slaving away teaching a lot of nasty little children the ABC."

"Quite right, sugar-plum," Mr Wormwood said, casting a look of such simpering sloppiness at his wife it would have made a cat sick.

Miss Honey decided that if she was going to get anywhere with these people she must not lose her temper. "I haven't told you all of it yet," she said. "Matilda, so far as I can gather at this early stage, is also a kind of mathematical genius. She can multiply complicated figures in her head like lightning."

"What's the point of that when you can buy a calculator?" Mr Wormwood said.

"A girl doesn't get a man by being brainy," Mrs Wormwood said. "Look at that film-star for instance," she added, pointing at the silent TV screen where a bosomy female was being embraced by a craggy actor in the moonlight. "You don't think she got him to do that by multiplying figures at him, do you? Not likely. And now he's going to marry her, you see if he doesn't, and she's going to live in a mansion with a butler and lots of maids."

Miss Honey could hardly believe what she was hearing. She had heard that parents like this existed all over the place and that their children turned out to be delinquents and drop-outs, but it was still a shock to meet a pair of them in the flesh.

"Matilda's trouble", she said, trying once again, "is that she is so far ahead of everyone else around her that it might be worth thinking about some extra kind of private tuition. I seriously believe that she could be brought up to university standard in two or three years with the proper coaching."

"University?" Mr Wormwood shouted, bouncing up in his chair. "Who wants to go to university for heaven's sake! All they learn there is bad habits!"

"That is not true," Miss Honey said. "If you had a heart attack this minute and had to call a doctor, that doctor would be a university graduate. If you got sued for selling someone a rotten second-hand car, you'd have to get a lawyer and he'd be a university graduate, too. Do not despise clever people, Mr Wormwood. But I can see we're not going to agree. I'm sorry I burst in on you like this." Miss Honey rose from her chair and walked out of the room.

Mr Wormwood followed her to the front-door and said, "Good of you to come, Miss Hawkes, or is it Miss Harris?"

"It's neither," Miss Honey said, "but let it go." And away she went.

## Throwing the Hammer

The nice thing about Matilda was that if you had met her casually and talked to her you would have thought she was a perfectly normal five-and-a-half-year-old child. She displayed almost no outward signs of her brilliance and she never showed off. "This is a very sensible and quiet little girl," you would have said to yourself. And unless for some reason you had started a discussion with her about literature or mathematics, you would never have known the extent of her brain-power.

It was therefore easy for Matilda to make friends with other children. All those in her class liked her. They knew of course that she was "clever" because they had heard her being questioned by Miss Honey on the first day of term. And they knew also that she was allowed to sit quietly with a book during lessons and not pay attention to the teacher. But children of their age do not search deeply for reasons. They are far too wrapped up in their own small struggles to worry overmuch about what others are doing and why.

Among Matilda's new-found friends was the girl called Lavender. Right from the first day of term the two of them started wandering round together during the morning-break and in the lunch-hour. Lavender was exceptionally small for her age, a