

"You seemed so far away," Miss Honey whispered, awestruck.

"Oh, I was. I was flying past the stars on silver wings," Matilda said. "It was wonderful."

Miss Honey was still gazing at the child in absolute wonderment, as though she were The Creation, The Beginning Of The World, The First Morning.

"It went much quicker this time," Matilda said quietly.

"It's not possible!" Miss Honey was gasping. "I don't believe it! I simply don't believe it!" She closed her eyes and kept them closed for quite a while, and when she opened them again it seemed as though she had gathered herself together. "Would you like to come back and have tea at my cottage?" she asked.

"Oh, I'd love to," Matilda said.

"Good. Gather up your things and I'll meet you outside in a couple of minutes."

"You won't tell anyone about this . . . this thing that I did, will you, Miss Honey?"

"I wouldn't dream of it," Miss Honey said.

Miss Honey's Cottage

Miss Honey joined Matilda outside the school gates and the two of them walked in silence through the village High Street. They passed the greengrocer with his window full of apples and oranges, and the butcher with bloody lumps of meat on display and naked chickens hanging up, and the small bank, and the grocery store and the electrical shop, and then they came out at the other side of the village on to the narrow country road where there were no people any more and very few motor-cars.

And now that they were alone, Matilda all of a sudden became wildly animated. It seemed as though a valve had burst inside her and a great gush of energy was being released. She trotted beside Miss Honey with wild little hops and her fingers flew as if she would scatter them to the four winds and her words went off like fireworks, with terrific speed. It was Miss Honey this and Miss Honey that and Miss Honey I do honestly feel I could move almost anything in the world, not just tipping over glasses and little things like that . . . I feel I could topple tables and chairs, Miss Honey . . . Even when people are sitting in the chairs I think I could push them over, and bigger things too, much bigger things than chairs and tables . . . I only have to take a moment to get my eyes strong

and then I can push it out, this strongness, at anything at all so long as I am staring at it hard enough . . . I have to stare at it very hard, Miss Honey, very very hard, and then I can feel it all happening behind my eyes, and my eyes get hot just as though they were burning but I don't mind that in the least, and Miss Honey . . .



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"Calm yourself down, child, calm yourself down," Miss Honey said. "Let us not get ourselves too worked up so early in the proceedings."

"But you do think it is *interesting*, don't you, Miss Honey?"

"Oh, it is *interesting* all right," Miss Honey said. "It is *more* than interesting. But we must tread very carefully from now on, Matilda."

"Why must we tread carefully, Miss Honey?"

"Because we are playing with mysterious forces, my child, that we know nothing about. I do not think they are evil. They may be good. They may even be divine. But whether they are or not, let us handle them carefully."

These were wise words from a wise old bird, but Matilda was too steamed up to see it that way. "I don't see why we have to be so careful?" she said, still hopping about.

"I am trying to explain to you," Miss Honey said patiently, "that we are dealing with the unknown. It is an unexplainable thing. The right word for it is a phenomenon. It is a phenomenon."

"Am I a phenomenon?" Matilda asked.

"It is quite possible that you are," Miss Honey said. "But I'd rather you didn't think about yourself as anything in particular at the moment. What I thought we might do is to explore this phenomenon a little further, just the two of us together, but making sure we take things very carefully all the time."

"You want me to do some more of it then, Miss Honey?"

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"That is what I am tempted to suggest," Miss Honey said cautiously.

"Goody-good," Matilda said.

"I myself," Miss Honey said, "am probably far more bowled over by what you did than you are, and I am trying to find some reasonable explanation."

"Such as what?" Matilda asked.

"Such as whether or not it's got something to do with the fact that you are quite exceptionally precocious."

"What exactly does that word mean?" Matilda said.

"A precocious child", Miss Honey said, "is one that shows amazing intelligence early on. You are an unbelievably precocious child."

"Am I really?" Matilda asked.

"Of course you are. You must be aware of that. Look at your reading. Look at your mathematics."

"I suppose you're right," Matilda said.

Miss Honey marvelled at the child's lack of conceit and self-consciousness.

"I can't help wondering", she said, "whether this sudden ability that has come to you, of being able to move an object without touching it, whether it might not have something to do with your brain-power."

"You mean there might not be room in my head for all those brains so something has to push out?"

"That's not quite what I mean," Miss Honey said, smiling. "But whatever happens, and I say it again, we must tread carefully from now on. I have not forgotten that strange and distant glimmer on

your face after you tipped over the last glass."

"Do you think doing it could actually hurt me? Is that what you're thinking, Miss Honey?"

"It made you feel pretty peculiar, didn't it?"

"It made me feel lovely," Matilda said. "For a moment or two I was flying past the stars on silver wings. I told you that. And shall I tell you something else, Miss Honey? It was easier the second time, much much easier. I think it's like anything else, the more you practise it, the easier it gets."

Miss Honey was walking slowly so that the small child could keep up with her without trotting too fast, and it was very peaceful out there on the narrow road now that the village was behind them. It was one of those golden autumn afternoons and there were blackberries and splashes of old man's beard in the hedges, and the hawthorn berries were ripening scarlet for the birds when the cold winter came along. There were tall trees here and there on either side, oak and sycamore and ash and occasionally a sweet chestnut. Miss Honey, wishing to change the subject for the moment, gave the names of all these to Matilda and taught her how to recognise them by the shape of their leaves and the pattern of the bark on their trunks. Matilda took all this in and stored the knowledge away carefully in her mind.

They came finally to a gap in the hedge on the left-hand side of the road where there was a five-barred gate. "This way," Miss Honey said, and she opened the gate and led Matilda through and closed

it again. They were now walking along a narrow lane that was no more than a rutted cart-track. There was a high hedge of hazel on either side and you could see clusters of ripe brown nuts in their green jackets. The squirrels would be collecting them all very soon, Miss Honey said, and storing them away carefully for the bleak months ahead.

"You mean you *live* down here?" Matilda asked. "I do," Miss Honey replied, but she said no more. Matilda had never once stopped to think about where Miss Honey might be living. She had always regarded her purely as a teacher, a person who turned up out of nowhere and taught at school and then went away again. Do any of us children, she wondered, ever stop to ask ourselves where our teachers go when school is over for the day? Do we wonder if they live alone, or if there is a mother at home or a sister or a husband? "Do you

live all by yourself, Miss Honey?" she asked.

"Yes," Miss Honey said. "Very much so." They were walking over the deep sun-baked mud-tracks of the lane and you had to watch where you put your feet if you didn't want to twist your ankle. There were a few small birds around in the hazel branches but that was all.

"It's just a farm-labourer's cottage," Miss Honey said. "You mustn't expect too much of it. We're nearly there."

They came to a small green gate half-buried in the hedge on the right and almost hidden by the overhanging hazel branches. Miss Honey paused with one hand on the gate and said, "There it is. That's where I live."

Matilda saw a narrow dirt-path leading to a tiny



red-brick cottage. The cottage was so small it looked more like a doll's house than a human dwelling. The bricks it was built of were old and crumbly and very pale red. It had a grey slate roof and one small chimney, and there were two little windows at the front. Each window was no larger than a sheet of tabloid newspaper and there was clearly no upstairs to the place. On either side of the path there was a wilderness of nettles and blackberry thorns and long brown grass. An enormous oak tree stood overshadowing the cottage. Its massive spreading branches seemed to be enfolding and embracing the tiny building, and perhaps hiding it as well from the rest of the world.

Miss Honey, with one hand on the gate which she had not yet opened, turned to Matilda and said, "A poet called Dylan Thomas once wrote some lines that I think of every time I walk up this path." Matilda waited, and Miss Honey, in a rather wonderful slow voice, began reciting the poem:

"Never and never, my girl riding far and near
In the land of the hearthstone tales, and spelled
asleep,
Fear or believe that the wolf in the sheepwhite
hood
Loping and bleating roughly and blithely shall
leap, my dear, my dear,
Out of a lair in the flocked leaves in the dew
dipped year
To eat your heart in the house in the rosy
wood."

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There was a moment of silence, and Matilda, who had never before heard great romantic poetry spoken aloud, was profoundly moved. "It's like music," she whispered.

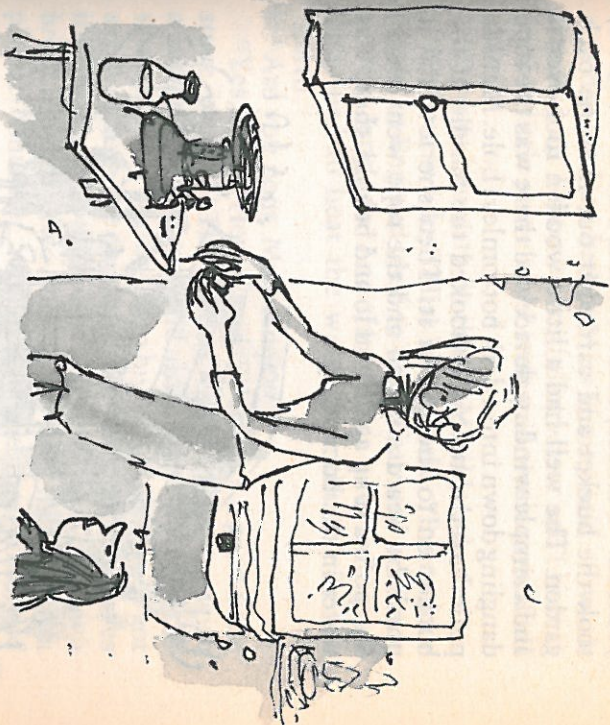
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"It is music," Miss Honey said. And then, as though embarrassed at having revealed such a secret part of herself, she quickly pushed open the gate and walked up the path. Matilda hung back. She was a bit frightened of this place now. It seemed so unreal and remote and fantastic and so totally away from this earth. It was like an illustration in Grimm or Hans Andersen. It was the house where the poor woodcutter lived with Hansel and Gretel and where Red Riding Hood's grandmother lived and it was also the house of The Seven Dwarfs and The Three Bears and all the rest of them. It was straight out of a fairy-tale.

"Come along, my dear," Miss Honey called back, and Matilda followed her up the path.

The front-door was covered with flaky green paint and there was no keyhole. Miss Honey simply lifted the latch and pushed open the door and went in. Although she was not a tall woman, she had to stoop low to get through the doorway. Matilda went after her and found herself in what seemed to be a dark narrow tunnel.

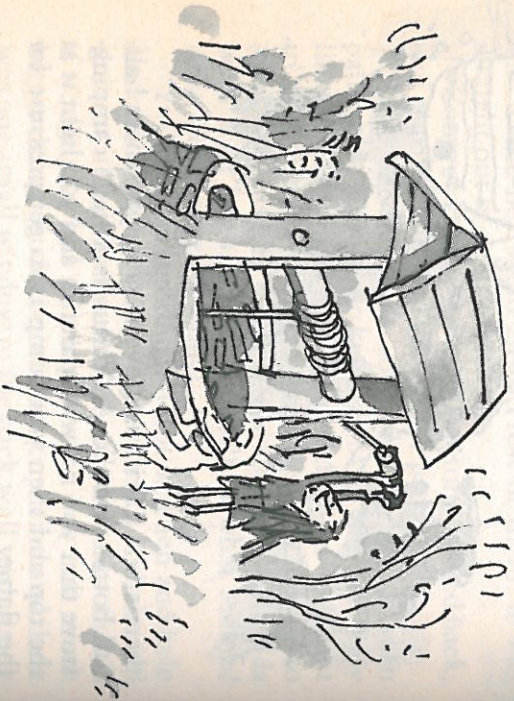
"You can come through to the kitchen and help me make the tea," Miss Honey said, and she led the way along the tunnel into the kitchen – that is if you could call it a kitchen. It was not much bigger than a good-sized clothes cupboard and there was one small window in the back wall with a sink under the window, but there were no taps over the sink. Against another wall there was a shelf, presumably for preparing food, and there was a single cupboard above the shelf. On the shelf itself



there stood a Primus stove, a saucepan and a half-full bottle of milk. A Primus is a little camping-stove that you fill with paraffin and you light it at the top and then you pump it to get pressure for the flame.

"You can get me some water while I light the Primus," Miss Honey said. "The well is out at the back. Take the bucket. Here it is. You'll find a rope in the well. Just hook the bucket on to the end

of the rope and lower it down, but don't fall in yourself." Matilda, more bemused than ever now, took the bucket and carried it out into the back garden. The well had a little wooden roof over it and a simple winding device and there was the rope dangling down into a dark bottomless hole. Matilda pulled up the rope and hooked the handle of the bucket on to the end of it. Then she lowered it until she heard a splash and the rope went slack. She pulled it up again and lo and behold, there was water in the bucket.



"Is this enough?" she asked, carrying it in.
"Just about," Miss Honey said. "I don't suppose you've ever done that before?"

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"Never," Matilda said. "It's fun. How do you get enough water for your bath?"

"I don't take a bath," Miss Honey said. "I wash standing up. I get a bucketful of water and I heat it on this little stove and I strip and wash myself all over."

"Do you honestly do that?" Matilda asked.

"Of course I do," Miss Honey said. "Every poor person in England used to wash that way until not so very long ago. And *they* didn't have a Primus. They had to heat the water over the fire in the hearth."

"Are you poor, Miss Honey?"

"Yes," Miss Honey said. "Very. It's a good little stove, isn't it?" The Primus was roaring away with a powerful blue flame and already the water in the saucepan was beginning to bubble. Miss Honey got a teapot from the cupboard and put some tea leaves into it. She also found half a small loaf of brown bread. She cut two thin slices and then, from a plastic container, she took some margarine and spread it on the bread.

Margarine, Matilda thought. She really must be poor.

Miss Honey found a tray and on it she put two mugs, the teapot, the half bottle of milk and a plate with the two slices of bread. "I'm afraid I don't have any sugar," she said. "I never use it."

"That's all right," Matilda said. In her wisdom she seemed to be aware of the delicacy of the situation and she was taking great care not to say anything to embarrass her companion.

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"Let's have it in the sitting-room," Miss Honey said, picking up the tray and leading the way out of the kitchen and down the dark little tunnel into the room at the front. Matilda followed her, but just inside the doorway of the so-called sitting-room she stopped and stared around her in absolute amazement. The room was as small and square and bare as a prison cell. The pale daylight that entered came from a single tiny window in the front wall, but there were no curtains. The only objects in the entire room were two upturned wooden boxes to serve as chairs and a third box between them for a table. That was all. There were no pictures on the walls, no carpet on the floor, only rough unpolished wooden planks, and there were gaps between the planks where dust and bits of grime had gathered. The ceiling was so low that with a jump Matilda could nearly touch it with her finger-tips. The walls were white but the whiteness didn't look like paint. Matilda rubbed her palm against it and a white powder came off on to her skin. It was whitewash, the cheap stuff that is used in cowsheds and stables and hen-houses.

Matilda was appalled. Was this really where her neat and trimly-dressed school teacher lived? Was this all she had to come back to after a day's work? It was unbelievable. And what was the reason for it? There was something very strange going on around here, surely.

Miss Honey put the tray on one of the upturned boxes. "Sit down, my dear, sit down," she said, "and we'll have a nice hot cup of tea. Help yourself

to bread. Both slices are for you. I never eat anything when I get home. I have a good old tuck-in at the school lunch and that keeps me going until the next morning."

Matilda perched herself carefully on an upturned box and more out of politeness than anything else she took a slice of bread and margarine and started to eat it. At home she would have been having buttered toast and strawberry jam and probably a piece of sponge-cake to round it off. And yet this was somehow far more fun. There was a mystery here in this house, a great mystery, there was no doubt about that, and Matilda was longing to find out what it was.

