

## Miss Honey's Story

Miss Honey poured the tea and added a little milk to both cups. She appeared to be not in the least ill at ease sitting on an upturned box in a bare room and drinking tea out of a mug that she balanced on her knee.

"You know," she said, "I've been thinking very hard about what you did with that glass. It is a great power you have been given, my child, you know that."

"Yes, Miss Honey, I do," Matilda said, chewing her bread and margarine.

"So far as I know," Miss Honey went on, "nobody else in the history of the world has been able to compel an object to move without touching it or blowing on it or using any outside help at all."

Matilda nodded but said nothing.

"The fascinating thing," Miss Honey said, "would be to find out the real limit of this power of yours. Oh, I know you think you can move just about anything there is, but I have my doubts about that."

"I'd love to try something really huge," Matilda said.

"What about distance?" Miss Honey asked. "Would you always have to be close to the thing you were pushing?"

"I simply don't know," Matilda said. "But it would be fun to find out."

"We mustn't hurry this," Miss Honey said, "so let's have another cup of tea. And do eat that other slice of bread. You must be hungry."

Matilda took the second slice and started eating it slowly. The margarine wasn't at all bad. She doubted whether she could have told the difference if she hadn't known. "Miss Honey," she said suddenly, "do they pay you very badly at our school?" Miss Honey looked up sharply. "Not too badly," she said. "I get about the same as the others."

"But it must still be very little if you are so dreadfully poor," Matilda said. "Do all the teachers live like this, with no furniture and no kitchen stove and no bathroom?"

"No, they don't," Miss Honey said rather stiffly. "I just happen to be the exception."

"I expect you just happen to like living in a very simple way," Matilda said, probing a little further. "It must make house cleaning an awful lot easier and you don't have furniture to polish or any of those silly little ornaments lying around that have to be dusted every day. And I suppose if you don't have a fridge you don't have to go out and buy all sorts of junky things like eggs and mayonnaise and ice-cream to fill it up with. It must save a terrific lot of shopping."

At this point Matilda noticed that Miss Honey's face had gone all tight and peculiar-looking. Her whole body had become rigid. Her shoulders were hunched up high and her lips were pressed together tight and she sat there gripping her mug of tea in both hands and staring down into it as though searching for a way to answer these not-quite-so-innocent questions.

There followed a rather long and embarrassing silence. In the space of thirty seconds the atmosphere in the tiny room had changed completely and now it was vibrating with awkwardness and secrets. Matilda said, "I am very sorry I asked you



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those questions, Miss Honey. It is not any of my business."

At this, Miss Honey seemed to rouse herself. She gave a shake of her shoulders and then very carefully she placed her mug on the tray.

"Why shouldn't you ask?" she said. "You were bound to ask in the end. You are much too bright not to have wondered. Perhaps I even *wanted* you to ask. Maybe that is why I invited you here after all. As a matter of fact you are the first visitor to come to the cottage since I moved in two years ago."

Matilda said nothing. She could feel the tension growing and growing in the room.

"You are so much wiser than your years, my dear," Miss Honey went on, "that it quite staggers me. Although you look like a child, you are not really a child at all because your mind and your powers of reasoning seem to be fully grown-up. So I suppose we might call you a grown-up child, if you see what I mean."

Matilda still did not say anything. She was waiting for what was coming next.

"Up to now", Miss Honey went on, "I have found it impossible to talk to anyone about my problems. I couldn't face the embarrassment, and anyway I lack the courage. Any courage I had was knocked out of me when I was young. But now, all of a sudden I have a sort of desperate wish to tell everything to somebody. I know you are only a tiny little girl, but there is some kind of magic in you somewhere. I've seen it with my own eyes."

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Matilda became very alert. The voice she was hearing was surely crying out for help. It must be. It had to be.

Then the voice spoke again. "Have some more tea," it said. "I think there's still a drop left."

Matilda nodded.

Miss Honey poured tea into both mugs and added milk. Again she cupped her own mug in both hands and sat there sipping.

There was quite a long silence before she said, "May I tell you a story?"

"Of course," Matilda said.

"I am twenty-three years old," Miss Honey said, "and when I was born my father was a doctor in this village. We had a nice old house, quite large, red-brick. It's tucked away in the woods behind the hills. I don't think you'd know it."

Matilda kept silent.

"I was born there," Miss Honey said. "And then came the first tragedy. My mother died when I was two. My father, a busy doctor, had to have someone to run the house and to look after me. So he invited my mother's unmarried sister, my aunt, to come and live with us. She agreed and she came."

Matilda was listening intently. "How old was the aunt when she moved in?" she asked.

"Not very old," Miss Honey said. "I should say about thirty. But I hated her right from the start. I missed my mother terribly. And the aunt was not a kind person. My father didn't know that because he was hardly ever around but when he did put in an appearance, the aunt behaved differently."

Miss Honey paused and sipped her tea. "I can't think why I am telling you all this," she said, embarrassed.

"Go on," Matilda said. "Please."

"Well," Miss Honey said, "then came the second tragedy. When I was five, my father died very suddenly. One day he was there and the next day he was gone. And so I was left to live alone with my aunt. She became my legal guardian. She had all the powers of a parent over me. And in some way or another, she became the actual owner of the house."

"How did your father die?" Matilda asked.

"It is interesting you should ask that," Miss Honey said. "I myself was much too young to question it at the time, but I found out later that there was a good deal of mystery surrounding his death."

"Didn't they know how he died?" Matilda asked.

"Well, not exactly," Miss Honey said, hesitating. "You see, no one could believe that he would ever have done it. He was such a very sane and sensible man."

"Done what?" Matilda asked.

"Killed himself."

Matilda was stunned.

"Did he?" she gasped.



"That's what it looked like," Miss Honey said. "But who knows?" She shrugged and turned away and stared out of the tiny window.

"I know what you're thinking," Matilda said. "You're thinking that the aunt killed him and made it look as though he'd done it himself."

"I am not thinking anything," Miss Honey said. "One must never think things like that without proof."

The little room became quiet. Matilda noticed that the hands clasping the mug were trembling slightly. "What happened after that?" she asked. "What happened when you were left all alone with the aunt? Wasn't she nice to you?"

"Nice?" Miss Honey said. "She was a demon. As soon as my father was out of the way she became a holy terror. My life was a nightmare."

"What did she do to you?" Matilda asked.

"I don't want to talk about it," Miss Honey said. "It's too horrible. But in the end I became so frightened of her I used to start shaking when she came into the room. You must understand I was never a strong character like you. I was always shy and retiring."

"Didn't you have any other relations?" Matilda asked. "Any uncles or aunts or grannies who would come and see you?"

"None that I knew about," Miss Honey said.

"They were all either dead or they'd gone to Australia. And that's still the way it is now, I'm afraid."

"So you grew up in that house alone with your

aunt," Matilda said. "But you must have gone to school."

"Of course," Miss Honey said. "I went to the same school you're going to now. But I lived at home." Miss Honey paused and stared down into her empty tea-mug. "I think what I am trying to explain to you," she said, "is that over the years I became so completely cowed and dominated by this monster of an aunt that when she gave me an order, no matter what it was, I obeyed it instantly. That can happen, you know. And by the time I was ten, I had become her slave. I did all the housework. I made her bed. I washed and ironed for her. I did all the cooking. I learned how to do everything."

"But surely you could have complained to somebody?" Matilda said.

"To whom?" Miss Honey said. "And anyway, I was far too terrified to complain. I told you, I was her slave."

"Did she beat you?"

"Let's not go into details," Miss Honey said.

"How simply awful," Matilda said. "Did you cry nearly all the time?"

"Only when I was alone," Miss Honey said. "I wasn't allowed to cry in front of her. But I lived in fear."

"What happened when you left school?" Matilda asked.

"I was a bright pupil," Miss Honey said. "I could easily have got into university. But there was no question of that."

"Why not, Miss Honey?"

"Because I was needed at home to do the work."  
"Then how did you become a teacher?" Matilda asked.

"There is a Teacher's Training College in Reading," Miss Honey said. "That's only forty minutes' bus-ride away from here. I was allowed to go there on condition I came straight home again every afternoon to do the washing and ironing and to clean the house and cook the supper."

"How old were you then?" Matilda asked.

"When I went into Teacher's Training I was eighteen," Miss Honey said.

"You could have just packed up and walked away," Matilda said.

"Not until I got a job," Miss Honey said. "And don't forget, I was by then dominated by my aunt to such an extent that I wouldn't have dared. You can't imagine what it's like to be completely controlled like that by a very strong personality. It turns you to jelly. So that's it. That's the sad story of my life. Now I've talked enough."

"Please don't stop," Matilda said. "You haven't finished yet. How did you manage to get away from her in the end and come and live in this funny little house?"

"Ah, that was something," Miss Honey said. "I was proud of that."

"Tell me," Matilda said.

"Well," Miss Honey said, "when I got my teacher's job, the aunt told me I owed her a lot of money. I asked her why. She said, 'Because I've been feeding you for all these years and buying



your shoes and your clothes!' She told me it added up to thousands and I had to pay her back by giving her my salary for the next ten years. 'I'll give you one pound a week pocket-money,' she said. 'But that's all you're going to get.' She even arranged with the school authorities to have my salary paid directly into her own bank. She made me sign the paper."

"You shouldn't have done that," Matilda said. "Your salary was your chance of freedom."

"I know, I know," Miss Honey said. "But by then I had been her slave nearly all my life and I hadn't the courage or the guts to say no. I was still petrified of her. She could still hurt me badly."

"So how did you manage to escape?" Matilda asked.

"Ah," Miss Honey said, smiling for the first time, "that was two years ago. It was my greatest triumph."

"Please tell me," Matilda said.

"I used to get up very early and go for walks while my aunt was still asleep," Miss Honey said. "And one day I came across this tiny cottage. It was empty. I found out who owned it. It was a farmer. I went to see him. Farmers also get up very early. He was milking his cows. I asked him if I could rent his cottage. 'You can't live there!' he cried. 'It's got no conveniences, no running water, no nothing!'"

"I want to live there," I said. "I'm a romantic. I've fallen in love with it. Please rent it to me."

"You're mad," he said. "But if you insist, you're welcome to it. The rent will be ten pence a week."

"Here's one month's rent in advance," I said, giving him 40p. "And thank you so much!"

"How super!" Matilda cried. "So suddenly you had a house all of your own! But how did you pluck up the courage to tell the aunt?"

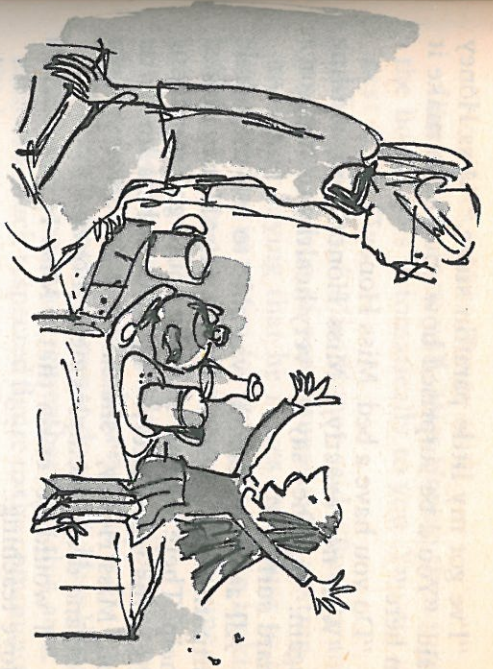
"That was tough," Miss Honey said. "But I steeled myself to do it. One night, after I had cooked her supper, I went upstairs and packed the few things I possessed in a cardboard box and came downstairs and announced I was leaving. 'I've rented a house,' I said.

"My aunt exploded. 'Rented a house!' she shouted. 'How can you rent a house when you have only one pound a week in the world?'"

"I've done it," I said.

"And how are you going to buy food for yourself?"

"I'll manage," I mumbled and rushed out of the front door."



"Oh, well done you!" Matilda cried. "So you were free at last!"

"I was free at last," Miss Honey said. "I can't tell you how wonderful it was."

"But have you really managed to live here on one pound a week for two years?" Matilda asked.

"I most certainly have," Miss Honey said. "I pay ten pence rent, and the rest just about buys me paraffin for my stove and for my lamp, and a little milk and tea and bread and margarine. That's all I need really. As I told you, I have a jolly good tuck-in at the school lunch."

Matilda stared at her. What a marvellously brave thing Miss Honey had done. Suddenly she was a heroine in Matilda's eyes. "Isn't it awfully cold in the winter?" she asked.

"I've got my little paraffn stove," Miss Honey said. "You'd be surprised how snug I can make it in here."

"Do you have a bed, Miss Honey?"

"Well not exactly," Miss Honey said, smiling again. "But they say it's very healthy to sleep on a hard surface."

All at once Matilda was able to see the whole situation with absolute clarity. Miss Honey needed help. There was no way she could go on existing like this indefinitely. "You would be a lot better off, Miss Honey," she said, "if you gave up your job and drew unemployment money."

"I would never do that," Miss Honey said. "I love teaching."

"This awful aunt," Matilda said, "I suppose she is still living in your lovely old house?"

"Very much so," Miss Honey said. "She's still only about fifty. She'll be around for a long time yet."

"And do you think your father really meant her to own the house for ever?"

"I'm quite sure he didn't," Miss Honey said.

"Parents will often give a guardian the right to occupy the house for a certain length of time, but it is nearly always left in trust for the child. It then becomes the child's property when he or she grows up."

"Then surely it is your house?" Matilda said.

"My father's will was never found," Miss Honey said. "It looks as though somebody destroyed it."

"No prizes for guessing who," Matilda said.

"No prizes," Miss Honey said.

"But if there is no will, Miss Honey, then surely the house goes automatically to you. You are the next of kin."

"I know I am," Miss Honey said. "But my aunt produced a piece of paper supposedly written by my father saying that he leaves the house to his sister-in-law in return for her kindness in looking after me. I am certain it's a forgery. But no one can prove it."

"Couldn't you try?" Matilda said. "Couldn't you hire a good lawyer and make a fight of it?"

"I don't have the money to do that," Miss Honey said. "And you must remember that this aunt of mine is a much respected figure in the community. She has a lot of influence."

"Who is she?" Matilda asked.

Miss Honey hesitated a moment. Then she said softly, "Miss Trunchbull."