

though she had hardly done anything, it had all been so simple.

The school matron, followed by five teachers, three women and two men, came rushing into the room.

"By golly, somebody's floored her at last!" cried one of the men, grinning. "Congratulations, Miss Honey!"

"Who threw the water over her?" asked the matron.

"I did," said Nigel proudly.

"Good for you," another teacher said. "Shall we get some more?"

"Stop that," the matron said. "We must carry her up to the sick-room."

It took all five teachers and the matron to lift the enormous woman and stagger with her out of the room.

Miss Honey said to the class, "I think you'd all better go out to the playground and amuse yourselves until the next lesson." Then she turned and walked over to the blackboard and carefully wiped out all the chalk writing.

The children began filing out of the classroom. Matilda started to go with them, but as she passed Miss Honey she paused and her twinkling eyes met the teacher's eyes and Miss Honey ran forward and gave the tiny child a great big hug and a kiss.

A New Home

Later that day, the news began to spread that the Headmistress had recovered from her fainting-fit and had then marched out of the school building tight-lipped and white in the face.

The next morning she did not turn up at school. At lunchtime, Mr Trilby, the Deputy Head, telephoned her house to enquire if she was feeling unwell. There was no answer to the phone.

When school was over, Mr Trilby decided to investigate further, so he walked to the house where Miss Trunchbull lived on the edge of the village, the lovely small red-brick Georgian building known as The Red House, tucked away in the woods behind the hills.

He rang the bell. No answer.

He knocked loudly. No answer.

He called out, "Is anybody at home?" No answer.

He tried the door and to his surprise found it unlocked. He went in.

The house was silent and there was no one in it, and yet all the furniture was still in place. Mr Trilby went upstairs to the main bedroom. Here also everything seemed to be normal until he started opening drawers and looking into cupboards. There were no clothes or underclothes or shoes anywhere. They had all gone.

She's done a bunk, Mr Trilby said to himself and he went away to inform the School Governors that the Headmistress had apparently vanished.

On the second morning, Miss Honey received by registered post a letter from a firm of local solicitors informing her that the last will and testament of her late father, Dr Honey, had suddenly and mysteriously turned up. This document revealed that ever since her father's death, Miss Honey had in fact been the rightful owner of a property on the edge of the village known as The Red House, which until recently had been occupied by a Miss Agatha Trunchbull. The will also showed that her father's lifetime savings, which fortunately were still safely in the bank, had also been left to her. The solicitor's letter added that if Miss Honey would kindly call in to the office as soon as possible, then the property and the money could be transferred into her name very rapidly.

Miss Honey did just that, and within a couple of weeks she had moved into The Red House, the very place in which she had been brought up and where luckily all the family furniture and pictures were still around. From then on, Matilda was a welcome visitor to The Red House every single evening after school, and a very close friendship began to develop between the teacher and the small child.

Back at school, great changes were also taking place. As soon as it became clear that Miss Trunchbull had completely disappeared from the scene, the excellent Mr Trilby was appointed Head Teacher in her place. And very soon after that,

Matilda was moved up into the top form where Miss Plimsoll quickly discovered that this amazing child was every bit as bright as Miss Honey had said.

One evening a few weeks later, Matilda was having tea with Miss Honey in the kitchen of The Red House after school as they always did, when Matilda said suddenly, "Something strange has happened to me, Miss Honey."

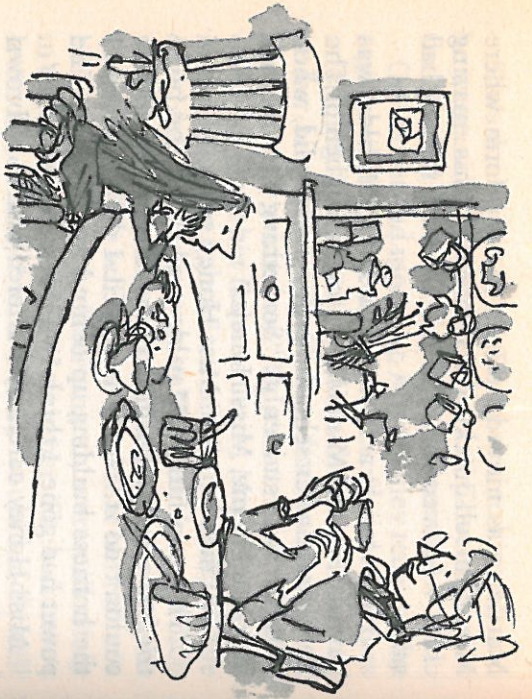
"Tell me about it," Miss Honey said.

"This morning," Matilda said, "just for fun I tried to push something over with my eyes and I couldn't do it. Nothing moved. I didn't even feel the hotness building up behind my eyeballs. The power had gone. I think I've lost it completely."

Miss Honey carefully buttered a slice of brown bread and put a little strawberry jam on it. "I've been expecting something like that to happen," she said.

"You have? Why?" Matilda asked.

"Well," Miss Honey said, "it's only a guess, but here's what I think. While you were in my class you had nothing to do, nothing to make you struggle. Your fairly enormous brain was going crazy with frustration. It was bubbling and boiling away like mad inside your head. There was tremendous energy bottled up in there with nowhere to go, and somehow or other you were able to shoot that energy out through your eyes and make objects move. But now things are different. You are in the top form competing against children more than twice your age and all that mental energy is being



used up in class. Your brain is for the first time having to struggle and strive and keep really busy, which is great. That's only a theory, mind you, and it may be a silly one, but I don't think it's far off the mark."

"I'm glad it's happened," Matilda said. "I wouldn't want to go through life as a miracle-worker."

"You've done enough," Miss Honey said. "I can still hardly believe you made all this happen for me."

Matilda, who was perched on a tall stool at the kitchen table, ate her bread and jam slowly. She did so love these afternoons with Miss Honey. She felt completely comfortable in her presence, and

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the two of them talked to each other more or less as equals.

"Did you know", Matilda said suddenly, "that the heart of a mouse beats at the rate of six hundred and fifty times a minute?"

"I did not," Miss Honey said smiling. "How absolutely fascinating. Where did you read that?"

"In a book from the library," Matilda said. "And that means it goes so fast you can't even hear the separate beats. It must sound just like a buzz."

"It must," Miss Honey said.

"And how fast do you think a hedgehog's heart beats?" Matilda asked.

"Tell me," Miss Honey said, smiling again.

"It's not as fast as a mouse," Matilda said. "It's three hundred times a minute. But even so, you wouldn't have thought it went as fast as that in a creature that moves so slowly, would you, Miss Honey?"

"I certainly wouldn't," Miss Honey said. "Tell me one more."

"A horse," Matilda said. "That's really slow. It's only forty times a minute."

This child, Miss Honey told herself, seems to be interested in everything. When one is with her it is impossible to be bored. I love it.

The two of them stayed sitting and talking in the kitchen for an hour or so longer, and then, at about six o'clock, Matilda said goodnight and set out to walk home to her parent's house, which was about an eight-minute journey away. When she arrived at her own gate, she saw a large black

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Mercedes motor-car parked outside. She didn't take too much notice of that. There were often strange cars parked outside her father's place. But when she entered the house, she was confronted by a scene of utter chaos. Her mother and father were

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both in the hall frantically stuffing clothing and various objects into suitcases.

"What on earth's going on?" she cried. "What's happening, daddy?"

"We're off!" Mr Wormwood said, not looking up.

"We're leaving for the airport in half an hour so you'd better get packed. Your brother's upstairs all ready to go. Get a move on, girl! Get going!"

"Off?" Matilda cried out. "Where to?"

"Spain," the father said. "It's a better climate than this lousy country."

"Spain!" Matilda cried. "I don't want to go to Spain! I love it here and I love my school!"

"Just do as you're told and stop arguing," the father snapped. "I've got enough troubles without messing about with you!"

"But daddy . . ." Matilda began.

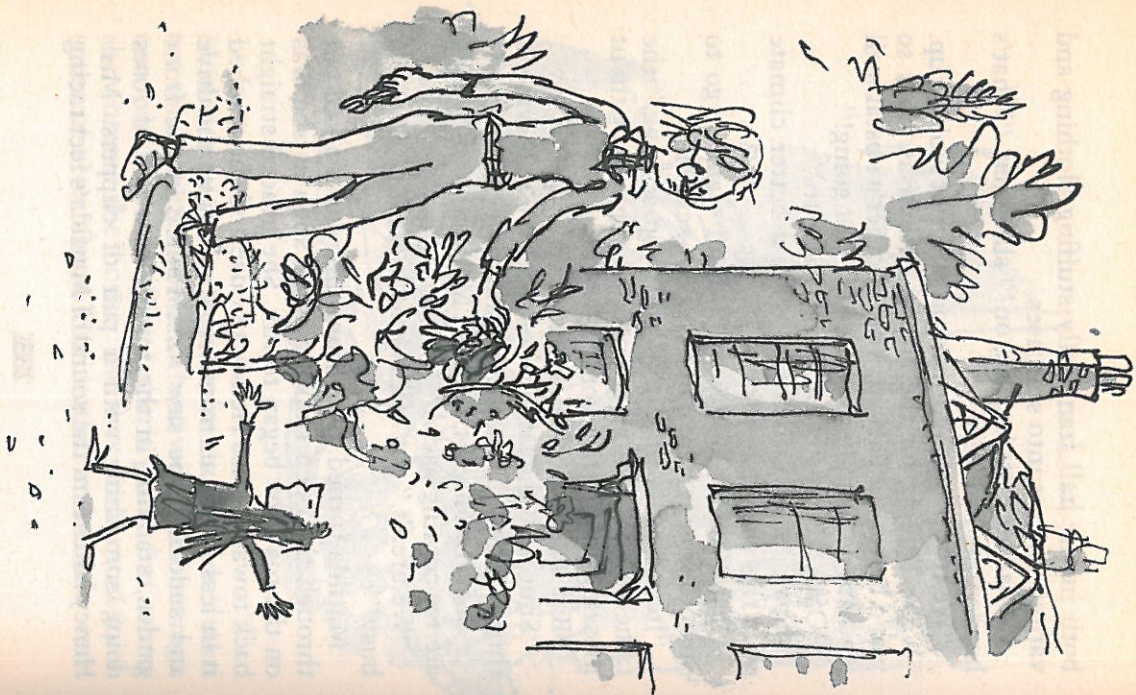
"Shut up!" the father shouted. "We're leaving in thirty minutes! I'm not missing that plane!"

"But how long for, daddy?" Matilda cried. "When are we coming back?"

"We aren't," the father said. "Now beat it! I'm busy!"

Matilda turned away from him and walked out through the open front-door. As soon as she was on the road she began to run. She headed straight back towards Miss Honey's house and she reached it in less than four minutes. She flew up the drive and suddenly she saw Miss Honey in the front garden, standing in the middle of a bed of roses doing something with a pair of clippers. Miss Honey had heard the sound of Matilda's feet racing

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over the gravel and now she straightened up and turned and stepped out of the rose-bed as the child came running up.

"My, my!" she said. "What in the world is the matter?"

Matilda stood before her, panting, out of breath, her small face flushed crimson all over.

"They're leaving!" she cried. "They've all gone mad and they're filling their suitcases and they're leaving for Spain in about thirty minutes!"

"Who is?" Miss Honey asked quietly.

"Mummy and daddy and my brother Mike and they say I've got to go with them!"

"You mean for a holiday?" Miss Honey asked.

"For ever!" Matilda cried. "Daddy said we were never coming back!"

There was a brief silence, then Miss Honey said, "Actually I'm not very surprised."

"You mean you knew they were going?" Matilda cried. "Why didn't you tell me?"

"No, darling," Miss Honey said. "I did not know they were going. But the news still doesn't surprise me."

"Why?" Matilda cried. "Please tell me why." She was still out of breath from the running and from the shock of it all.

"Because your father," Miss Honey said, "is in with a bunch of crooks. Everyone in the village knows that. My guess is that he is a receiver of stolen cars from all over the country. He's in it deep."

Matilda stared at her open-mouthed.

Miss Honey went on, "People brought stolen cars to your father's workshop where he changed the number-plates and resprayed the bodies a different colour and all the rest of it. And now somebody's probably tipped him off that the police are on to him and he's doing what they all do, running off to Spain where they can't get him. He'll have been sending his money out there for years, all ready and waiting for him to arrive."

They were standing on the lawn in front of the lovely red-brick house with its weathered old red tiles and its tall chimneys, and Miss Honey still had the pair of garden clippers in one hand. It was a warm golden evening and a blackbird was singing somewhere near by.

"I don't want to go with them!" Matilda shouted suddenly. "I won't go with them."

"I'm afraid you must," Miss Honey said.

"I want to live here with you," Matilda cried out.

"Please let me live here with you!"

"I only wish you could," Miss Honey said. "But I'm afraid it's not possible. You cannot leave your parents just because you want to. They have a right to take you with them."

"But what if they agreed?" Matilda cried eagerly.

"What if they said yes, I can stay with you? Would you let me stay with you then?"

Miss Honey said softly, "Yes, that would be heaven."

"Well, I think they might!" Matilda cried. "I honestly think they might! They don't actually care tuppence about me!"

"Not so fast," Miss Honey said.
"We've got to be fast!" Matilda cried. "They're leaving any moment! Come on!" she shouted, grasping Miss Honey's hand. "Please come with me and ask them! But we'll have to hurry! We'll have to run!"



The next moment the two of them were running down the drive together and then out on to the road, and Matilda was ahead, pulling Miss Honey after her by her wrist, and it was a wild and wonderful dash they made along the country lane and

through the village to the house where Matilda's parents lived. The big black Mercedes was still outside and now its boot and all its doors were open and Mr and Mrs Wormwood and the brother were scurrying around it like ants, piling in the suitcases, as Matilda and Miss Honey came dashing up.

"Daddy and mummy!" Matilda burst out, gasping for breath. "I don't want to go with you! I want to stay here and live with Miss Honey and she says that I can but only if you give me permission! Please say yes! Go on, daddy, say yes! Say yes, mummy!"

The father turned and looked at Miss Honey. "You're that teacher woman who once came here

to see me, aren't you?" he said. Then he went back to stowing the suitcases into the car.

His wife said to him, "This one'll have to go on the back seat. There's no more room in the boot."

"I would love to have Matilda," Miss Honey said. "I would look after her with loving care, Mr Wormwood, and I would pay for everything. She wouldn't cost you a penny. But it was not my idea. It was Matilda's. And I will not agree to take her without your full and willing consent."

"Come on, Harry," the mother said, pushing a suitcase into the back seat. "Why don't we let her go if that's what she wants. It'll be one less to look after."

"I'm in a hurry," the father said. "I've got a plane



to catch. If she wants to stay, let her stay. It's fine with me."

Matilda leapt into Miss Honey's arms and hugged her, and Miss Honey hugged her back, and then the mother and father and brother were inside the car and the car was pulling away with the tyres screaming. The brother gave a wave through the rear window, but the other two didn't even look back. Miss Honey was still hugging the tiny girl in her arms and neither of them said a word as they stood there watching the big black car tearing round the corner at the end of the road and disappearing for ever into the distance.

