

In a couple of minutes Mr Hoppy was back on the balcony with a sheet of paper in his hand. 'I'm going to lower it to you on a bit of string,' he said, 'or it might blow away. Here it comes.'

Mrs Silver caught the paper and held it up in front of her. This is what she read:

ESIO TROT, ESIO TROT,
 TEG REGGIB REGGIB!
 EMOC NO, ESIO TROT,
 WORG PU, FFUP PU, TOOHS PU!
 GNIRPS PU, WOLB PU, LEWS PU!
 EGROG! ELZZUG! FFUTS! PLUG!
 TUP NO TAF, ESIO TROT, TUP NO TAF!
 TEG NO, TEG NO! ELBBOG DOOF!



'What does it mean?' she asked. 'Is it another language?'

'It's tortoise language,' Mr Hoppy said.

'Tortoises are very backward creatures. Therefore they can only understand words that are written backwards. That's obvious, isn't it?'

'I suppose so,' Mrs Silver said, bewildered.

'Esio trot is simply tortoise spelled backwards,'

Mr Hoppy said. 'Look at it.'

'So it is,' Mrs Silver said.

'The other words are spelled backwards, too,' Mr Hoppy said. 'If you turn them round into human language, they simply say:

TORTOISE, TORTOISE,

GET BIGGER BIGGER!

COME ON, TORTOISE,

GROW UP, PUFF UP, SHOOT UP!

SPRING UP, BLOW UP, SWELL UP!

GORGE! GUZZLE! STUFF! GULP!

PUT ON FAT, TORTOISE, PUT ON FAT!

GET ON, GET ON! GOBBLE FOOD!'



Mrs Silver examined the magic words on the paper more closely. 'I guess you're right,' she said. 'How clever. But there's an awful lot of poos in it. Are they something special?'

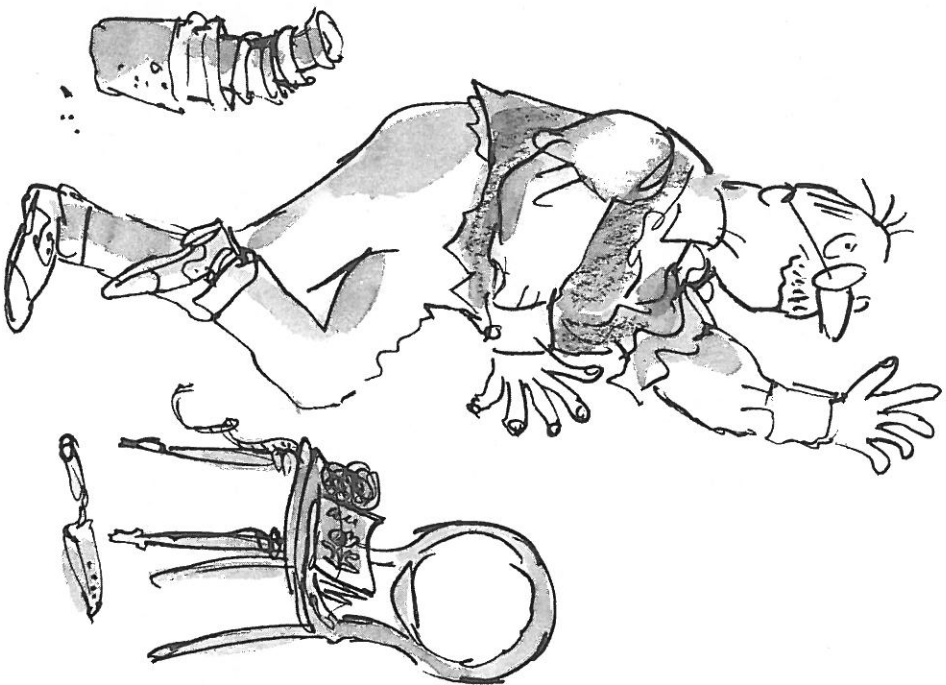
'Poo is a very strong word in any language,' Mr Hoppy said, 'especially with tortoises. Now what you have to do, Mrs Silver, is hold Alfe up to your face and whisper these words to him three times a day, morning, noon and night. Let me hear you practise them.'

Very slowly and stumbling a little over the strange words, Mrs Silver read the whole message out loud in tortoise language.

'Not bad,' Mr Hoppy said. 'But try to get a little more expression into it when you say it to Alfe. If you do it properly I'll bet you anything you like that in a few months' time he'll be twice as big as he is now.'

'I'll try it,' Mrs Silver said. 'I'll try anything. Of course I will. But I can't believe it'll work.'

'You wait and see,' Mr Hoppy said, smiling at her.



Back in his flat, Mr Hoppy was simply quivering all over with excitement. *Your slave for life*, he kept repeating to himself. What bliss!

But there was a lot of work to be done before that happened.

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The only furniture in Mr Hoppy's small living-room was a table and two chairs. These he moved into his bedroom. Then he went out and bought a sheet of thick canvas and spread it over the entire living-room floor to protect his carpet.

Next, he got out the telephone-book and wrote down the address of every pet-shop in the city. There were fourteen of them altogether.

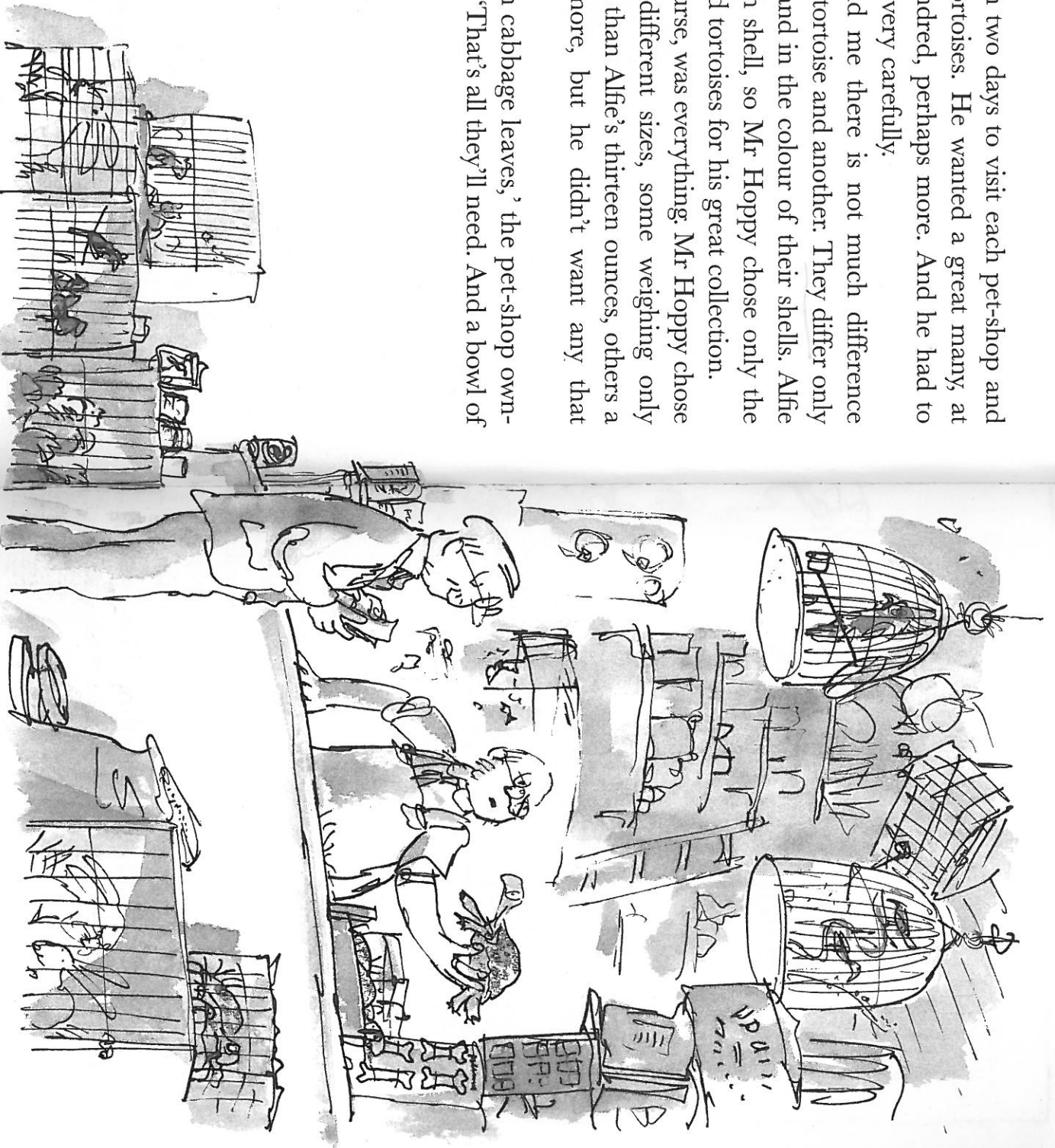


It took him two days to visit each pet-shop and choose his tortoises. He wanted a great many, at least one hundred, perhaps more. And he had to choose them very carefully.

To you and me there is not much difference between one tortoise and another. They differ only in their size and in the colour of their shells. Alfie had a darkish shell, so Mr Hoppy chose only the darker-shelled tortoises for his great collection.

Size, of course, was everything. Mr Hoppy chose all sorts of different sizes, some weighing only slightly more than Alfie's thirteen ounces, others a great deal more, but he didn't want any that weighed less.

'Feed them cabbage leaves,' the pet-shop owners told him. 'That's all they'll need. And a bowl of water.'



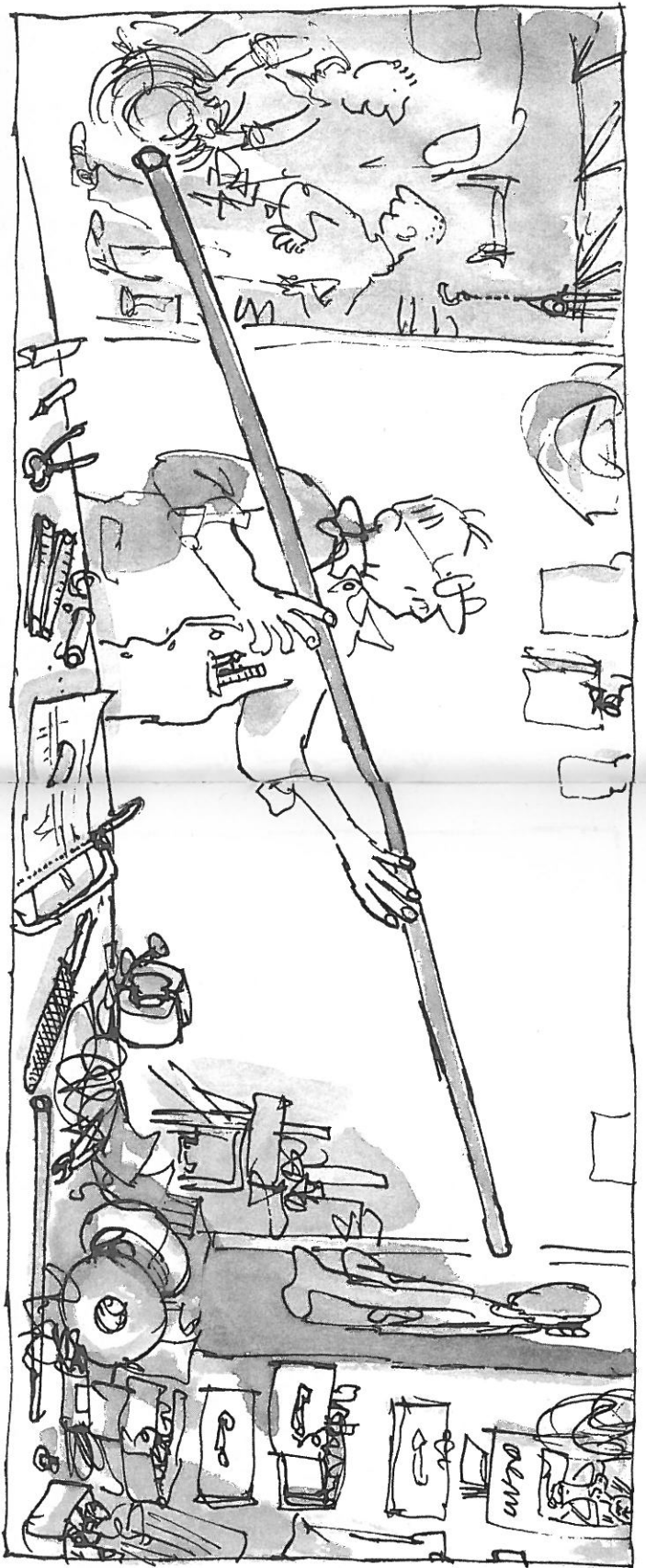


When he had finished, Mr Hoppy, in his enthusiasm, had bought no less than one hundred and forty tortoises and he carried them home in baskets, ten or fifteen at a time. He had to make a lot of trips and he was quite exhausted at the end of it all, but it was worth it. Boy, was it worth it! And what an amazing sight his living-room was when they were all in there together! The floor was swarming with tortoises of different sizes,

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some walking slowly about and exploring, some munching cabbage leaves, others drinking water from a big shallow dish. They made just the faintest rustling sound as they moved over the canvas sheet, but that was all. Mr Hoppy had to pick his way carefully on his toes between this moving sea of brown shells whenever he walked across the room. But enough of that. He must get on with the job.

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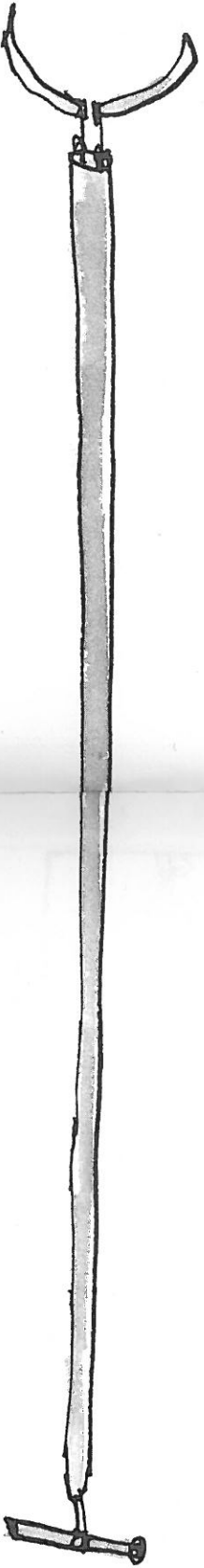


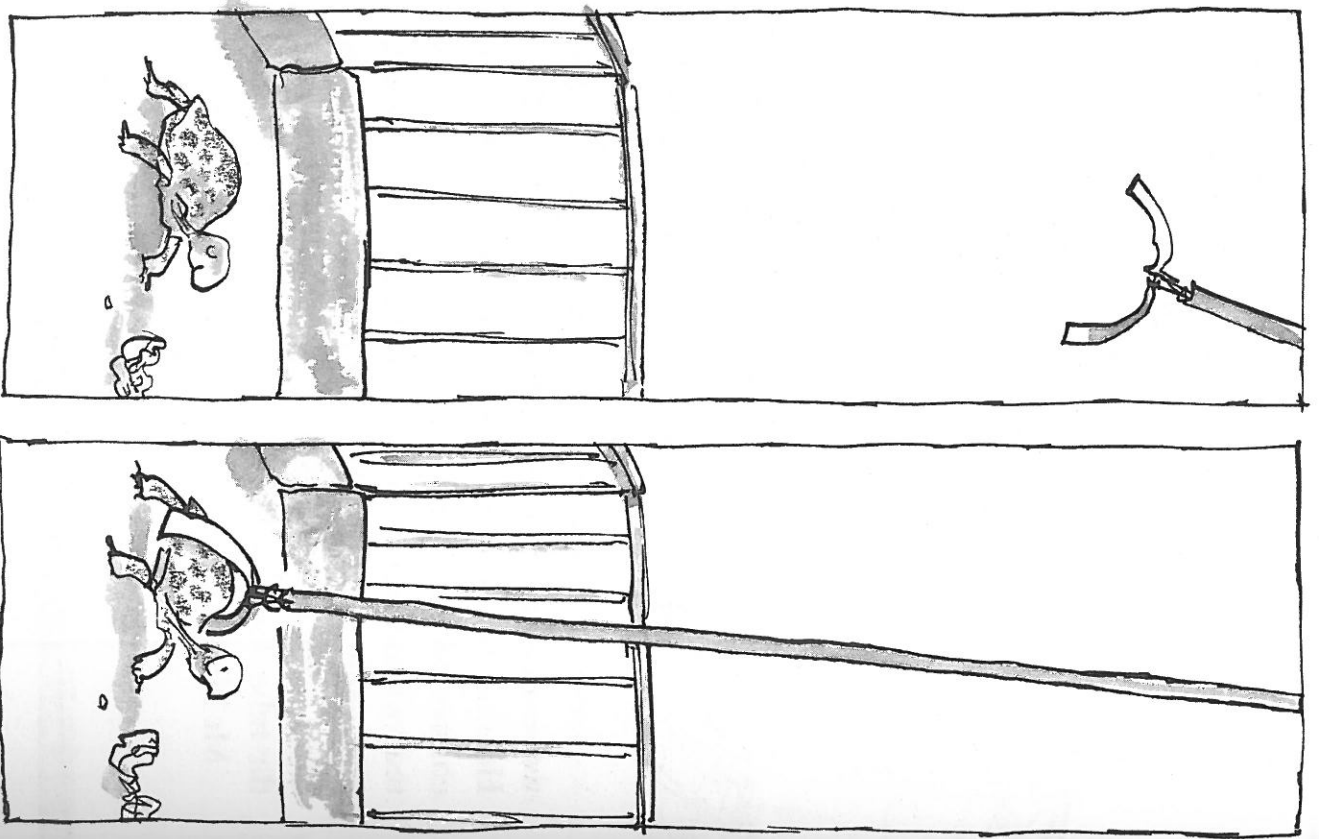
Before he retired Mr Hoppy had been a mechanic in a bus-garage. And now he went back to his old place of work and asked his mates if he might use his old bench for an hour or two.

What he had to do now was to make something that would reach down from his own balcony to Mrs Silver's balcony and pick up a tortoise. This was not difficult for a mechanic like Mr Hoppy.

First he made two metal claws or fingers, and these he attached to the end of a long metal tube. He ran two stiff wires down inside the tube and connected them to the metal claws in such a way that when you pulled the wires, the claws closed, and when you pushed them, the claws opened. The wires were joined to a handle at the other end of the tube. It was all very simple.

Mr Hoppy was ready to begin.



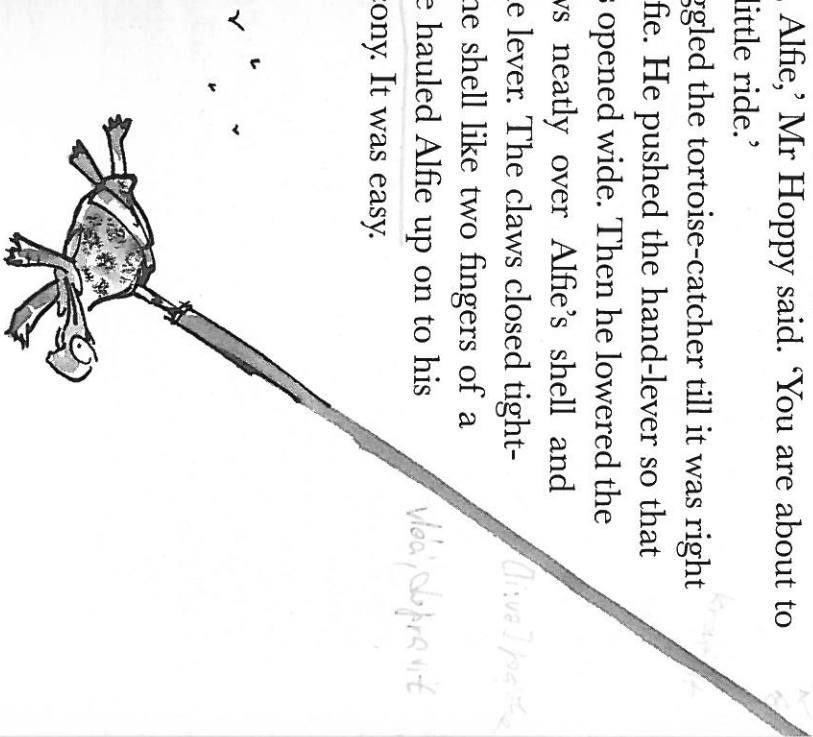


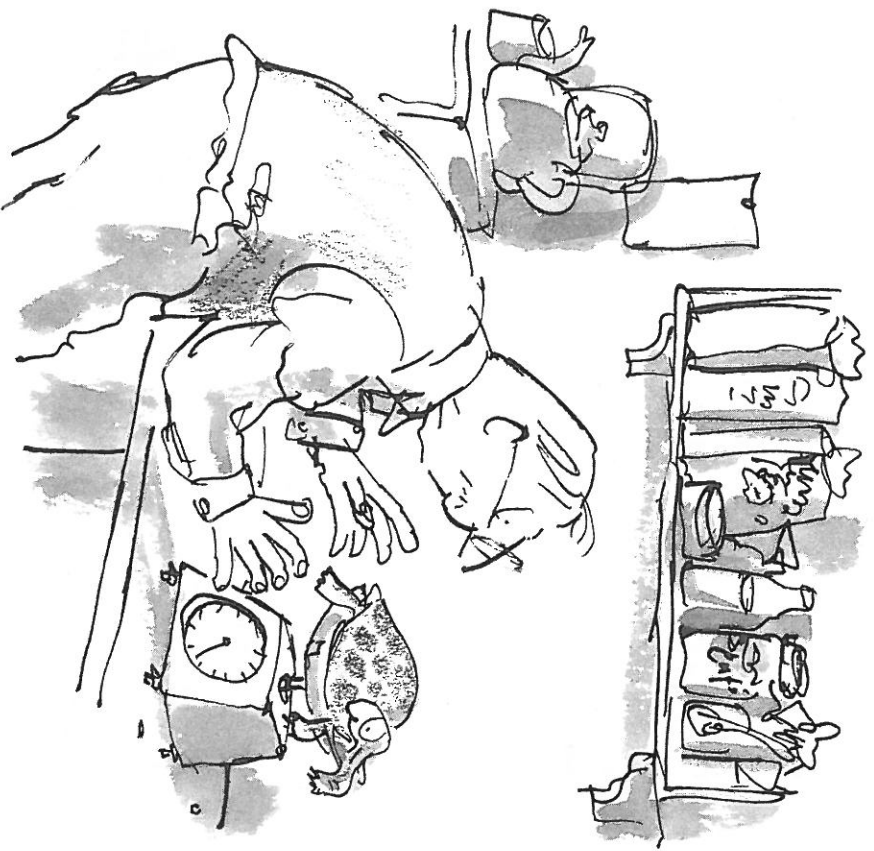
Mrs Silver had a part-time job. She worked from noon until five o'clock every weekday afternoon in a shop that sold newspapers and sweets. That made things a lot easier for Mr Hoppy.

So on that first exciting afternoon, after he had made sure that Mrs Silver had gone to work, Mr Hoppy went out on to his balcony armed with his long metal pole. He called this his tortoise-catcher. He leaned over the balcony railings and lowered the pole down on to Mrs Silver's balcony below. Alfie was basking in the pale sunlight over to one side.

'Hello, Alfie,' Mr Hoppy said. 'You are about to go for a little ride.'

He wiggled the tortoise-catcher till it was right above Alfie. He pushed the hand-lever so that the claws opened wide. Then he lowered the two claws neatly over Alfie's shell and pulled the lever. The claws closed tightly over the shell like two fingers of a hand. He hauled Alfie up on to his own balcony. It was easy.





Mr Hoppy weighed Alfie on his own kitchen scales just to make sure that Mrs Silver's figure of thirteen ounces was correct. It was.

Now, holding Alfie in one hand, he picked his way carefully through his huge collection of tortoises to find one that first of all had the same colour shell as Alfie's and secondly weighed *exactly two ounces more*.

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Two ounces is not much. It is less than a smallish hen's egg weighs. But, you see, the important thing in Mr Hoppy's plan was to make sure that the new tortoise was bigger than Alfie but only a *tiny bit* bigger. The difference had to be so small that Mrs Silver wouldn't notice it.



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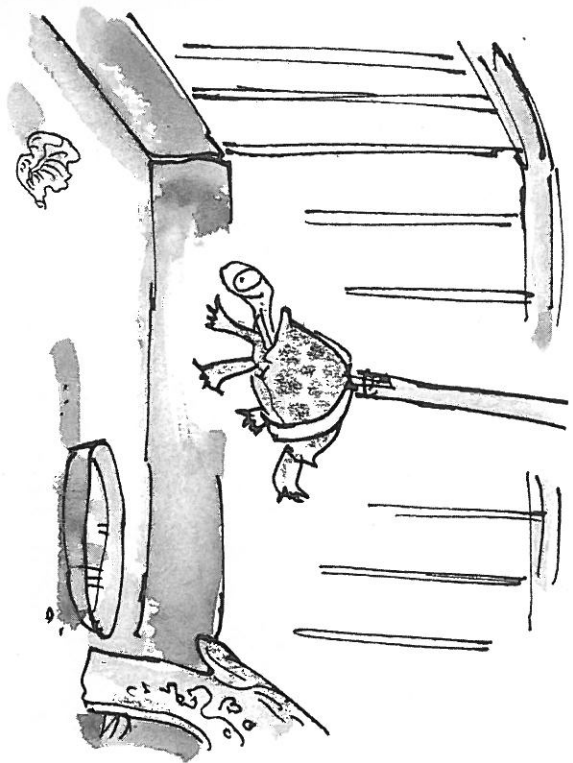


From his vast collection, it was not difficult for Mr Hoppy to find just the tortoise he wanted. He wanted one that weighed fifteen ounces exactly on his kitchen scales, no more and no less. When he had got it, he put it on the kitchen table beside Alfie, and even he could hardly tell that one was bigger than the other. But it *was* bigger. It was bigger by two ounces. This was Tortoise Number 2.

Mr Hoppy took Tortoise Number 2 out on to the balcony and gripped it in the claws of his tortoise-catcher. Then he lowered it on to Mrs Silver's balcony, right beside a nice fresh lettuce.

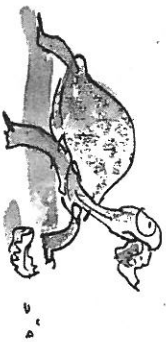
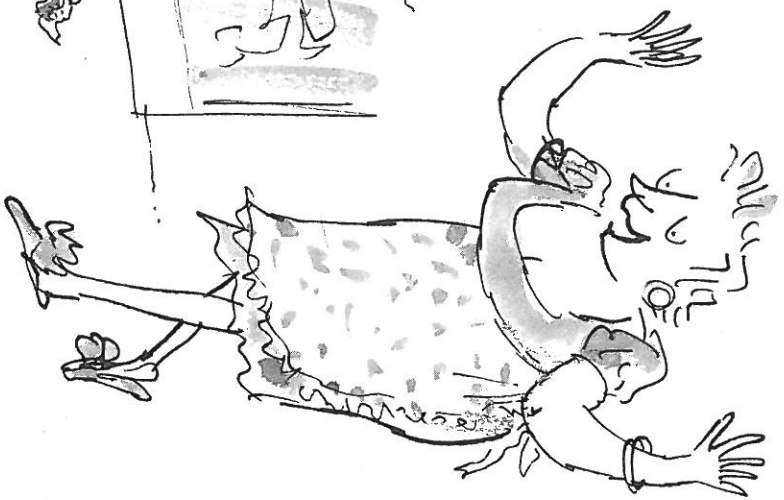
Tortoise Number 2 had never eaten tender juicy lettuce leaves before. It had only had thick old cabbage leaves. It loved the lettuce and started chomping away at it with great gusto.

chomping



There followed a rather nervous two hours' wait for Mrs Silver to return from work.

Would she see any difference between the new tortoise and Alfie? It was going to be a tense moment.



Out on to her balcony swept Mrs Silver.
 'Alfie, my darling!' she cried out. 'Mummy's
 back! Have you missed me?'

Mr Hoppy, peering over his railing, but well
 hidden between two huge potted plants, held his
 breath.

The new tortoise was still chomping away at the
 lettuce.

'My my, Alfie, you do seem hungry today,' Mrs
 Silver was saying. 'It must be Mr Hoppy's magic
 words I've been whispering to you.'

Mr Hoppy watched as Mrs Silver picked the
 tortoise up and stroked his shell. Then she fished
 Mr Hoppy's piece of paper out of her pocket, and
 holding the tortoise very close to her face, she
 whispered, reading from the paper:

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