**Royal Jelly** (1960)

*Roald Dahl*

**Part One**

 ‘It worries me to death, Albert, it really does,’ Mrs. Taylor said.

 She kept her eyes fixed on the baby who was now lying absolutely motionless in the crook of her left arm.

 ‘I just know there’s something wrong.’

 The skin on the baby’s face had a pearly translucent quality, and was stretched very tightly over the bones.

 ‘Try again,’ Albert Taylor said.

 ‘It won’t do any good.’

 ‘You have to keep trying, Mabel,’ he said.

 She lifted the bottle out of the saucepan of hot water and shook a few drops of milk on to the inside of her wrist, testing for temperature.

 ‘Come on,’ she whispered, ‘Come on, my baby. Wake up and take a bit more of this.’

 There was a small lamp on the table close by that made a soft yellow glow all around her.

 ‘Please,’ she said. ‘Take just a weeny bit more.’

 The husband watched her over the top of his magazine. She was half dead with exhaustion, he could see that, and the pale oval face, usually so grave and serene, had taken on a kind of pinched and desperate look. But even so, the drop of her head as she gazed down at the child was curiously

beautiful.

 ’You see,‘ she murmured. ‘It’s no good. She won’t have it.’

 ‘She held the bottle up to the light, squinting at the calibrations.

 ‘One ounce (29 g) again. That’s all she takes. No – it isn’t even that. It’s only three quarters. It’s not

enough to keep body and soul together. Albert, it really isn’t. It worries me to death.’

 ‘I know,’ he said.

 ‘If only they could find out what was wrong.’

 ‘There’s nothing wrong, Mabel. It’s just a matter of time.’

 ‘Of course there’s something wrong.’

 ‘Doctor Robinson says no.’

 ‘Look,’ she said, standing up.’ You can’t tell me it’s natural for a six-week-old child to weigh less, less by more than two whole pounds (900 g) than she did when she was born! Just look at those legs! They’re nothing but skin and bone!’

 The tiny baby lay limply on her arm, not moving.

 ‘Doctor Robinson said you was to stop worrying, Mabel. So did that other one.’

 ‘Ha!’ she said. ‘Isn’t that wonderful! I’m to stop worrying!’

 ‘Now, Mabel!’

 ‘What does he want me to do? Treat it as some sort of a joke?’

 ‘He didn’t say that.’

 ‘I hate doctors! I hate them all!’ she cried, and she swung away from him and walked quickly out of

the room towards the stairs, carrying the baby with her.

 Albert Taylor stayed where he was and let her go.

 In a little while he heard her moving about in the bedroom directly over his head, quick nervous

footsteps going tap tap tap on the linoleum above. Soon the footsteps would stop, and then he

would have to get up and follow her, and when he went into the bedroom he would find her sitting

beside the cot as usual, staring at the child and crying softly to herself and refusing to move.

 ‘She’s starving, Albert,’ she would say.

 ‘Of course she’s not starving.’

 ‘She is starving. I know she is. And Albert?’

 ‘Yes?’

 ‘I believe you know it too, but you won’t admit it. Isn’t that right?’

 Every night now it was like this.

 Last week they had taken the child back to the hospital, and the doctor had examined it carefully

and told them that there was nothing to matter.

 ‘It took us nine years to get this baby,’ Mabel had said. ‘I think it would kill me if anything should

happen to her.’

 That was six days ago and since then it had lost another five ounces. (140g)

 But worrying about it wasn’t going to help anybody, Albert Taylor told himself. One simply had to

trust the doctor on a thing like this. He picked up the magazine that was still lying on his lap and

glanced idly down the list of contents to see what it had to offer this week:

* Among the Bees in May
* Honey Cookery
* The Bee Farmer and the B. Pharm.
* Experiences in the Control of Nosema
* The Latest on Royal Jelly
* This Week in the Apiary
* The Healing Power of Propolis
* Regurgitations
* British Beekeepers Annual Dinner
* Association News

 All his life Albert Taylor had been fascinated by anything that had to do with bees. As a small boy he

often used to catch them in his bare hands and go running with them into the house to show to his

mother, and sometimes he would put them on his face and let them crawl about over his cheeks and

neck, and the astonishing thing about it all was that he never got stung. On the contrary, the bees

seemed to enjoy being with him. They never tried to fly away, and to get rid of them he would have

to brush them off gently with his fingers. Even then they would frequently return and settle again on

his arm or hand or knee, any place where the skin was bare.

 As he grew older, Albert Taylor’s fascination with bees developed into an obsession, and by the time he was 12 he has built his first hive. The following summer he had captured his first swarm. Two years later, at the age of 14, he had no less than 5 hives standing neatly in a row against the fence in his father’s small backyard.

 He never had to use smoke when there was work to do inside the hive and he never wore gloves on

his hands or a net over his head. Clearly there was some strange sympathy between this boy and the

bees, and down in the village, in the shops and pubs, they began to speak about him with a certain

kind of respect, and people started coming up to the house to buy honey.

 When he was 18, he had rented one acre of rough pasture and there he had set out to establish his

own business. Now, eleven years later, he was still in the same spot, but he had six acres (2,4

hectares) of ground instead of one, two hundred and forty well-stocked hives, and a small house

he’d built mainly with his own hands. He had married at the age of 20 and that, apart from the fact

that it had taken them over nine years to get a child, had also been a success. In fact, everything had

gone pretty well for Albert until this strange little baby girl came along and started frightening them

out of their wits by refusing to eat properly and losing weight every day.

 He looked up from the magazine and began thinking about his daughter.

 This evening, for instance, when she had opened her eyes at the beginning of the feed, he had gazed into them and seen something that frightened him to death – a kind of misty vacant stare, as though the eyes themselves were not connected to the brain at all but were just lying loose in their sockets like a couple of small grey marbles.

 Did those doctors really know what they were talking about?

 One could always take her along to another hospital, somewhere in Oxford perhaps. He might

suggest that to Mabel when he went upstairs.

 He could still hear her moving around in the bedroom, but she must have taken off her shoes now

and put on slippers because the noise was very faint. He switched his attention back to the magazine

and went on with his reading. He finished the article called ‘Experiences in the Control of Nosema’,

then turned over the page and began reading the next one. ‘The Latest on Royal Jelly’. He doubted

very much whether there would be anything in this that he didn’t know already:

 *‘What is this wonderful substance called royal jelly?’*

 *Royal jelly is a glandular secretion produced by the nurse bees to feed the larvae immediately after*

*they have hatched from the egg. The pharyngeal glands of bees produce this substance in much the*

*same way as the mammary glands of vertebrates produce milk. The fact is of great biological interest*

*because no other insects in the world are known to have evolved such a process.*

 All old stuff, he told himself, but for want of anything better to do, he continued to read.

 *Royal jelly is fed in concentrated form to all bee larvae for the first three days after hatching from*

*the egg; but beyond that point, for all those who are destined to become drones or workers, this*

*precious food is greatly diluted with honey and pollen. On the other hand, the larvae which are*

*destined to become queens are fed throughout the whole of their larvae period on a concentrated*

*diet of pure royal jelly. Hence the name.*

 Above him, up in the bedroom, the noise of footsteps had stopped altogether. The house was quiet.

 *... Royal jelly must be a substance of tremendous nourishing power, for on this diet alone, the honeybee larva increases in weight 1500 times in five days...This is as if a seven-and-a-half pound baby (3,5 kg) should increase in that time to five tons...*

 Albert Taylor stopped and read that sequence again. He read it a third time.

 *This is as if a seven-and-a-half pound baby (3,5 kg)...*

 ‘Mabel!’ he cried, jumping up from his chair. ‘Mabel! Come here!’

 He went out into the hall and stood at the foot of the stairs calling for her to come down.

 There was no answer.

 He ran up the stairs and switched on the light on the landing. The bedroom door was closed. He

crossed the landing and opened it and stood in the doorway looking into the dark room. ‘Mabel,’ he

said. ’Come downstairs a moment, will you please? I’ve just had a bit of an idea. It’s about the baby.’

 The light from the landing behind him cast a faint glow over the bed and he could see her dimly now, lying on her stomach with her face buried in the pillow and her arms up over her head. She was

crying again.

 ‘Mabel,’ he said, going over to her, touching her shoulder. ‘Please come down a moment. This may

be important.’

 ‘Go away,’ she said. ‘Leave me alone.’

 ‘Don’t you want to hear about my idea?’

 ‘Oh, Albert, I’m tired,’ she sobbed. ‘I’m so tired I don’t know what I’m doing any more. I don’t think I can go on. I don’t think I can stand it.’

 There was a pause, Albert Taylor turned away from her and walked slowly over to the cradle where

the baby was lying, and peered in.

 ‘What time is the next feed?’ he asked.

 ‘Two o´clock, I suppose.’

 ‘And the one after that?’

 ‘Six in the morning.’

 ‘I’ll do them both,’ he said. ‘You go to sleep.’

 She didn’t answer.

 ‘You get properly into bed, Mabel, and go straight to sleep, you understand? And stop worrying. I’m

taking over completely for the next 12 hours. You’ll give yourself a nervous breakdown going on like this.’

 ‘Yes,’ She said.’ I know.’

 I’m taking the nipper and myself and the alarm clock into the spare room this very moment, so you

just lie down and relax and forget all about us. Right?’ Already he was pushing the cradle out

through the door.

 ‘Oh, Albert,’ she sobbed.

 ‘Don’t worry about a thing. Leave it to me.’

 ‘Albert...’

 ‘Yes?’

 ‘I love you Albert.’

 ‘I love you too, Mabel. Now go to sleep.’

 Albert Taylor didn’t see his wife again until nearly 11 o’clock the next morning.

**END OF PART ONE**

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