**Royal Jelly** (1960)

*Roald Dahl*

**Part Two**

‘Good gracious me!’ she cried, rushing down the stairs in dressing-gown and slippers. ‘Albert! Just

look at the time! I must have slept twelve hours at least! Is everything all right? What happened?’

He was sitting quietly in his armchair, smoking a pipe and reading the morning paper. The baby was

in a sort of carry-cot on the floor at his feet, sleeping.

‘Hullo, dear,’ he said smiling.

She ran over to the cot and looked in. ‘Did she take anything, Albert? How many times have you fed

her? She was due for another one at 10 o’clock, did you know that?’

Albert Taylor folded the newspaper neatly into a square and put it away on the side table. ‘I fed her

at two in the morning,’ he said, ‘and she took about half an ounce, no more. I fed her again at six and she did a bit better that time, two ounces....’

‘Two ounces! Oh, Albert, that’s marvellous!’

‘And we just finished the last feed ten minutes ago. There’s the bottle on the mantelpiece. Only one ounce left. She drank three. How’s that? He was grinning proudly, delighted with his achievement.

The woman quickly got down on her knees and peered at the baby.

‘Doesn’t she look better?’ he asked eagerly. ‘Doesn’t she look fatter in the face?’

‘It may sound silly,’ the wife said,’ but actually I think she does. Oh, Albert, you’re a marvel! How did you do it?’

´She’s turning the corner,’ he said. ‘That’s all it is. Just like the doctor prophesied, she’s turning the

corner.’

‘I pray to God you’re right, Albert.’

‘Of course I’m right. From now on, you watch her go.’

The woman was gazing lovingly at the baby.

‘You look a lot better yourself too, Mabel.’

‘I feel wonderful. I’m sorry about last night.’

‘Let’s keep it this way,’ he said. ‘I’ll do all the night feeds in future. You do the day ones.’

She looked up at him across the cot, frowning. ‘N0,’ she said. ‘Oh no, I wouldn’t allow you to do

that.’

‘I don’t want you to have a breakdown, Mabel.’

‘I won’t, not now, I’ve had some sleep.’

‘Much better we share it.’

‘No, Albert. This is my job and I intend to do it. Last night won’t happen again.’

‘All right,’ he said. ‘In that case I’ll just relieve you of the donkey work; I’ll do all the sterilizing and

mixing of the food and getting everything ready. That’ll help you a bit, anyway. I’ve been thinking

that up until last night I’ve never even raised a finger to help you with this baby.’

‘That isn’t true.’

‘Oh yes it is. So I’ve decided that from now on I’m going to do my share of the work. I’m going to be

the feed-mixer and the bottle-steriliser. Right?’

‘It’s very sweet of you, dear, but I really don’t think it’s necessary...’

‘Come on!’ he cried. ‘Don’t change the luck! I’ve done it the last three times and just look what happened! When’s the next one? Two o’clock, isn’t it?’

‘Yes.’

‘It’s all mixed,’ he said. ’Everything’s all mixed and ready and all you’ve got to do when the time

comes is to go out three to the larder and take it off the shelf and warm it up. That’s some help, isn’t

it?’

The woman got up off her knees and went over to him and kissed him on the cheek. ‘You’re such a

nice man,’ she said. ‘I love you more and more every day I know you.’

Later, in the middle of the afternoon, when Albert was outside in the sunshine working among the

hives, he heard her calling to him from the house.

‘Albert!’ she shouted. ‘Albert, come here!’

He started forward to meet her, wondering what was wrong.

‘Oh, Albert! Guess what!’

‘What?’

‘I’ve just finished giving her the two-o’clock feed and she’s taken the whole lot!’

‘No!’

‘Every drop of it! Oh, Albert, I’m so happy! She’s going to be all right! She’s turned the corner just

like you said!’ She came up to him and threw her arms round his neck and hugged him, and he

clapped her on the back and laughed and said what a marvellous little mother she was.

Naturally, there was a certain amount of suspense in the air as the time approached for the 6 o’clock feed. By five thirty both parents were already seated in the living-room waiting for the moment to arrive. The bottle with the milk formula in it was standing in a saucepan of warm water on the mantelpiece. The baby was asleep in its carry-cot on the sofa.

At twenty minutes to six it woke up and started screaming its head off.

‘There you are!’ Mrs. Taylor cried. ‘She’s asking for the bottle. Pick her up quick, Albert, and hand

her to me here. Give me the bottle first.’

He gave her the bottle, then placed the baby on the woman’s lap. Cautiously, she touched the baby’s lips with the end of the nipple. The baby seized the nipple between its gums and began to suck ravenously with a rapid powerful action.

‘Oh, Albert, isn’t it wonderful?’

‘It’s terrific, Mabel.’

In seven or eight minutes, the entire contents of the bottle had disappeared down the baby’s throat.

‘You clever girl,’ Mrs. Taylor said- ‘Four ounces again.’

Albert Taylor was leaning forward in his chair, peering intently into the baby’s face. ‘You know

what?’ he said. ‘She even seems as though she’s put on a touch of weight already. What do you

think?’

The mother looked down at the child.

‘Doesn’t she seem bigger and fatter to you, Mabel, than she was yesterday?’

‘Maybe she does, Albert. I’m not sure. Although actually there couldn’t be any real gain in such a

short time as this. The important thing is that she’s eating normally.’

‘She’s turned the corner,’ Albert said. ‘I don’t think you need to worry about her anymore.’

‘I certainly won’t.’

‘You want me to go up and fetch the cradle back into our bedroom. Mabel?’

‘Yes, please,’ she said.

Albert went upstairs and moved the cradle. The woman followed with the baby, and after changing

its nappy, she laid it gently down on its bed. Then she covered it with sheet and blanket.

‘Doesn’t she look lovely, Albert?’ she whispered. ‘Isn’t that the most beautiful baby you’ve ever seen in your entire life?’

After they had finished eating, the parents settled themselves in armchairs in the living-room, Albert with his magazine and his pipe, Mrs. Taylor with her knitting.

‘Albert,’ she said after a while.

‘Yes, dear?’

‘What was it you were going to tell me last night when you came rushing up to the bedroom? You

said you had an idea for the baby.’

Albert Taylor lowered the magazine on to his lap and gave her a long sly look.

‘Did I?’ he said.

‘Yes.’ She waited for him to go on, but he didn’t. ‘What’s the big joke?’ she asked. ‘ Why are you

grinning like that?’

‘It’s a joke all right,’ he said.

‘Tell it to me, dear.’

‘I’m not sure I ought to,’ he said. ‘You might call me a liar.’

She had seldom seen him looking so pleased with himself as he was now, and she smiled back at

him, egging him on.

‘I’d just like to see your face when you hear it, Mabel, that’s all.’

‘Albert, what is all this?’

He paused, refusing to be hurried.

‘You do think the baby is better, don’t you?’ he asked.

‘Of course I do.’

‘You agree with me that all of a sudden she’s feeding marvellously and looking one hundred percent different?’

‘I do, Albert, yes.’

‘That’s good,’ he said, the grin widening. ‘You see, it’s me that did it.’

‘Did what?’

‘I cured the baby.’

‘Yes, dear, I’m sure you did.’ Mrs. Taylor went right on with her knitting.

‘You don’t believe me, do you?’

‘Of course I believe you, Albert. I give you all the credit, every bit of it.’

‘Then how did I do it?’

‘Well, she said, pausing a moment to think. ‘I suppose it’s simply that you’re a brilliant feed-mixer.

Ever since you started mixing the feeds she’s got better and better.’

‘You mean there’s some sort of an art in mixing the feeds?’

‘Apparently there is.’

‘I’ll tell you a secret,’ he said. ‘You’re absolutely right. Although, mind you, it isn’t so much how you

mix it that counts. It’s what you put in. You realize that, don’t you, Mabel?’

Mrs. Taylor stopped knitting and looked up sharply at her husband.

‘Albert,’ she said, ‘don’t tell me you’ve been putting things into that child’s milk?’

He sat there grinning.

‘Well, have you or haven’t you?’

‘It’s possible,’ he said.

‘I don’t believe you.’

He had a strange fierce way of grinning that showed his teeth.

‘Albert,’ she said. ‘Stop playing with me like this.’

‘Yes, dear, all right.’

‘You haven’t really put anything into her milk, have you? Answer me properly, Albert. This could be

serious with such a tiny baby.’

‘The answer is yes, Mabel.’

‘Albert Taylor! How could you?’

‘Now don’t get excited,’ he said. ‘I’ll tell you all about it if you really want me to, but for heaven’s

sake keep your hair on.’

‘It was beer!’ she cried. ‘I just know it was beer!’

‘Don’t be so daft, Mabel, please.’

‘Then what was it?’

Albert laid his pipe down carefully on the table beside him and leaned back in his chair. ‘Tell me,’ he

said, ‘did you ever by any chance happen to hear me mentioning something called royal jelly?’

‘I did not.’

‘It’s magic,’ he said. ‘Pure magic. And last night I suddenly got the idea that if I was to put some of

this into the baby’s milk...’

‘How dare you!’

‘Now Mabel, you don’t even know what it is yet.’

‘I don’t care what it is,’ she said. ‘You can’t go putting foreign bodies like that into a tiny baby’s milk. You must be mad.’

‘It’s perfectly harmless, Mabel, otherwise I wouldn’t have done it. It comes from bees.’

‘I might have guessed that.’

‘And it’s so precious that practically no one can afford to take it. When they do, it’s only one little

drop at a time.’

‘And how much did you give to our baby, might I ask?’

‘Ah,’ he said. ’That’s the whole point. That’s where the difference lies. I reckon that our baby, just in

the last four feeds, has already swallowed about 50 times as much royal jelly as anyone else in the

world has ever swallowed before. How about that?’

‘Albert, stop pulling my leg.’

‘I swear it,’ he said proudly.

She sat there staring at him, her brow wrinkled, her mouth slightly open.

‘You know what this stuff actually costs, Mabel, if you want to buy it? There’s a place in America

advertising it for sale this very moment for something like five hundred dollars a pound jar! Five

hundred dollars! That’s more than gold, you know!’

She hadn’t the faintest idea what he was talking about.

‘I’ll prove it,’ he said, and jumped up and went across to the large bookcase where he kept all his

literature about bees. He took down the last issue of the American Bee Journal and turned to a page

of small classified advertisements at the back.

‘Here you are,’ he said. ‘Exactly as I told you, “We sell royal jelly - $ 480 per lb jar wholesale.”’

He handed her the magazine so she could read it herself.

‘Now do you believe me? This is an actual shop in New York, Mabel. It says so.’

‘It doesn’t say you can go stirring it into the milk of a practically newborn baby,’ she said. ‘I don’t

know what’s come over you, Albert, I really don’t.’

‘It’s curing her, isn’t it?’

‘I’m not sure about that, now.’

‘Don’t be damn silly, Mabel. You know it is.’

‘Then why haven’t other people done it with their babies?’

‘I keep telling you,’ he said. ‘It’s too expensive. Practically nobody in the world can afford to buy

royal jelly just for eating except maybe one or two multimillionaires. The people who buy it are the

big companies that make women’s face creams and things like that. They’re using it as a stunt. They

mix a tiny pinch of it into a big jar of face cream and it’s selling like hot cakes for absolutely

enormous prices. They claim it takes out the wrinkles.’

‘And does it?’

‘Now how on earth would I know that, Mabel? Anyway,’ he said, returning to his chair, ‘that’s not

the point. The point is this. It’s done so much good to our little baby just in the last few hours that I

think we ought to go right on giving it to her. Now don’t interrupt, Mabel. Let me finish. I’ve got 240

hives out there and if I turn over maybe a hundred of them to making royal jelly, we ought to be able

to supply her with all she wants.’

‘Albert Taylor,’ the woman said, stretching her eyes wide and staring at him. Have you gone out of

your mind?’

‘Just hear me through, will you please?’

‘I forbid it,’ she said, ‘absolutely. You’re not to give my baby another drop of that horrid jelly, you

understand?’

‘Now, Mabel... Do me a favour, will you?’ he said. ‘Let me explain some of the marvellous things this stuff does.’

‘You haven’t even told me what it is yet.’

‘All right, Mabel. I’ll do that too. Will you listen? Will you give me a chance to explain it?’

She sighed and picked up her knitting once more. ‘I suppose you might as well get it off your chest,

Albert. Go on and tell me.’

He paused, a bit uncertain now how to begin. It wasn’t going to be easy to explain something like

this to a person with no detailed knowledge of apiculture at all.

‘You know, don’t you,’ he said, ‘that each colony has only one queen?’

‘Yes.’

‘And that this queen lays all the eggs?’

‘Yes, dear. That much I know.’

‘All right. Now the queen can actually lay two different kinds of eggs. She can lay eggs that produce

drones, and she can lay eggs that produce workers. Now if that isn’t a miracle, Mabel, I don’t know

what is.’

‘Yes, Albert, all right.’

‘The drones are the males. We don’t have to worry about them. The workers are the females. So is

the queen, of course.’

‘Now what happens is this. The queen crawls around on the comb and lays her eggs in what we call

cells. She lays one egg to each cell, and in three days each of these eggs hatches out into a tiny grub.

We call it larva. Now, as soon as this larva appears, the nurse bees – they’re young workers – all

crowd round and start feeding it like mad. And you know what they feed it on?’

‘’Royal jelly,’ Mabel answered patiently.

‘Right!’ he cried. ‘That’s exactly what they do feed it on. They get this stuff out of a gland in their

heads and they start pumping it into the cell to feed the larva. And what happens then? You want to

know what happens then?’ he asked, wetting his lips.

‘I can hardly wait.’

‘”Royal jelly,”’ he read aloud, ‘”must be a substance of tremendous nourishing power, for on this

diet alone, the honey-bee larva increases in weight 1500 times in five days!”’

‘How much?’

‘Fifteen hundred times, Mabel. And you know what that means if you put it in terms of a human

being? It means, ‘ he said, lowering his voice, leaning forward, fixing her with those small pale eyes,

‘it means that in five days a baby weighing seven and a half pounds to start off with would increase

in weight to five tons!’

For the second time, Mrs. Taylor stopped knitting.

‘Now you mustn’t take that too literally, Mabel.’

‘Who says I mustn’t?’

‘It’s just a scientific way of putting it, that’s all.’

‘Very well, Albert. Go on.’

‘But that’s only half the story,’ he said. ‘There’s more to come. The really amazing thing about royal

jelly, I haven’t told you yet. I’m going to show you now how it can transform a plain dull looking little

worker bee with practically no sex organs at all into a great big beautiful fertile queen.’

‘Are you saying our baby is dull-looking and plain?’ she asked sharply.

‘Did you know that the queen bee and the worker bee, although they are completely different when they grow up, are both hatched out of exactly the same kind of egg?’

‘I don’t believe that,’ she said.

‘It’s as true as I’m sitting here, Mabel, honest it is. Any time the bees want a queen to hatch out of

the egg instead of a worker, they can do it.’

‘How?’

‘Ah,’ he said, shaking a thick forefinger in her direction. ‘That’s just what I’m coming to. That’s the

secret of the whole thing. Now – what do you think it is, Mabel that makes this miracle happen?’

‘Royal jelly,’ she answered. You already told me.’

‘Royal jelly it is!’ he cried, clapping his hands and bouncing up on his seat. His big round face was

glowing with excitement now, and two vivid patches of scarlet had appeared high up on each cheek.

‘Here’s how it works. I’ll put it very simple for you. The bees want a new queen. So they build an

extra-large cell, a queen cell we call it, and they get the old queen to lay one of her eggs in there. The other one thousand nine hundred and ninety-nine eggs she lays in ordinary worker cells. Now. As soon as these eggs hatch into larvae, the nurse bees rally round and start pumping in the royal jelly. All of them get it, workers as well as queen. But here is the vital thing, Mabel, so listen carefully. Here’s where the difference comes. The worker larvae only receive this special marvellous food for the first three days of their larval life. After the third day they’re put straight away on to more or less routine bees’ food – a mixture of honey and pollen – and then about two weeks later they emerge from the cells as workers. But not so the larva in the queen cell! This one gets royal jelly all the way through its larval life. The nurse bees simply pour it into the cell, so much so in fact that the little larva is literally floating in it. And that’s what makes it into a queen!’

‘You can’t prove it,’ she said.

‘Don’t talk so damn silly, Mabel, please. Thousands of people have proved it time and time again,

famous scientists in every country in the world. All you have to do is take a larva out of a worker cell

and put it in a queen cell (...) and just so long as the nurse bees keep it well supplied with royal jelly,

then presto! – it’ll grow up into a queen! And what makes it more marvellous still is the absolutely

enormous difference between a queen and a worker when they grow up. The abdomen is a different

shape. The sting is different. The legs are different. The.... (...)

‘It’s pretty hard to believe,’ she said, ‘that a food can do all that.’

‘Of course it’s hard to believe. It’s another of the miracles of the hive.’

He stood beside the bookcase with the magazine in his hand, smiling a funny little furtive smile of

triumph, and his wife watched him, bewildered.

He was not a tall man; he had a thick plump pulpy-looking body that was built close to the ground on abbreviated legs. The legs were slightly bowed. The head was huge and round, covered with bristly short-cut hair, and the greater part of the face – now that he had given up shaving altogether – was hidden by a brownish yellow fuzz about an inch (2,5 cm) long. In one way and another, he was rather grotesque to look at; there was no denying in that.

Looking at him now as he buzzed around in front of the bookcase with his bristly head and his hairy

face and his plump pulpy body, she couldn’t help thinking that somehow, in some curious way, there

was a touch of the bee about this man. Up until now it had never occurred to her that her husband

might look like a bee. It shocked her a bit.

‘You know something? She said, staring at him but smiling a little all the same.’ You’re getting to look just a teeny bit like a bee yourself, did you know that?’

He turned and looked at her.

‘I suppose it’s the beard mostly,’ she said. ‘I do wish you’d stop wearing it. Even the colour is sort of

bee-ish, don’t you think?’

‘What the hell are you talking about, Mabel?’

‘Albert,’ she said. ‘Your language.’

‘Do you want to hear any more of this or don’t you?’

‘Yes, dear, I’m sorry. I was only joking. Do go on.’

He turned away again and pulled another magazine out of the bookcase and began leafing through

the pages. ‘Now just listen of this, Mabel.’

‘”Still and Burdett found that a male rat which hitherto had been unable to breed, upon receiving a

minute daily dose of royal jelly, became a father many times over”’.

‘Albert,’ she cried, ‘this stuff is much too strong to give to a baby! I don’t like it at all.’

‘Nonsense, Mabel.’

‘Listen!’ Mrs. Taylor said, interrupting him. ‘I think the baby’s crying.’

Albert glanced up from his reading. Sure enough, a lusty yelling noise was coming from the bedroom above.

‘She must be hungry,’ he said.

END OF PART TWO