

opening extract from

nurse matilda

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published by bloomsbury children's books

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To Tora –
and to our Hilde, with love

Published in Great Britain in 2005 by Bloomsbury Publishing Plc
38 Soho Square, London, W1D 3HB

First published in 1964 by The Brockhampton Press Ltd

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A CIP catalogue record of this book is available from the British Library

ISBN 0 7475 7675 0

Printed and bound in Italy by Artegrafica S. p. A. Verona

1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

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Chapter 1



ONCE upon a time there was a huge family of children; and they were terribly, terribly naughty.

In those days, mothers and fathers used to have much larger families than they do now; and these large families often *were* naughty. The mothers and fathers had to have all sorts of nurses and nannies and governesses (who were often French or German) to look after all their naughty children: and usually one poor, skinny little nursery-maid to wait on all the nurses and governesses and nannies . . .

This family I'm telling you about seemed to have more children, and naughtier children, than any other. There were so many of them that I shan't even tell you their names but leave you to sort them out as you go along, and add up how

many there were. But even their parents had to think of them in groups – there were the Big Ones and the Middling Ones and the Little Ones and the Littlest Ones; and the Baby. The baby was really a splendid character. It had fat, bent legs and its nappy was always falling down round its fat, pink knees; but it kept up with the children to the last ounce of its strength. It talked a curious language all of its own.

There was also the Tiny Baby, but it was so small that it *couldn't* be naughty, so it was very dull and we needn't count it.

The children had two dogs, who were dachshunds. One was a goldeny brown and he was called Brown Sugar or Barley Sugar or sometimes even Demerara Sugar, but anyway, Sugar for short. The other was tiny and black and as sleek as a little seal and she was called Spice.

And the naughtiness of these children was almost past believing. Not a week passed by but the fat nanny or one of the two starchy nurses or the French governess or the skinny little nursery-maid gave notice and had to be replaced by a new fat nanny or starchy nurse or foreign governess or skinny little nursery-maid. Till a day

came when they all gave notice together, rising up in a body and marching into the drawing-room and saying with one voice, 'Mr and Mrs Brown' – for that was the name of the children's father and mother – 'your children are so naughty that we can't stand it one minute longer and we're all going away.'

Mrs Brown was very sweet and she never could believe that her children were really naughty. She opened her eyes very wide and said, 'Oh, dear, what have they been doing now?'

So they all began:

'Miss Tora has cut off one of Miss Susie's plaits –'

'– and Master David has made a beard out of it, and glued it on to Miss Charlotte.'

'Master Simon 'ave dress up ze dachshoooond in my best Parees 'at, and take eem for ze promenade.'

'Miss Helen has poured syrup into all the Wellington boots –'

'Miss Stephanie has grated up soap to look like cheese, and now poor Cook's dinner does nothing but foam –'

'– and all the other children are doing simply dreadful things too . . .'

'What *you* need,' they added, speaking in



unison, 'is Nurse Matilda.' And they all turned and marched out of the drawing-room and up to their rooms and collected their luggage and got into two cabs and departed.

I'm afraid the children didn't mind a bit. While this had been going on in the drawing-room, they had been busy changing over the contents of the suitcases: and all they could think of was big fat Nanny tomorrow, trying to struggle into the skinny little nursery-maid's dresses; and what the two starchy nurses would look like in Mademoiselle's Paris hats.

'Oh, dear,' sighed Mr and Mrs Brown, 'we shall have to get a new staff of governesses and nurses and nannies.' So they ordered the carriage and drove round to the Agency. The Agency was doubtful, because they had already sent rather a lot of nurses and nannies and governesses to Mr and Mrs Brown's family. 'The person *you* want,' they said, 'is Nurse Matilda.'

'I'm afraid we don't know any Nurse Matilda,' said Mr and Mrs Brown. So the Agency rather reluctantly agreed to send a new nursery staff to the Brown family.

So on Monday a cab drew up at the gate and

out of it poured a new fat nanny and a new governess and two new starchy nurses; and a skinny little nursery-maid, as usual, to wait on them all. Mr and Mrs Brown left the drawing-room and hurried to the front door, all welcoming smiles. But what was their amazement to see nothing but one skinny leg of the nursery-maid disappearing, as she was hauled into the cab – and five horror-stricken faces gazing backwards and upwards as the whole party drove off down the road as fast as it could go. Mr and Mrs Brown rushed out into the drive and looked up, themselves.

At every window of the house (except the drawing-room) stood a group of children, their hair on end, their faces twisted into horrible grimaces, their arms dreadfully waving as they mopped and mowed and lolloped about, obviously in the last stages of the worst kind of lunacy.

'My children!' gasped Mrs Brown. 'My poor, dear, darling children! The dogs have gone mad and bitten them and now they've all gone mad too!'

'Rabies!' cried Mr Brown.

'Hydrophobia!' cried Mrs Brown.

'Raving!' cried Mr Brown.

'Foaming at the mouth!' cried Mrs Brown.

'Only they aren't,' said Mr Brown, calming down a bit and looking up at the children, whose faces were certainly quite innocent of foam; and he looked at the dogs which had rushed out gaily into the garden to speed the departing cab, and added: 'And *they* aren't.' And he grew very thoughtful.

But Mrs Brown was already flying upstairs. She was very sweet, but she was really rather foolish about her poor, dear, darling children. Of course her poor, dear, darling children hadn't been bitten by mad dogs at all, and of course they weren't mad either.

So Mr and Mrs Brown ordered the carriage and drove round to the Agency again.

The Agency was quite cross. 'You simply must get Nurse Matilda,' they said.

'But we don't *know* any Nurse Matilda,' said Mr and Mrs Brown.

'Well – for the very last time,' said the Agency.

'Oh, thank you,' said Mr and Mrs Brown, and they drove hopefully home. At least Mrs Brown



was hopeful. I'm not so sure about Mr Brown.

As it happened, Mr and Mrs Brown had to go out on the following day, so they said to the butler, who was a large, sad, dignified man called Hoppitt, much given to having Feelings in his Bones, 'Hoppitt, if the new nursery staff arrive in the meantime, please give them a nice welcome and take them upstairs to the schoolroom to meet the children.'

'Yes, Sir, yes, Madam,' said Hoppitt, but he thought to himself, Do you call *that* a nice welcome? He had a Feeling in his Bones at this very moment; and it was that Mr and Mrs Brown had been foolish to tell their children how anxious they had been, about their being bitten

by mad dogs, and going mad too.

But Mr and Mrs Brown had never thought of that and they drove off, quite untroubled, and on their way back they said to one another, gladly, 'We're earlier than we hoped. Perhaps we'll be in time to meet the new staff, after all.'

Well, they were – in a way. The new staff had just burst out of the front door as Mr and Mrs Brown's carriage drew up to the gate and were streeling down the drive in terrified confusion, led by the governess – she was German, this time – bellowing, '*Hilfe! Hilfe! Die Hunde sind verruckt!*' with a fat nanny waddling frantically in her wake, gasping out, 'Oh, my poor 'eart!' and the two starchy nurses shoving along behind her, hooting, 'Out of our way! Out of our way!' The skinny little nursery-maid dodged between them all, like a boy on a bicycle nipping through the traffic, screeching in a dreadful monotony, 'Ow! Ow! Ow!'

And as they all hurled and tumbled towards the gate, there appeared behind them, to the horror of Mr and Mrs Brown, two small creatures, one brown, one black, their faces covered with a lather of shaving-soap, laced through with tomato