

CHAPTER FOUR



‘D’you suppose he’ll be all right?’ said Ma anxiously.

It was dawn, and they were about to retire for the day. The children were already asleep in a thick bed of fallen leaves.

‘I should hope so,’ said Pa. “‘Hodgeheg” indeed! His brains are scrambled.’

Max slept the clock round and halfway round

again; he did not stir till the evening of the following day. The shock had sent him into a kind of short, early hibernation.

When at last he woke, his sisters rushed to nuzzle at his nose (the safest nuzzling place for hedgehogs) with squeaks of concern, and his parents left their snail-hunting and came trotting up.

‘How are you feeling, dear?’ said Ma.

Max considered this. His headache was almost gone, and he was thinking straight, but his speech, he found, would still not behave properly.

‘I’m a bet bitter, thanks,’ he said.

‘You had a nasty knock,’ said Pa.

‘You need rest,’ said Ma. ‘Why not get back into bed? We will bring you some nice slugs.’



‘I don’t want to bed into get,’ said Max. ‘I feel quite wake awide. In fact, I feel like walking for a go.’

Pa took a moment to work this one out. Then he said firmly, ‘You’re not going anywhere, son, d’you hear me? You stay home in the garden for a while. Get your strength back, understand?’

‘Yes, Pa,’ said Max. ‘I’ll say what you do.’ And he did do what Pa had said, for a week or more.

Peony, Pansy and Petunia fussed over their brother. They brought him the fattest, slimiest slugs they could find, and encouraged him to play their favourite game, Hide-and-Seek. However, this didn’t work. When they hid, Max forgot to go and look for them; and when it was his turn, he forgot to go and hide, so busy was he thinking about the business of road-crossing. The girls would count to thirty with their eyes shut, but when they opened them, Max would still be sitting there thinking. Striped bits were no good – he didn’t intend trying that again – but maybe, he thought, there were other methods.

His determination to find out was increased when Pa came back early one morning from a visit

to the Park, with more bad news. Max overheard him telling Ma.

‘Another one gone,’ Pa said.

‘Not a relation?’ said Ma fearfully.

‘No,’ said Pa. ‘Chap from Number 9A just up the road, I didn’t know him well, you understand, but he always seemed a decent sort of hog. He was crossing just in front of me, not ten minutes ago. Misjudged it. Motorbike got him. Leaves a wife and six kids.’

That evening Max waited until he was sure that Pa was out of the way, in the garden of Number 5B. The people in 5A always put out bread and milk for Max’s family, but the people in 5B often provided something much better for their hedgehogs – tinned dog food.



Every evening, Pa crept through the dividing hedge to see if he could nick a saucerful of Munchimeat before his neighbour woke from the day’s sleep.

‘Ma,’ said Max, ‘I’m walking for a go.’

Ma was quick at translating by now.

‘Did Pa say you could go?’ she said.

‘No,’ said Max, ‘but he couldn’t say I didn’t,’ and before Ma could do anything he trotted off along the garden path.

‘Oh, Max!’ called Ma. ‘Are you sure you’ll be all right?’

‘Yes, of course,’ said Max. ‘I’ll be quite KO.’

Once outside the garden gate he turned left and

set off up the road, in the opposite direction to his previous effort. By now he was used to the noise and the brightness, and confident that he was safe from traffic as long as he did not step down into the road. When a human passed, he stood still. The creatures did not notice you, he found, if you did not move.



He trotted on, past the garden of Number 9A with its widow and six kids, until the row of houses ended and a high factory wall began, so high that he would not have been able to read the notice on it beside the factory entrance: Max Speed 5 mph it said.

Max kept going (a good deal more slowly than this), and then suddenly, once again, he saw not far

ahead what he was seeking. Again, there were people crossing the street!

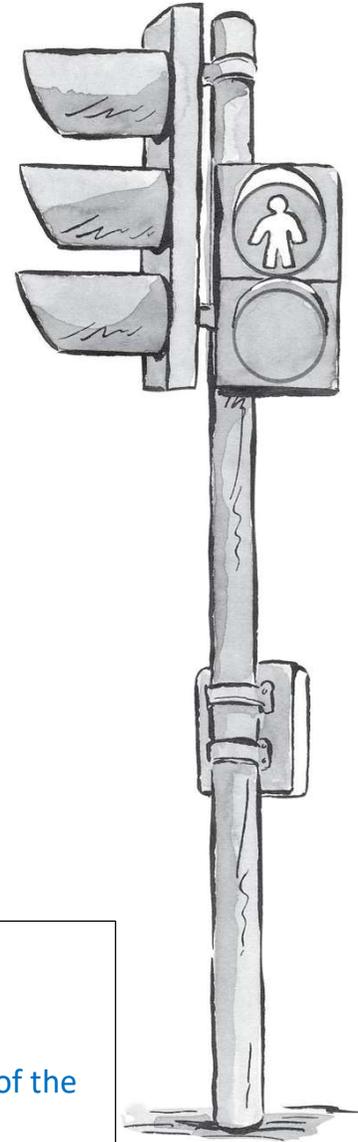
This time they did not go in ones and twos at random, but waited all together and then, at some signal he supposed, crossed at the same time. Max drew nearer, until he could hear at intervals a high, rapid peep-peep-peeping noise, at the sound of which the traffic stopped and the people walked over in safety.

Creeping closer still, tight up against the wall, he finally reached the crossing-place, and now he could see this new magic method. The bunch of humans stood and watched, just above their heads, a picture of a little red man standing quite still. The people stood quite still. Then suddenly the little red man disappeared and underneath him there was a picture of a little green man, walking, swinging his arms. The people walked, swinging their arms, while the high, rapid peep-peep-peeping noise warned the traffic not to move.



Max sat and watched for quite a long time, fascinated by the red man and the green man. He rather wished they could have been a red hedgehog and a green hedgehog, but that was not really important, as long as hedgehogs could cross here safely. That was all he had to prove, and the sooner the better.

He edged forward, until he was just behind the waiting humans, and watched tensely for the little green man to walk.



Task—please answer the following questions.

1. Why is Ma anxious?
2. 'Max slept the clock round and halfway round again; he did not stir till the evening of the following day.' How long did Max sleep for?
3. How did Max's sisters try to help him feel better?
4. What is a good food to put out for hedgehogs?
5. Why did Max wait 'tensely' for the green man?