

The Platinum-Blond Man

There was no doubt in Matilda's mind that this latest display of foulness by her father deserved severe punishment, and as she sat eating her awful fried fish and fried chips and ignoring the television, her brain went to work on various possibilities. By the time she went up to bed her mind was made up.

The next morning she got up early and went into the bathroom and locked the door. As we already know, Mrs Wormwood's hair was dyed a brilliant platinum blonde, very much the same glistening silvery colour as a female tightrope-walker's tights in a circus. The big dyeing job was done twice a year at the hair-dresser's, but every month or so in between, Mrs Wormwood used to freshen it up by giving it a rinse in the washbasin with something called PLATINUM BLONDE HAIR-DYE EXTRA STRONG. This also served to dye the nasty brown hairs that kept growing from the roots underneath. The bottle of PLATINUM BLONDE HAIR-DYE EXTRA STRONG was kept in the cupboard in the bathroom, and underneath the title on the label were written the words *Caution, this is peroxide. Keep away from children.* Matilda had read it many times with fascination.

Matilda's father had a fine crop of black hair which he parted in the middle and of which he was exceedingly proud. 'Good strong hair,' he was fond of

saying, 'means there's a good strong brain underneath.'

'Like Shakespeare,' Matilda had once said to him.

'Like who?'

'Shakespeare, Daddy.'

'Was he brainy?'

'Very, Daddy.'

'He had masses of hair, did he?'

'He was bald, Daddy.'

'To which the father had snapped, 'If you can't talk sense then shut up.'





Anyway, Mr Wormwood kept his hair looking bright and strong, or so he thought, by rubbing into it every morning large quantities of a lotion called OIL OF VIOLETS HAIR TONIC. A bottle of this smelly purple mixture always stood on the shelf above the sink in the bathroom alongside all the toothbrushes, and a very vigorous scalp massage with OIL OF VIOLETS took place daily after shaving was completed. This hair and scalp massage was always accompanied by loud

masculine grunts and heavy breathing and gasps of 'Ahhh, that's better! That's the stuff! Rub it right into the roots!' which could be clearly heard by Matilda in her bedroom across the corridor.

Now, in the early morning privacy of the bathroom, Matilda unscrewed the cap of her father's OIL OF VIOLETS and tipped three-quarters of the contents down the drain. Then she filled the bottle up with her mother's PLATINUM BLONDE HAIR-DYE EXTRA STRONG. She carefully left enough of her father's original hair tonic in the bottle so that when she gave it a good shake the whole thing still looked reasonably purple. She then replaced the bottle on the shelf above the sink, taking care to put her mother's bottle back in the cupboard. So far so good.

At breakfast time Matilda sat quietly at the dining-room table eating her cornflakes. Her brother sat opposite her with his back to the door devouring hunks of bread smothered with a mixture of peanut-butter and strawberry jam. The mother was just out of sight around the corner in the kitchen making Mr Wormwood's breakfast which always had to be two fried eggs on fried bread with three pork sausages and three strips of bacon and some fried tomatoes.

At this point Mr Wormwood came noisily into the room. He was incapable of entering any room quietly, especially at breakfast time. He always had to make his appearance felt immediately by creating a lot of noise and clatter. One could almost hear him saying, 'It's me! Here I come, the great man himself, the master of the

house, the wage-earner, the one who makes it possible for all the rest of you to live so well! Notice me and pay your respects!’

On this occasion he strode in and slapped his son on the back and shouted, ‘Well, my boy, your father feels he’s in for another great money-making day today at the garage! I’ve got a few little beauties I’m going to flog to the idiots this morning. Where’s my breakfast?’

‘It’s coming, treasure,’ Mrs Wormwood called from the kitchen.

Matilda kept her face bent low over her cornflakes. She didn’t dare look up. In the first place she wasn’t at all sure what she was going to see. And secondly, if she did see what she thought she was going to see, she wouldn’t trust herself to keep a straight face. The son was looking directly ahead out of the window stuffing himself with bread and peanut-butter and strawberry jam.

The father was just moving round to sit at the head of the table when the mother came sweeping out from the kitchen carrying a huge plate piled high with eggs and sausages and bacon and tomatoes. She looked up. She caught sight of her husband. She stopped dead. Then she let out a scream that seemed to lift her right up into the air and she dropped the plate with a crash and a splash on to the floor. Everyone jumped, including Mr Wormwood.

‘What the heck’s the matter with you, woman?’ he shouted. ‘Look at the mess you’ve made on the carpet!’



‘Your *hair!*’ the mother was shrieking, pointing a quivering finger at her husband. ‘Look at your *hair!* What’ve you done to your *hair?*’

‘What’s wrong with my hair, for heaven’s sake?’ he said.

‘Oh my gawd, Dad, what’ve you done to your hair?’ the son shouted.

A splendid noisy scene was building up nicely in the breakfast room.

Matilda said nothing. She simply sat there admiring the wonderful effect of her own handiwork. Mr Wormwood's fine crop of black hair was now a dirty silver, the colour this time of a tightrope-walker's tights that had not been washed for the entire circus season.

'You've . . . you've . . . you've *dyled* it!' shrieked the mother. 'Why did you do it, you fool! It looks absolutely frightful! It looks horrendous! You look like a freak!'

'What the blazes are you all talking about?' the father yelled, putting both hands to his hair. 'I most certainly have not dyed it! What d'you mean I've dyed it? What's happened to it? Or is this some sort of a stupid joke?' His face was turning pale green, the colour of sour apples.

'You *must* have dyed it, Dad,' the son said. 'It's the same colour as Mum's only much dirtier-looking.'

'Of course he's dyed it!' the mother cried. 'It can't change colour all by itself! What on earth were you trying to do, make yourself look handsome or something? You look like someone's grandmother gone wrong!'

'Get me a mirror!' the father yelled. 'Don't just stand there shrieking at me! Get me a mirror!'

The mother's handbag lay on a chair at the other end of the table. She opened the bag and got out a powder compact that had a small round mirror on the inside of the lid. She opened the compact and handed it to her husband. He grabbed it and held it before his face and in doing so spilled most of the powder all over the front of his fancy tweed jacket.



‘Be *careful!*’ shrieked the mother. ‘Now look what you’ve done! That’s my best Elizabeth Arden face powder!’

‘Oh my gawd!’ yelled the father, staring into the little mirror. ‘What’s happened to me! I look terrible! I look just like *you* gone wrong! I can’t go down to the garage and sell cars like this! How did it happen?’ He stared round the room, first at the mother, then at the son, then at Matilda. ‘How *could* it have happened?’ he yelled.

‘I imagine, Daddy,’ Matilda said quietly, ‘that you weren’t looking very hard and you simply took Mummy’s bottle of hair stuff off the shelf instead of your own.’

‘*Of course* that’s what happened!’ the mother cried. ‘Well really, Harry, how stupid can you get? Why didn’t you read the label before you started splashing the stuff all over you! Mine’s *terribly* strong. I’m only meant to use one tablespoon of it in a whole basin of water and you’ve gone and put it all over your head neat! It’ll probably take all your hair off in the end! Is your scalp beginning to burn, dear?’

‘You mean I’m going to lose all my hair?’ the husband yelled.

‘I think you will,’ the mother said. ‘Peroxide is a very powerful chemical. It’s what they put down the lavatory to disinfect the pan, only they give it another name.’

‘What are you saying!’ the husband cried. ‘I’m not a lavatory pan! I don’t want to be disinfected!’

‘Even diluted like I use it,’ the mother told him, ‘it makes a good deal of *my* hair fall out, so goodness knows what’s going to happen to you. I’m surprised it didn’t take the whole of the top of your head off!’

‘What shall I do?’ wailed the father. ‘Tell me quick what to do before it starts falling out!’

Matilda said, ‘I’d give it a good wash, Dad, if I were you, with soap and water. But you’ll have to hurry.’

‘Will that change the colour back?’ the father asked anxiously.

‘Of course it won’t, you twit,’ the mother said.

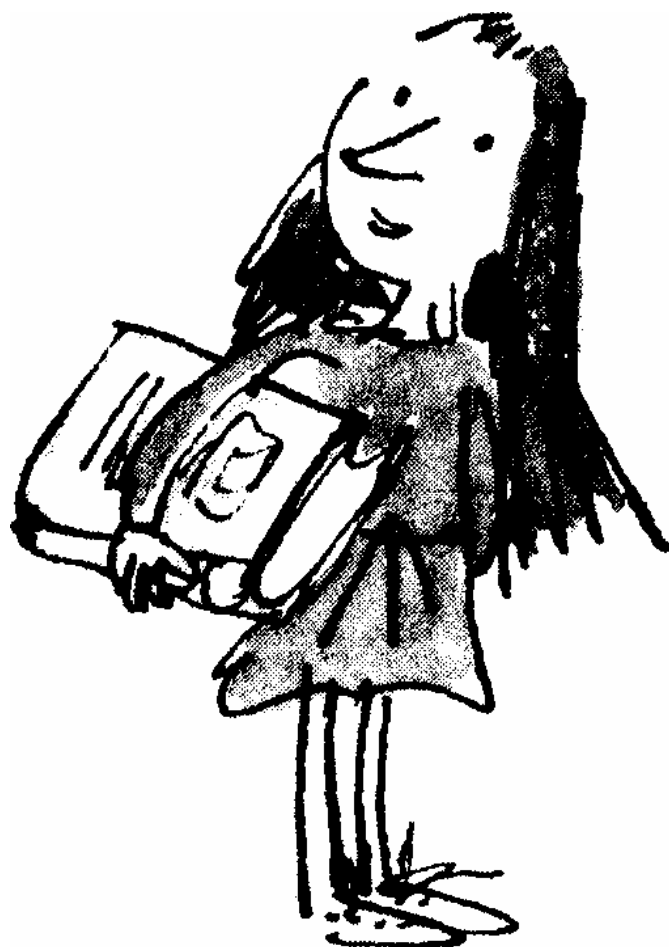
‘Then what do I do? I can’t go around looking like this for ever?’

‘You’ll have to have it dyed black,’ the mother said. ‘But wash it first or there won’t be any there to dye.’

‘Right!’ the father shouted, springing into action. ‘Get me an appointment with your hairdresser this instant for a hair-dyeing job! Tell them it’s an emergency! They’ve got to boot someone else off their list! I’m going upstairs to wash it now!’ With that the man dashed out of the room and Mrs Wormwood, sighing deeply, went to the telephone to call the beauty parlour.

‘He does do some pretty silly things now and again, doesn’t he, Mummy?’ Matilda said.

The mother, dialling the number on the phone, said, ‘I’m afraid men are not always quite as clever as they think they are. You will learn that when you get a bit older, my girl.’



Miss Honey

Matilda was a little late in starting school. Most children begin Primary School at five or even just before, but Matilda's parents, who weren't very concerned one way or the other about their daughter's education, had forgotten to make the proper arrangements in advance. She was five and a half when she entered school for the first time.

The village school for younger children was a bleak brick building called Crunchem Hall Primary School. It had about two hundred and fifty pupils aged from five to just under twelve years old. The head teacher, the boss, the supreme commander of this establishment, was a formidable middle-aged lady whose name was Miss Trunchbull.

Naturally Matilda was put in the bottom class, where there were eighteen other small boys and girls about the same age as her. Their teacher was called Miss Honey, and she could not have been more than twenty-three or twenty-four. She had a lovely pale oval madonna face with blue eyes and her hair was light-brown. Her body was so slim and fragile one got the feeling that if she fell over she would smash into a thousand pieces, like a porcelain figure.

Miss Jennifer Honey was a mild and quiet person who never raised her voice and was seldom seen to smile, but there is no doubt she possessed that rare gift

for being adored by every small child under her care. She seemed to understand totally the bewilderment and fear that so often overwhelm young children who for the first time in their lives are herded into a classroom and told to obey orders. Some curious warmth that was almost tangible shone out of Miss Honey's face when she spoke to a confused and homesick newcomer to the class.

Miss Trunchbull, the Headmistress, was something else altogether. She was a gigantic holy terror, a fierce tyrannical monster who frightened the life out of the pupils and teachers alike. There was an aura of menace about her even at a distance, and when she came up close you could almost feel the dangerous heat radiating from her as from a red-hot rod of metal. When she marched – Miss Trunchbull never walked, she always marched like a storm-trooper with long strides and arms aswinging – when she marched along a corridor you could actually hear her snorting as she went, and if a group of children happened to be in her path, she ploughed right on through them like a tank, with small people bouncing off her to left and right. Thank goodness we don't meet many people like her in this world, although they do exist and all of us are likely to come across at least one of them in a lifetime. If you ever do, you should behave as you would if you met an enraged rhinoceros out in the bush – climb up the nearest tree and stay there until it has gone away. This woman, in all her eccentricities and in her appearance, is almost impossible to describe, but I shall make some



attempt to do so a little later on. Let us leave her for the moment and go back to Matilda and her first day in Miss Honey's class.

After the usual business of going through all the names of the children, Miss Honey handed out a brand-new exercise-book to each pupil.

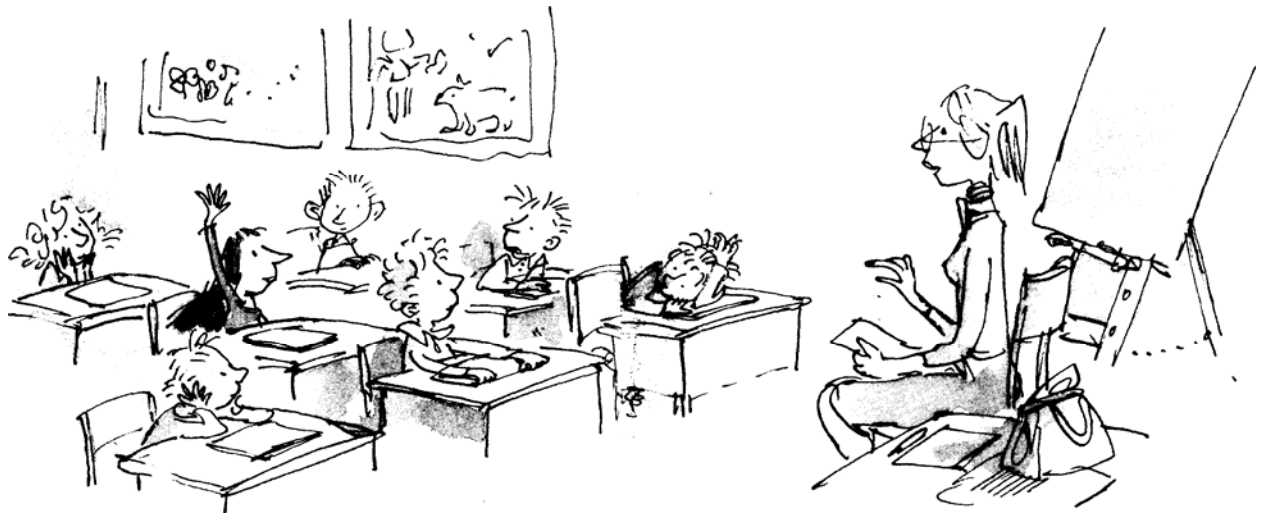
'You have all brought your own pencils, I hope,' she said.

'Yes, Miss Honey,' they chanted.

‘Good. Now this is the very first day of school for each one of you. It is the beginning of at least eleven long years of schooling that all of you are going to have to go through. And six of those years will be spent right here at Crunchem Hall, where, as you know, your Headmistress is Miss Trunchbull. Let me for your own good tell you something about Miss Trunchbull. She insists upon strict discipline throughout the school, and if you take my advice you will do your very best to behave yourselves in her presence. Never argue with her. Never answer her back. Always do as she says. If you get on the wrong side of Miss Trunchbull she can liquidize you like a carrot in a kitchen blender. It’s nothing to laugh about, Lavender. Take that grin off your face. All of you will be wise to remember that Miss Trunchbull deals very very severely with anyone who gets out of line in this school. Have you got the message?’

‘Yes, Miss Honey,’ chirruped eighteen eager little voices.

‘I myself,’ Miss Honey went on, ‘want to help you to learn as much as possible while you are in this class. That is because I know it will make things easier for you later on. For example, by the end of this week I shall expect every one of you to know the two-times table by heart. And in a year’s time I hope you will know all the multiplication tables up to twelve. It will help you enormously if you do. Now then, do any of you happen to have learnt the two-times table already?’



Matilda put up her hand. She was the only one.

Miss Honey looked carefully at the tiny girl with dark hair and a round serious face sitting in the second row. 'Wonderful,' she said. 'Please stand up and recite as much of it as you can.'

Matilda stood up and began to say the two-times table. When she got to twice twelve is twenty-four she didn't stop. She went right on with twice thirteen is twenty-six, twice fourteen is twenty-eight, twice fifteen is thirty, twice sixteen is . . .

'Stop!' Miss Honey said. She had been listening slightly spellbound to this smooth recital, and now she said, 'How far can you go?'

‘How far?’ Matilda said. ‘Well, I don’t really know, Miss Honey. For quite a long way, I think.’

Miss Honey took a few moments to let this curious statement sink in. ‘You mean,’ she said, ‘that you could tell me what two times twenty-eight is?’

‘Yes, Miss Honey.’

‘What is it?’

‘Fifty-six, Miss Honey.’

‘What about something much harder, like two times four hundred and eighty-seven? Could you tell me that?’

‘I think so, yes,’ Matilda said.

‘Are you sure?’

‘Why yes, Miss Honey, I’m fairly sure.’

‘What is it then, two times four hundred and eighty-seven?’

‘Nine hundred and seventy-four,’ Matilda said immediately. She spoke quietly and politely and without any sign of showing off.

Miss Honey gazed at Matilda with absolute amazement, but when next she spoke she kept her voice level. ‘That is really splendid,’ she said. ‘But of course multiplying by two is a lot easier than some of the bigger numbers. What about the other multiplication tables? Do you know any of those?’



‘I think so, Miss Honey. I think I do.’

‘Which ones, Matilda? How far have you got?’

‘I . . . I don’t quite know,’ Matilda said. ‘I don’t know what you mean.’

‘What I mean is do you for instance know the three-times table?’

‘Yes, Miss Honey.’

‘And the four-times?’

‘Yes, Miss Honey.’

‘Well, how many *do* you know, Matilda? Do you

know all the way up to the twelve-times table?’

‘Yes, Miss Honey.’

‘What are twelve sevens?’

‘Eighty-four,’ Matilda said.

Miss Honey paused and leaned back in her chair behind the plain table that stood in the middle of the floor in front of the class. She was considerably shaken by this exchange but took care not to show it. She had never come across a five-year-old before, or indeed a ten-year-old, who could multiply with such facility.

‘I hope the rest of you are listening to this,’ she said to the class. ‘Matilda is a very lucky girl. She has wonderful parents who have already taught her to multiply lots of numbers. Was it your mother, Matilda, who taught you?’

‘No, Miss Honey, it wasn’t.’

‘You must have a great father then. He must be a brilliant teacher.’

‘No, Miss Honey,’ Matilda said quietly. ‘My father did not teach me.’

‘You mean you taught yourself?’

‘I don’t quite know,’ Matilda said truthfully. ‘It’s just that I don’t find it very difficult to multiply one number by another.’

Miss Honey took a deep breath and let it out slowly. She looked again at the small girl with bright eyes standing beside her desk so sensible and solemn. ‘You say you don’t find it difficult to multiply one number by another,’ Miss Honey said. ‘Could you try to explain that a little bit.’

‘Oh dear,’ Matilda said. ‘I’m not really sure.’

Miss Honey waited. The class was silent, all listening.

‘For instance,’ Miss Honey said, ‘if I asked you to multiply fourteen by nineteen . . . No, that’s too difficult . . .’

‘It’s two hundred and sixty-six,’ Matilda said softly.

Miss Honey stared at her. Then she picked up a pencil and quickly worked out the sum on a piece of paper. ‘What did you say it was?’ she said, looking up.

‘Two hundred and sixty-six,’ Matilda said.

Miss Honey put down her pencil and removed her spectacles and began to polish the lenses with a piece of tissue. The class remained quiet, watching her and waiting for what was coming next. Matilda was still standing up beside her desk.

‘Now tell me, Matilda,’ Miss Honey said, still polishing, ‘try to tell me exactly what goes on inside your head when you get a multiplication like that to do. You obviously have to work it out in some way, but you seem able to arrive at the answer almost instantly. Take the one you’ve just done, fourteen multiplied by nineteen.’

‘I . . . I . . . I simply put the fourteen down in my head and multiply it by nineteen,’ Matilda said. ‘I’m afraid I don’t know how else to explain it. I’ve always said to myself that if a little pocket calculator can do it why shouldn’t I?’

‘Why not indeed?’ Miss Honey said. ‘The human brain is an amazing thing.’



‘I think it’s a lot better than a lump of metal,’ Matilda said. ‘That’s all a calculator is.’

‘How right you are,’ Miss Honey said. ‘Pocket calculators are not allowed in this school anyway.’ Miss Honey was feeling quite quivery. There was no doubt in her mind that she had met a truly extraordinary mathematical brain, and words like child-genius and prodigy went flitting through her head. She knew that these sorts of wonders do pop up in the world from time to time, but only once or twice in a hundred years. After all, Mozart was only five when he started composing for the piano and look what happened to him.

‘It’s not fair,’ Lavender said. ‘How can she do it and we can’t?’

‘Don’t worry, Lavender, you’ll soon catch up,’ Miss Honey said, lying through her teeth.

At this point Miss Honey could not resist the temptation of exploring still further the mind of this astonishing child. She knew that she ought to be paying some attention to the rest of the class but she was altogether too excited to let the matter rest.

‘Well,’ she said, pretending to address the whole class, ‘let us leave sums for the moment and see if any of you have begun to learn to spell. Hands up anyone who can spell cat.’

Three hands went up. They belonged to Lavender, a small boy called Nigel and to Matilda.

‘Spell cat, Nigel.’

Nigel spelled it.

Miss Honey now decided to ask a question that normally she would not have dreamed of asking the class on its first day. ‘I wonder,’ she said, ‘whether any of you three who know how to spell cat have learnt how to read a whole group of words when they are strung together in a sentence?’

‘I have,’ Nigel said.

‘So have I,’ Lavender said.

Miss Honey went to the blackboard and wrote with her white chalk the sentence, *I have already begun to learn how to read long sentences*. She had purposely made it difficult and she knew that there were precious few five-year-olds around who would be able to manage it.

‘Can you tell me what that says, Nigel?’ she asked.

‘That’s too hard,’ Nigel said.

‘Lavender?’

‘The first word is I,’ Lavender said.

‘Can any of you read the whole sentence?’ Miss Honey asked, waiting for the ‘yes’ that she felt certain was going to come from Matilda.

‘Yes,’ Matilda said.

‘Go ahead,’ Miss Honey said.

Matilda read the sentence without any hesitation at all.

‘That really is very good indeed,’ Miss Honey said, making the understatement of her life. ‘How much *can* you read, Matilda?’

‘I think I can read most things, Miss Honey,’ Matilda said, ‘although I’m afraid I can’t always understand the meanings.’

Miss Honey got to her feet and walked smartly out of the room, but was back in thirty seconds carrying a thick book. She opened it at random and placed it on Matilda’s desk. ‘This is a book of humorous poetry,’ she said. ‘See if you can read that one aloud.’

Smoothly, without a pause and at a nice speed, Matilda began to read:

‘An epicure dining at Crewe
Found a rather large mouse in his stew.
Cried the waiter, “Don’t shout
And wave it about
Or the rest will be wanting one too.”’

Several children saw the funny side of the rhyme



and laughed. Miss Honey said, 'Do you know what an epicure is, Matilda?'

'It is someone who is dainty with his eating,' Matilda said.

'That is correct,' Miss Honey said. 'And do you happen to know what that particular type of poetry is called?'

'It's called a limerick,' Matilda said. 'That's a lovely one. It's so funny.'

'It's a famous one,' Miss Honey said, picking up the book and returning to her table in front of the class. 'A witty limerick is very hard to write,' she added. 'They look easy but they most certainly are not.'

'I know,' Matilda said. 'I've tried quite a few times but mine are never any good.'

'You have, have you?' Miss Honey said, more startled than ever. 'Well, Matilda, I would very much like to hear one of these limericks you say you have written. Could you try to remember one for us?'

'Well,' Matilda said, hesitating, 'I've actually been

trying to make up one about you, Miss Honey, while we've been sitting here.'

'About *me*!' Miss Honey cried. 'Well, we've certainly got to hear that one, haven't we?'

'I don't think I want to say it, Miss Honey.'

'Please tell it,' Miss Honey said. 'I promise I won't mind.'

'I think you will, Miss Honey, because I have to use your first name to make things rhyme and that's why I don't want to say it.'

'How do you know my first name?' Miss Honey asked.

'I heard another teacher calling you by it just before we came in,' Matilda said. 'She called you Jenny.'

'I insist upon hearing this limerick,' Miss Honey said, smiling one of her rare smiles. 'Stand up and recite it.'

Reluctantly Matilda stood up and very slowly, very nervously, she recited her limerick:

'The thing we all ask about Jenny
Is, "Surely there cannot be many
Young girls in the place
With so lovely a face?"
The answer to that is, "*Not any!*"'

The whole of Miss Honey's pale and pleasant face blushed a brilliant scarlet. Then once again she smiled. It was a much broader one this time, a smile of pure pleasure.

‘Why, thank you, Matilda,’ she said, still smiling. ‘Although it is not true, it is really a very good limerick. Oh dear, oh dear, I must try to remember that one.’

From the third row of desks, Lavender said, ‘It’s good. I like it.’

‘It’s true as well,’ a small boy called Rupert said.

‘Of course it’s true,’ Nigel said.

Already the whole class had begun to warm towards Miss Honey, although as yet she had hardly taken any notice of any of them except Matilda.

‘Who taught you to read, Matilda?’ Miss Honey asked.

‘I just sort of taught myself, Miss Honey.’

‘And have you read any books all by yourself, any children’s books, I mean?’

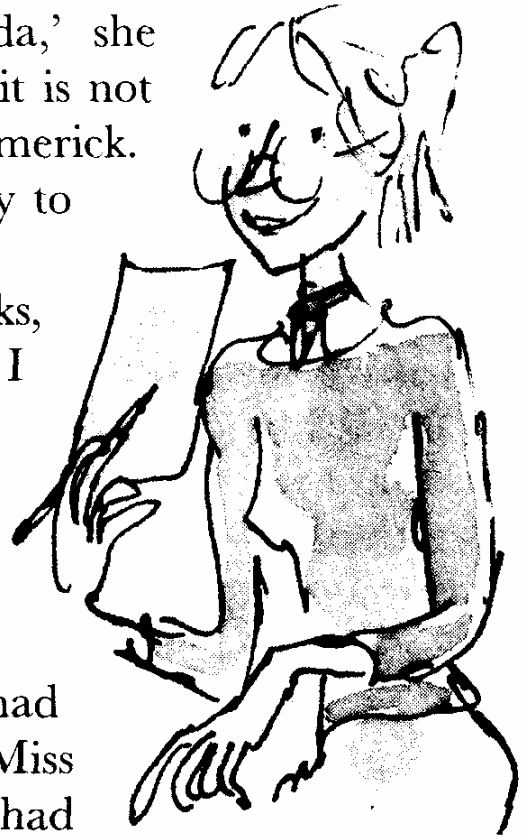
‘I’ve read all the ones that are in the public library in the High Street, Miss Honey.’

‘And did you like them?’

‘I liked some of them very much indeed,’ Matilda said, ‘but I thought others were fairly dull.’

‘Tell me one that you liked.’

‘I liked *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*,’ Matilda said. ‘I think Mr C. S. Lewis is a very good writer. But



he has one failing. There are no funny bits in his books.'

'You are right there,' Miss Honey said.

'There aren't many funny bits in Mr Tolkien either,' Matilda said.

'Do you think that all children's books ought to have funny bits in them?' Miss Honey asked.

'I do,' Matilda said. 'Children are not so serious as grown-ups and they love to laugh.'

Miss Honey was astounded by the wisdom of this tiny girl. She said, 'And what are you going to do now that you've read all the children's books?'

'I am reading other books,' Matilda said. 'I borrow them from the library. Mrs Phelps is very kind to me. She helps me to choose them.'

Miss Honey was leaning far forward over her work-table and gazing in wonder at the child. She had completely forgotten now about the rest of the class. 'What other books?' she murmured.

'I am very fond of Charles Dickens,' Matilda said. 'He makes me laugh a lot. Especially Mr Pickwick.'

At that moment the bell in the corridor sounded for the end of class.

The Trunchbull

In the interval, Miss Honey left the classroom and headed straight for the Headmistress's study. She felt wildly excited. She had just met a small girl who possessed, or so it seemed to her, quite extraordinary qualities of brilliance. There had not been time yet to find out exactly how brilliant the child was, but Miss Honey had learnt enough to realize that something had to be done about it as soon as possible. It would be ridiculous to leave a child like that stuck in the bottom form.

Normally Miss Honey was terrified of the Headmistress and kept well away from her, but at this moment she felt ready to take on anybody. She knocked on the door of the dreaded private study. 'Enter!' boomed the deep and dangerous voice of Miss Trunchbull. Miss Honey went in.

Now most head teachers are chosen because they possess a number of fine qualities. They understand children and they have the children's best interests at heart. They are sympathetic. They are fair and they are deeply interested in education. Miss Trunchbull possessed none of these qualities and how she ever got her present job was a mystery.

She was above all a most formidable female. She had once been a famous athlete, and even now the muscles were still clearly in evidence. You could see them in the bull-neck, in the big shoulders, in the thick

arms, in the sinewy wrists and in the powerful legs. Looking at her, you got the feeling that this was someone who could bend iron bars and tear telephone directories in half. Her face, I'm afraid, was neither a thing of beauty nor a joy for ever. She had an obstinate chin, a cruel mouth and small arrogant eyes. And as for her clothes . . . they were, to say the least, extremely odd. She always had on a brown cotton smock which was pinched in around the waist with a wide leather belt. The belt was fastened in front with an enormous silver buckle. The massive thighs which emerged from out of the smock were encased in a pair of extraordinary breeches, bottle-green in colour and made of coarse twill. These breeches reached to just below the knees and from there on down she sported green stockings with turn-up tops, which displayed her calf muscles to perfection. On her feet she wore flat-heeled brown brogues with leather flaps. She looked, in short, more like a rather eccentric and bloodthirsty follower of the stag-hounds than the headmistress of a nice school for children.

When Miss Honey entered the study, Miss Trunchbull was standing beside her huge desk with a look of scowling impatience on her face. 'Yes, Miss Honey,' she said. 'What is it you want? You're looking very flushed and flustered this morning. What's the matter with you? Have those little stinkers been flicking spitballs at you?'

'No, Headmistress. Nothing like that.'

'Well, what is it then? Get on with it. I'm a busy



woman.' As she spoke, she reached out and poured herself a glass of water from a jug that was always on her desk.

'There is a little girl in my class called Matilda Wormwood . . .' Miss Honey began.

'That's the daughter of the man who owns Wormwood Motors in the village,' Miss Trunchbull barked. She hardly ever spoke in a normal voice. She either barked or shouted. 'An excellent person, Wormwood,' she went on. 'I was in there only yesterday. He sold me a car. Almost new. Only done ten thousand miles. Previous owner was an old lady who took it out once a year at the most. A terrific bargain. Yes, I liked Wormwood. A real pillar of our society. He told me the daughter was a bad lot though. He said to watch her. He said if anything bad ever happened in the school, it was certain to be his daughter who did it. I haven't met the little brat yet, but she'll know about it when I do. Her father said she's a real wart.'

'Oh no, Headmistress, that can't be right!' Miss Honey cried.

'Oh yes, Miss Honey, it darn well is right! In fact, now I come to think of it, I'll bet it was she who put that stink-bomb under my desk here first thing this morning. The place stank like a sewer! Of course it was her! I shall have her for that, you see if I don't! What's she look like? Nasty little worm, I'll be bound. I have discovered, Miss Honey, during my long career as a teacher that a bad girl is a far more dangerous creature than a bad boy. What's more, they're much harder to

squash. Squashing a bad girl is like trying to squash a bluebottle. You bang down on it and the darn thing isn't there. Nasty dirty things, little girls are. Glad I never was one.'

'Oh, but you must have been a little girl once, Headmistress. Surely you were.'

'Not for long anyway,' Miss Trunchbull barked, grinning. 'I became a woman very quickly.'

She's completely off her rocker, Miss Honey told herself. She's barmy as a bedbug. Miss Honey stood resolutely before the Headmistress. For once she was not going to be browbeaten. 'I must tell you, Headmistress,' she said, 'that you are completely mistaken about Matilda putting a stink-bomb under your desk.'

'I am never mistaken, Miss Honey!'

'But Headmistress, the child only arrived in school this morning and came straight to the classroom . . .'

'Don't argue with me, for heaven's sake, woman! This little brute Matilda or whatever her name is has stink-bombed my study! There's no doubt about it! Thank you for suggesting it.'

'But I didn't suggest it, Headmistress.'

'Of course you did! Now what is it you want, Miss Honey? Why are you wasting my time?'

'I came to you to talk about Matilda, Headmistress. I have extraordinary things to report about the child. May I please tell you what happened in class just now?'

'I suppose she set fire to your skirt and scorched your knickers!' Miss Trunchbull snorted.

‘No, no!’ Miss Honey cried out. ‘Matilda is a genius.’
At the mention of this word, Miss Trunchbull’s face turned purple and her whole body seemed to swell up like a bullfrog’s. ‘A *genius!*’ she shouted. ‘What piffle is this you are talking, madam? You must be out of your mind! I have her father’s word for it that the child is a gangster!’

‘Her father is wrong, Headmistress.’

‘Don’t be a twerp, Miss Honey! You have met the little beast for only half an hour and her father has known her all her life!’

But Miss Honey was determined to have her say and she now began to describe some of the amazing things



Matilda had done with arithmetic.

‘So she’s learnt a few tables by heart, has she?’ Miss Trunchbull barked. ‘My dear woman, that doesn’t make her a genius! It makes her a parrot!’

‘But Headmistress, she can *read*.’

‘So can I,’ Miss Trunchbull snapped.



‘It is my opinion,’ Miss Honey said, ‘that Matilda should be taken out of my form and placed immediately in the top form with the eleven-year-olds.’

‘Ha!’ snorted Miss Trunchbull. ‘So you want to get rid of her, do you? So you can’t handle her? So now you want to unload her on to the wretched Miss Plimsoll in the top form where she will cause even more chaos?’

‘No, no!’ cried Miss Honey. ‘That is not my reason at all!’

‘Oh, yes it is!’ shouted Miss Trunchbull. ‘I can see right through your little plot, madam! And my answer is no! Matilda stays where she is and it is up to you to see that she behaves herself.’

‘But Headmistress, please . . .’

‘Not another word!’ shouted Miss Trunchbull. ‘And in any case, I have a rule in this school that all children remain in their own age groups regardless of ability.’

Great Scott, I'm not having a little five-year-old brigand sitting with the senior girls and boys in the top form. Whoever heard of such a thing!

Miss Honey stood there helpless before this great red-necked giant. There was a lot more she would like to have said but she knew it was useless. She said softly, 'Very well, then. It's up to you, Headmistress.'

'You're darn right it's up to me!' Miss Trunchbull bellowed. 'And don't forget, madam, that we are dealing here with a little viper who put a stink-bomb under my desk . . .'

'She did *not* do that, Headmistress!'

'Of course she did it,' Miss Trunchbull boomed. 'And I'll tell you what. I wish to heavens I was still allowed to use the birch and belt as I did in the good old days! I'd have roasted Matilda's bottom for her so she couldn't sit down for a month!'

Miss Honey turned and walked out of the study feeling depressed but by no means defeated. I am going to do something about this child, she told herself. I don't know what it will be, but I shall find a way to help her in the end.

The Parents

When Miss Honey emerged from the Headmistress's study, most of the children were outside in the playground. Her first move was to go round to the various teachers who taught the senior class and borrow from them a number of text-books, books on algebra, geometry, French, English Literature and the like. Then she sought out Matilda and called her into the classroom.

'There is no point,' she said, 'in you sitting in class doing nothing while I am teaching the rest of the form the two-times table and how to spell cat and rat and mouse. So during each lesson I shall give you one of these text-books to study. At the end of the lesson you can come up to me with your questions if you have any and I shall try to help you. How does that sound?'

'Thank you, Miss Honey,' Matilda said. 'That sounds fine.'

'I am sure,' Miss Honey said, 'that we'll be able to get you moved into a much higher form later on, but for the moment the Headmistress wishes you to stay where you are.'

'Very well, Miss Honey,' Matilda said. 'Thank you so much for getting those books for me.'

What a nice child she is, Miss Honey thought. I don't care what her father said about her, she seems very quiet and gentle to me. And not a bit stuck up in

spite of her brilliance. In fact she hardly seems aware of it.

So when the class reassembled, Matilda went to her desk and began to study a text-book on geometry which Miss Honey had given her. The teacher kept half an eye on her all the time and noticed that the child very soon became deeply absorbed in the book. She never glanced up once during the entire lesson.

Miss Honey, meanwhile, was making another decision. She was deciding that she would go herself and have a secret talk with Matilda's mother and father as soon as possible. She simply refused to let the matter rest where it was. The whole thing was ridiculous. She couldn't believe that the parents were totally unaware of their daughter's remarkable talents. After all, Mr Wormwood was a successful motor-car dealer so she presumed that he was a fairly intelligent man himself. In any event, parents never *underestimated* the abilities of their own children. Quite the reverse. Sometimes it was well nigh impossible for a teacher to convince the proud father or mother that their beloved offspring was a complete nitwit. Miss Honey felt confident that she would have no difficulty in convincing Mr and Mrs Wormwood that Matilda was something very special indeed. The trouble was going to be to stop them from getting over-enthusiastic.

And now Miss Honey's hopes began to expand even further. She started wondering whether permission might not be sought from the parents for her to give private tuition to Matilda after school. The prospect of

coaching a child as bright as this appealed enormously to her professional instinct as a teacher. And suddenly she decided that she would go and call on Mr and Mrs Wormwood that very evening. She would go fairly late, between nine and ten o'clock, when Matilda was sure to be in bed.

And that is precisely what she did. Having got the address from the school records, Miss Honey set out to walk from her own home to the Wormwoods' house shortly after nine. She found the house in a pleasant street where each smallish building was separated from its neighbours by a bit of garden. It was a modern brick house that could not have been cheap to buy and the name on the gate said COSY NOOK. Nosey cook might have been better, Miss Honey thought. She was given to playing with words in that way. She walked up the path and rang the bell, and while she stood waiting she could hear the television blaring inside.

The door was opened by a small ratty-looking man with a thin ratty moustache who was wearing a sports-coat that had an orange and red stripe in the material. 'Yes?' he said, peering out at Miss Honey. 'If you're selling raffle tickets I don't want any.'

'I'm not,' Miss Honey said. 'And please forgive me for butting in on you like this. I am Matilda's teacher at school and it is important I have a word with you and your wife.'

'Got into trouble already, has she?' Mr Wormwood said, blocking the doorway. 'Well, she's your responsibility from now on. You'll have to deal with her.'



‘She is in no trouble at all,’ Miss Honey said. ‘I have come with good news about her. Quite startling news, Mr Wormwood. Do you think I might come in for a few minutes and talk to you about Matilda?’

‘We are right in the middle of watching one of our favourite programmes,’ Mr Wormwood said. ‘This is most inconvenient. Why don’t you come back some other time.’

Miss Honey began to lose patience. ‘Mr Wormwood,’ she said, ‘if you think some rotten TV programme is more important than your daughter’s future, then you ought not to be a parent! Why don’t you switch the darn thing off and listen to me!’

That shook Mr Wormwood. He was not used to being spoken to in this way. He peered carefully at the slim frail woman who stood so resolutely out on the porch. ‘Oh very well then,’ he snapped. ‘Come on in and let’s get it over with.’ Miss Honey stepped briskly inside.

‘Mrs Wormwood isn’t going to thank you for this,’ the man said as he led her into the sitting-room, where a large platinum-blond woman was gazing rapturously at the TV screen.

‘Who is it?’ the woman said, not looking round.

‘Some school teacher,’ Mr Wormwood said. ‘She says she’s got to talk to us about Matilda.’ He crossed to the TV set and turned down the sound but left the picture on the screen.

‘Don’t do that, Harry!’ Mrs Wormwood cried out. ‘Willard is just about to propose to Angelica!’

‘You can still watch it while we’re talking,’ Mr Wormwood said. ‘This is Matilda’s teacher. She says she’s got some sort of news to give us.’

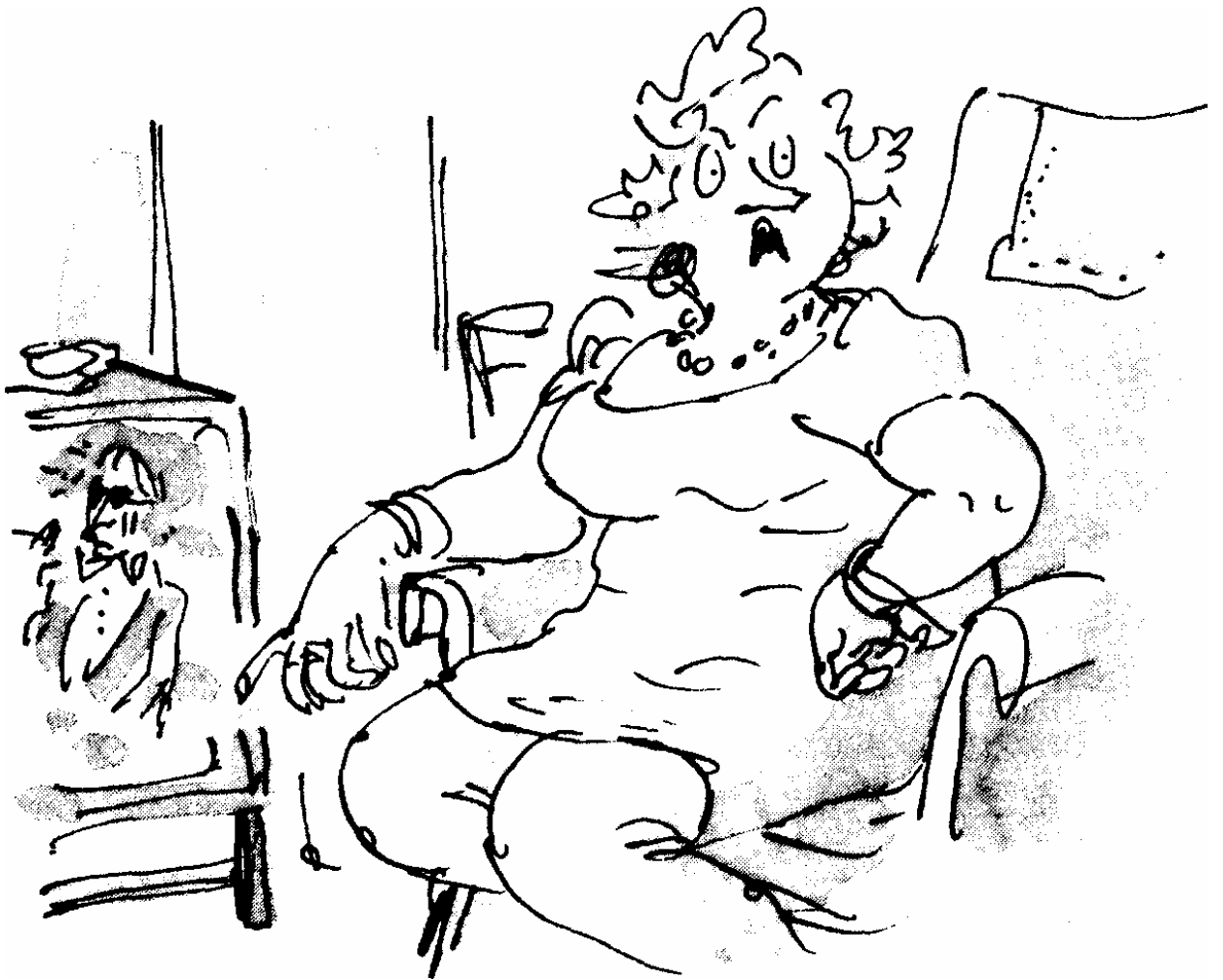
‘My name is Jennifer Honey,’ Miss Honey said.

‘How do you do, Mrs Wormwood.’

Mrs Wormwood glared at her and said, ‘What’s the trouble then?’

Nobody invited Miss Honey to sit down so she chose a chair and sat down anyway. ‘This,’ she said, ‘was your daughter’s first day at school.’

‘We know that,’ Mrs Wormwood said, ratty about missing her programme. ‘Is that all you came to tell



Miss Honey stared hard into the other woman's wet grey eyes, and she allowed the silence to hang in the air until Mrs Wormwood became uncomfortable. 'Do you wish me to explain why I came?' she said.

'Get on with it then,' Mrs Wormwood said.

'I'm sure you know,' Miss Honey said, 'that children in the bottom class at school are not expected to be able to read or spell or juggle with numbers when they first arrive. Five-year-olds cannot do that. But Matilda can do it all. And if I am to believe her . . .'

'I wouldn't,' Mrs Wormwood said. She was still ratty at losing the sound on the TV.

'Was she lying, then,' Miss Honey said, 'when she told me that nobody taught her to multiply or to read? Did either of you teach her?'

'Teach her what?' Mr Wormwood said.

'To read. To read books,' Miss Honey said. 'Perhaps you *did* teach her. Perhaps she *was* lying. Perhaps you have shelves full of books all over the house. I wouldn't know. Perhaps you are both great readers.'

'Of course we read,' Mr Wormwood said. 'Don't be so daft. I read the *Autocar* and the *Motor* from cover to cover every week.'

'This child has already read an astonishing number of books,' Miss Honey said. 'I was simply trying to find out if she came from a family that loved good literature.'

'We don't hold with book-reading,' Mr Wormwood said. 'You can't make a living from sitting on your fanny and reading story-books. We don't keep



them in the house.'

'I see,' Miss Honey said. 'Well, all I came to tell you was that Matilda has a brilliant mind. But I expect you knew that already.'

'Of course I knew she could read,' the mother said. 'She spends her life up in her room buried in some silly book.'

'But does it not intrigue you,' Miss Honey said, 'that a little five-year-old child is reading long adult novels by Dickens and Hemingway? Doesn't that make you jump up and down with excitement?'

'Not particularly,' the mother said. 'I'm not in favour of blue-stockings girls. A girl should think about making herself look attractive so she can get a good husband later on. Looks is more important than books, Miss Hunky ...'

'The name is Honey,' Miss Honey said.

'Now look at *me*,' Mrs Wormwood said. 'Then look



at *you*. You chose books. I chose looks.'

Miss Honey looked at the plain plump person with the smug suet-pudding face who was sitting across the room. 'What did you say?' she asked.

'I said you chose books and I chose looks,' Mrs Wormwood said. 'And who's finished up the better off? Me, of course. I'm sitting pretty in a nice house with a successful businessman and you're left slaving away teaching a lot of nasty little children the ABC.'

'Quite right, sugar-plum,' Mr Wormwood said, casting a look of such simpering sloppiness at his wife

it would have made a cat sick.

Miss Honey decided that if she was going to get anywhere with these people she must not lose her temper. 'I haven't told you all of it yet,' she said. 'Matilda, so far as I can gather at this early stage, is also a kind of mathematical genius. She can multiply complicated figures in her head like lightning.'

'What's the point of that when you can buy a calculator?' Mr Wormwood said.

'A girl doesn't get a man by being brainy,' Mrs Wormwood said. 'Look at that film-star for instance,' she added, pointing at the silent TV screen, where a bosomy female was being embraced by a craggy actor in the moonlight. 'You don't think she got him to do that by multiplying figures at him, do you? Not likely. And now he's going to marry her, you see if he doesn't, and she's going to live in a mansion with a butler and lots of maids.'

Miss Honey could hardly believe what she was hearing. She had heard that parents like this existed all over the place and that their children turned out to be delinquents and drop-outs, but it was still a shock to meet a pair of them in the flesh.

'Matilda's trouble,' she said, trying once again, 'is that she is so far ahead of everyone else around her that it might be worth thinking about some extra kind of private tuition. I seriously believe that she could be brought up to university standard in two or three years with the proper coaching.'

'University?' Mr Wormwood shouted, bouncing up

in his chair. 'Who wants to go to university, for heaven's sake! All they learn there is bad habits!'

'That is not true,' Miss Honey said. 'If you had a heart attack this minute and had to call a doctor, that doctor would be a university graduate. If you got sued for selling someone a rotten second-hand car, you'd have to get a lawyer and he'd be a university graduate, too. Do not despise clever people, Mr Wormwood. But I can see we're not going to agree. I'm sorry I burst in on you like this.' Miss Honey rose from her chair and walked out of the room.

Mr Wormwood followed her to the front-door and said, 'Good of you to come, Miss Hawkes, or is it Miss Harris?'

'It's neither,' Miss Honey said, 'but let it go.' And away she went.