

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 hairdresser'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 tittle 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

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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."

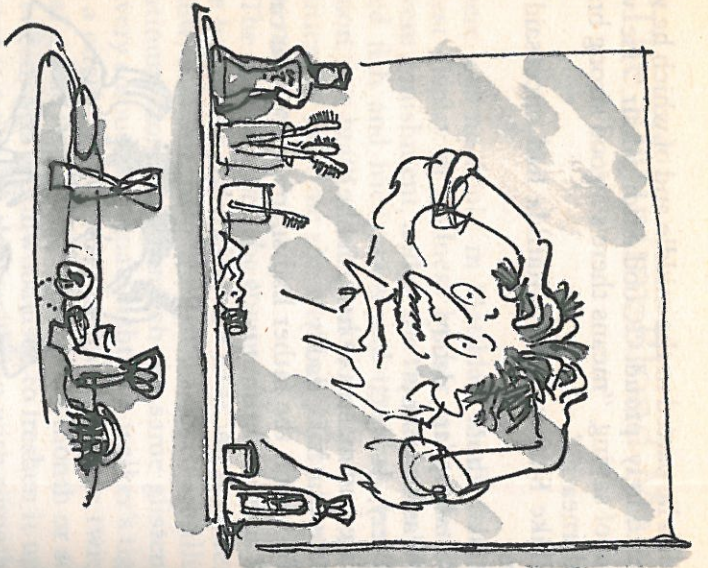
"He had masses of hair, did he?"

"He was bald, daddy."

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



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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 tooth-brushes, 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

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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

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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 corn-flakes. 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 dyed 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 hair-dresser 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."

