

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 learned enough to realise 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 damn 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 barny 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.