

"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.

Throwing the Hammer

The nice thing about Matilda was that if you had met her casually and talked to her you would have thought she was a perfectly normal five-and-a-half-year-old child. She displayed almost no outward signs of her brilliance and she never showed off. "This is a very sensible and quiet little girl," you would have said to yourself. And unless for some reason you had started a discussion with her about literature or mathematics, you would never have known the extent of her brain-power.

It was therefore easy for Matilda to make friends with other children. All those in her class liked her. They knew of course that she was "clever" because they had heard her being questioned by Miss Honey on the first day of term. And they knew also that she was allowed to sit quietly with a book during lessons and not pay attention to the teacher. But children of their age do not search deeply for reasons. They are far too wrapped up in their own small struggles to worry overmuch about what others are doing and why.

Among Matilda's new-found friends was the girl called Lavender. Right from the first day of term the two of them started wandering round together during the morning-break and in the lunch-hour. Lavender was exceptionally small for her age, a

skinny little nymph with deep-brown eyes and with dark hair that was cut in a fringe across her forehead. Matilda liked her because she was gutsy and adventurous. She liked Matilda for exactly the same reasons.

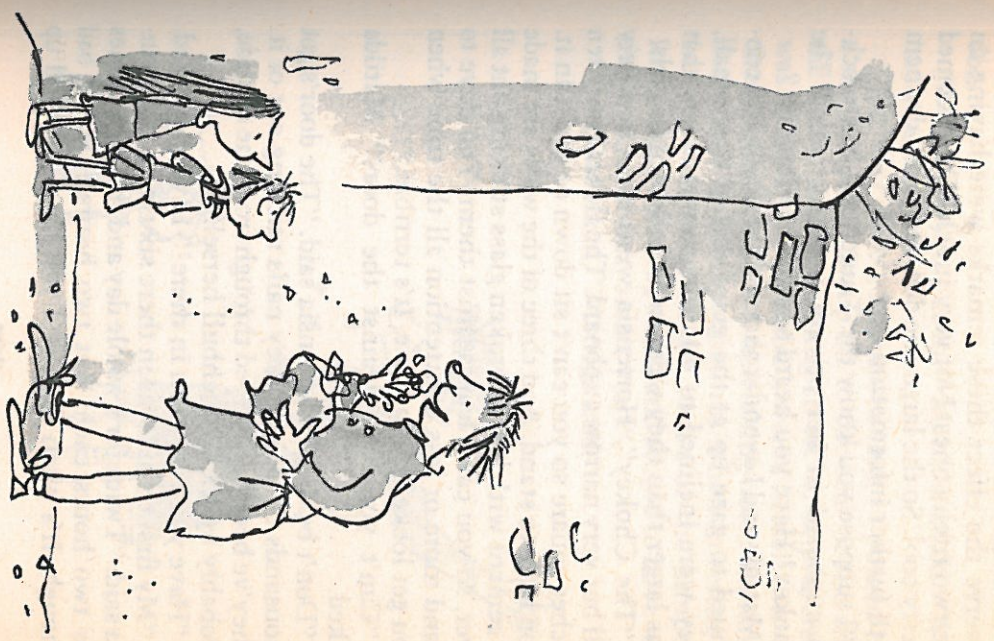
Before the first week of term was up, awesome tales about the Headmistress, Miss Trunchbull, began to filter through to the newcomers. Matilda and Lavender, standing in a corner of the playground during morning-break on the third day, were approached by a rugged ten-year-old with a boil on her nose, called Hortensia. "New scum, I suppose," Hortensia said to them, looking down from her great height. She was eating from an extra large bag of potato crisps and digging the stuff out in handfuls. "Welcome to borstal," she added, spraying bits of crisp out of her mouth like snow-flakes.

The two tiny ones, confronted by this giant, kept a watchful silence.

"Have you met the Trunchbull yet?" Hortensia asked.

"We've seen her at prayers," Lavender said, "but we haven't met her."

"You've got a treat coming to you," Hortensia said. "She hates very small children. She therefore loathes the bottom class and everyone in it. She thinks five-year-olds are grubs that haven't yet hatched out." In went another fistful of crisps and when she spoke again, out sprayed the crumbs. "If you survive your first year you may just manage to live through the rest of your time here. But many



don't survive. They get carried out on stretchers screaming. I've seen it often." Hortensia paused to observe the effect these remarks were having on the two titchy ones. Not very much. They seemed pretty cool. So the large one decided to regale them with further information.

"I suppose you know the Trunchbull has a lock-up cupboard in her private quarters called The Chokey? Have you heard about The Chokey?"

Matilda and Lavender shook their heads and continued to gaze up at the giant. Being very small, they were inclined to mistrust any creature that was larger than they were, especially senior girls.

"The Chokey", Hortensia went on, "is a very tall but very narrow cupboard. The floor is only ten inches square so you can't sit down or squat in it. You have to stand. And three of the walls are made of cement with bits of broken glass sticking out all over, so you can't lean against them. You have to stand more or less at attention all the time when you get locked up in there. It's terrible."

"Can't you lean against the door?" Matilda asked.

"Don't be daft," Hortensia said. "The door's got thousands of sharp spikey nails sticking out of it. They've been hammered through from the outside, probably by the Trunchbull herself."

"Have you ever been in there?" Lavender asked.

"My first term I was in there six times," Hortensia said. "Twice for a whole day and the other times for two hours each. But two hours is quite bad enough. It's pitch dark and you have to stand up

dead straight and if you wobble at all you get spiked either by the glass on the walls or the nails on the door.

"Why were you put in?" Matilda asked. "What had you done?"

"The first time", Hortensia said, "I poured half a tin of Golden Syrup on to the seat of the chair the Trunchbull was going to sit on at prayers. It was wonderful. When she lowered herself into the chair, there was a loud squeelching noise similar to that made by a hippopotamus when lowering its foot into the mud on the banks of the Limpopo River. But you're too small and stupid to have read the *Just So Stories*, aren't you?"

"I've read them," Matilda said.



"You're a liar," Hortensia said amiably. "You can't even read yet. But no matter. So when the Trunchbull sat down on the Golden Syrup, the squelch was beautiful. And when she jumped up again, the chair sort of stuck to the seat of those awful green breeches she wears and came up with her for a few seconds until the thick syrup slowly came unstuck. Then she clasped her hands to the seat of her breeches and both hands got covered in the muck. You should have heard her bellow."

"But how did she know it was you?" Lavender asked.

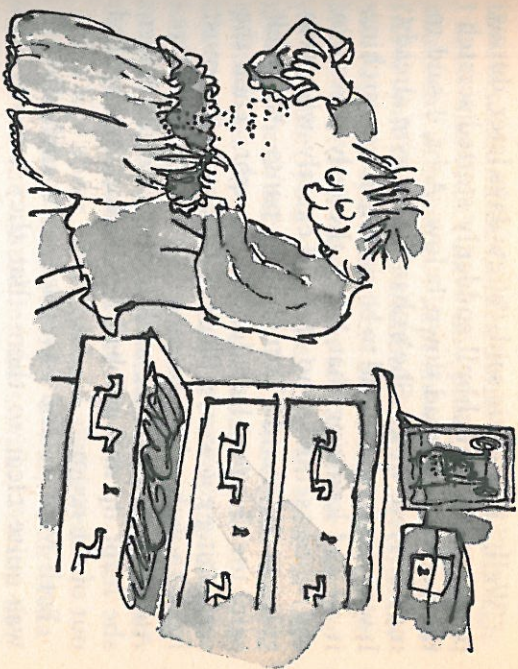
"A little squirt called Ollie Bogwhistle sneaked on me," Hortensia said. "I knocked his front teeth out."

"And the Trunchbull put you in The Chokey for a whole day?" Matilda asked, gulping.

"All day long," Hortensia said. "I was off my rocker when she let me out. I was babbling like an idiot."

"What were the other things you did to get put in The Chokey?" Lavender asked.

"Oh I can't remember them all now," Hortensia said. She spoke with the air of an old warrior who has been in so many battles that bravery has become commonplace. "It's all so long ago," she added, stuffing more crisps into her mouth. "Ah yes, I can remember one. Here's what happened. I chose a time when I knew the Trunchbull was out of the way teaching the sixth-formers, and I put up my hand and asked to go to the bogs. But instead of going *there*, I sneaked into the Trunchbull's



room. And after a speedy search I found the drawer where she kept all her gym knickers."

"Go on," Matilda said, spellbound. "What happened next?"

"I had sent away by post, you see, for this very powerful itching-powder," Hortensia said. "It cost 50p a packet and was called The Skin-Scorcher. The label said it was made from the powdered teeth of deadly snakes, and it was guaranteed to raise welts the size of walnuts on your skin. So I sprinkled this stuff inside every pair of knickers in the drawer and then folded them all up again carefully." Hortensia paused to cram more crisps into her mouth.

"Did it work?" Lavender asked.