



## Chapter 10

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## 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 snowflakes.

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 spiky 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 squelching 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 fifty pence 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.

'Well,' Hortensia said, 'a few days later, during prayers, the Trunchbull suddenly started scratching herself like mad down below. A-ha, I said to myself. Here we go. She's changed for gym already. It was



pretty wonderful to be sitting there watching it all and knowing that I was the only person in the whole school who realized exactly what was going on inside the Trunchbull's pants. And I felt safe, too. I knew I couldn't be caught. Then the scratching got worse. She couldn't stop. She must have thought she had a wasp's nest down there. And then, right in the middle of the Lord's Prayer, she leapt up and grabbed her bottom and rushed out of the room.'

Both Matilda and Lavender were enthralled. It was quite clear to them that they were at this moment standing in the presence of a master. Here was somebody who had brought the art of skulduggery to the highest point of perfection, somebody, moreover, who was willing to risk life and limb in pursuit of her calling. They gazed in wonder at this goddess, and suddenly even the boil on her nose was no longer a blemish but a badge of courage.

'But how *did* she catch you that time?' Lavender asked, breathless with wonder.

'She didn't,' Hortensia said. 'But I got a day in The Chokey just the same.'

'Why?' they both asked.

'The Trunchbull,' Hortensia said, 'has a nasty habit of guessing. When she doesn't know who the culprit is, she makes a guess at it, and the trouble is she's often right. I was the prime suspect this time because of the Golden Syrup job, and although I knew she didn't have any proof, nothing I said made any difference. I kept shouting, "How could I have done it,

Miss Trunchbull? I didn't even know you kept any spare knickers at school! I don't even know what itching-powder is! I've never heard of it!" But the lying didn't help me in spite of the great performance I put on. The Trunchbull simply grabbed me by one ear and rushed me to The Chokey at the double and threw me inside and locked the door. That was my second all-day stretch. It was absolute torture. I was spiked and cut all over when I came out.'

'It's like a war,' Matilda said, overawed.

'You're darn right it's like a war,' Hortensia cried. 'And the casualties are terrific. *We* are the crusaders, the gallant army fighting for our lives with hardly any weapons at all and the Trunchbull is the Prince of Darkness, the Foul Serpent, the Fiery Dragon with all the weapons at her command. It's a tough life. We all try to support each other.'

'You can rely on us,' Lavender said, making her height of three feet two inches stretch as tall as possible.

'No, I can't,' Hortensia said. 'You're only shrimps. But you never know. We may find a use for you one day in some undercover job.'

'Tell us just a little bit more about what she does,' Matilda said. 'Please do.'

'I mustn't frighten you before you've been here a week,' Hortensia said.

'You won't,' Lavender said. 'We may be small but we're quite tough.'

'Listen to this then,' Hortensia said. 'Only yesterday the Trunchbull caught a boy called Julius Rottwinkle



eating Liquorice Allsorts during the scripture lesson and she simply picked him up by one arm and flung him clear out of the open classroom window. Our classroom is one floor up and we saw Julius Rottwinkle go sailing out over the garden like a Frisbee and landing with a thump in the middle of the lettuces. Then the Trunchbull turned to us and said, "From now on, anybody caught eating in class goes straight out the window."

'Did this Julius Rottwinkle break any bones?' Lavender asked.

'Only a few,' Hortensia said. 'You've got to remember that the Trunchbull once threw the hammer for Britain in the Olympics so she's very proud of her right arm.'

'What's throwing the hammer?' Lavender asked.

'The hammer,' Hortensia said, 'is actually a ruddy great cannon-ball on the end of a long bit of wire, and the thrower whisks it round and round his or her head faster and faster and then lets it go. You have to be terrifically strong. The Trunchbull will throw anything around just to keep her arm in, especially children.'

'Good heavens,' Lavender said.

'I once heard her say,' Hortensia went on, 'that a large boy is about the same weight as an Olympic hammer and therefore he's very useful for practising with.'

At that point something strange happened. The playground, which up to then had been filled with shrieks and the shouting of children at play, all at once became silent as the grave. 'Watch out,' Hortensia





whispered. Matilda and Lavender glanced round and saw the gigantic figure of Miss Trunchbull advancing through the crowd of boys and girls with menacing strides. The children drew back hastily to let her through and her progress across the asphalt was like that of Moses going through the Red Sea when the waters parted. A formidable figure she was too, in her belted smock and green breeches. Below the knees her calf muscles stood out like grapefruits inside her stockings. 'Amanda Thripp!' she was shouting. 'You, Amanda Thripp, come here!'

'Hold your hats,' Hortensia whispered.

'What's going to happen?' Lavender whispered back.

'That idiot Amanda,' Hortensia said, 'has let her long hair grow even longer during the hols and her mother has plaited it into pigtails. Silly thing to do.'

'Why silly?' Matilda asked.

'If there's one thing the Trunchbull can't stand it's pigtails,' Hortensia said.

Matilda and Lavender saw the giant in green breeches advancing upon a girl of about ten who had a pair of plaited golden pigtails hanging over her shoulders. Each pigtail had a blue satin bow at the end of it and it all looked very pretty. The girl wearing the pigtails, Amanda Thripp, stood quite still, watching the advancing giant, and the expression on her face was one that you might find on the face of a person who is trapped in a small field with an enraged bull which is charging flat-out towards her. The girl was glued to the



spot, terror-struck, pop-eyed, quivering, knowing for certain that the Day of Judgement had come for her at last.



Miss Trunchbull had now reached the victim and stood towering over her. 'I want those filthy pigtailed off before you come back to school tomorrow!' she barked. 'Chop 'em off and throw 'em in the dustbin, you understand?'

Amanda, paralysed with fright, managed to stutter, 'My m-m-mummy likes them. She p-p-plaits them for me every morning.'

'Your mummy's a twit!' the Trunchbull bellowed. She pointed a finger the size of a salami at the child's head and shouted, 'You look like a rat with a tail coming out of its head!'

'My m-m-mummy thinks I look lovely, Miss T-T-Trunchbull,' Amanda stuttered, shaking like a blancmange.

'I don't give a tinker's toot what your mummy thinks!' the Trunchbull yelled, and with that she lunged forward and grabbed hold of Amanda's pigtailed in her right fist and lifted the girl clear off the ground. Then she started swinging her round and round her head, faster and faster, and Amanda was screaming blue murder and the Trunchbull was yelling, 'I'll give you pigtailed, you little rat!'

'Shades of the Olympics,' Hortensia murmured. 'She's getting up speed now just like she does with the hammer. Ten to one she's going to throw her.'

And now the Trunchbull was leaning back against the weight of the whirling girl and pivoting expertly on her toes, spinning round and round, and soon Amanda Thrripp was travelling so fast she became a blur, and

suddenly, with a mighty grunt, the Trunchbull let go of the pigtailed and Amanda went sailing like a rocket right over the wire fence of the playground and high up into the sky.





'Well thrown, sir!' someone shouted from across the playground, and Matilda, who was mesmerized by the whole crazy affair, saw Amanda Thrripp descending in a long graceful parabola on to the playing-field beyond. She landed on the grass and bounced three times and finally came to rest. Then, amazingly, she sat up. She looked a trifle dazed and who could blame her, but after a minute or so she was on her feet again and tottering back towards the playground.

The Trunchbull stood in the playground dusting off her hands. 'Not bad,' she said, 'considering I'm not in strict training. Not bad at all.' Then she strode away.

'She's mad,' Hortensia said.

'But don't the parents complain?' Matilda asked.

'Would yours?' Hortensia asked. 'I know mine wouldn't. She treats the mothers and fathers just the same as the children and they're all scared to death of her. I'll be seeing you some time, you two.' And with that she sauntered away.

