CHAPTER THREE



TEN minutes later, the rising-bell clanged and echoed through the gloomy corridors. Mildred, who was just on the verge of going back to sleep, steeled herself to get out of bed and grope around for her clothes which were festooned all over the room as usual. The summer dress was much easier to cope with than the winter uniform. Somehow, in winter she always got in a dreadful muddle with her tie.

She was just about to go and bang on Maud's door and surprise her by being ready when she remembered about Enid and set off to the next corridor to call for her.

'Enid! Are you up yet?' she called softly through the door.

'Hang on a sec!' called Enid's voice. 'I'm just feeding the monkey.'

'Monkey?' thought Mildred. 'I must have misheard.'

But she hadn't. When she pushed open the door, there sat Enid on her narrow bedstead. Perched on her shoulder was a slender grey monkey eating a banana.

'It's to go on the back of my broom,' explained Enid, as Mildred hastened inside and closed the door, in case by some mischance Miss Hardbroom should materialize outside.

'But it's a *monkey*, Enid!' exclaimed Mildred. 'You won't be allowed. It says in the rules that we can only have cats. We can't even have owls.'

'Oh, it'll be all right,' said Enid airily. 'No one'll notice when it's all hunched up on the end of my broom.'

I wouldn't be too sure,' said Mildred

darkly. 'You don't know Miss Hardbroom yet.'

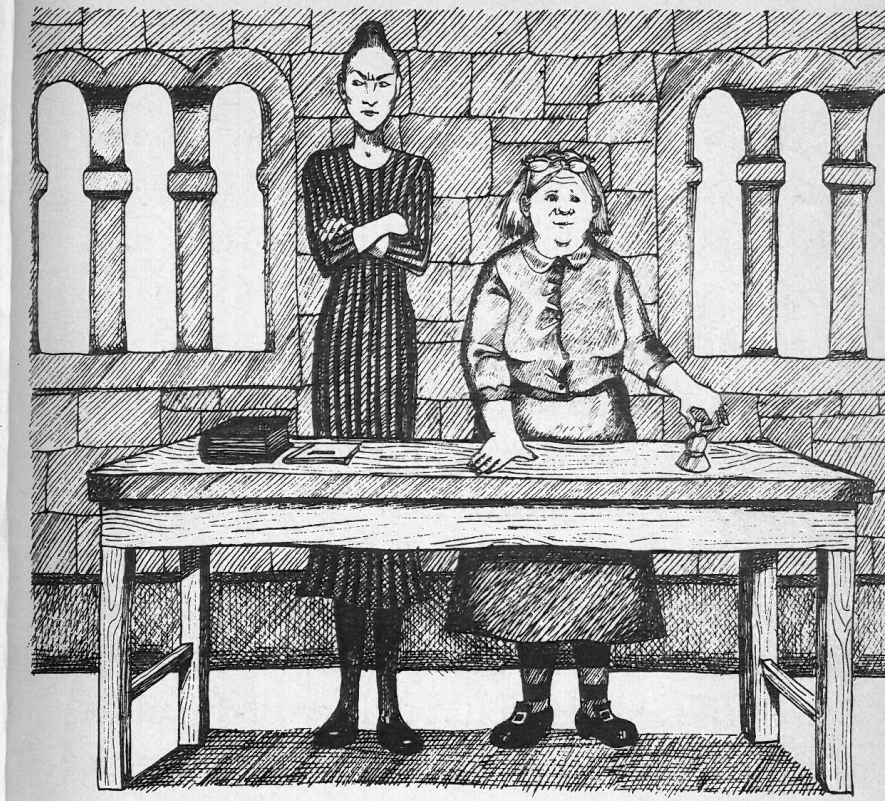
'Anyway,' continued Enid as if she hadn't heard Mildred's dire warning, 'it's much more fun than a silly old cat. It can hang upside-down by its tail and do all sorts of things.'

'Well,' said Mildred doubtfully, 'I do hope it'll be all right. Come on, we'd better go down to Assembly or we'll be late, and that would never do when I'm supposed to be looking after you!'

As the girls filed into the Great Hall, Mildred caught Maud by the arm and whispered, 'Hey, Maud! You'll never guess what Enid has got in her room.'

But Maud didn't answer and brushed past with her nose in the air.

Miss Hardbroom stood beside the headmistress, Miss Cackle, on the platform at the end of the Great Hall. Unlike Miss Hardbroom who was scowling, Miss Cackle beamed down at her flock which



stood in neat black-and-grey-checked rows in front of her. Mildred could not suppress a snigger at the strange-looking pair they made. Miss Cackle short and wearing a tight dress of grey satin which made her look very bulgy, and Miss Hardbroom tall and extremely thin, wearing a gown

with black vertical stripes which made her look even taller.

Miss Hardbroom's piercing gaze swept past like a searchlight, causing Mildred's smile to vanish instantly like the sun behind a cloud.

'Welcome back, girls,' said Miss Cackle. 'You have a term of hard work ahead of you. As well as the usual exams there will be the school Sports Day which I know you all look forward to.'

At this point Miss Hardbroom closed her eyes and a look of pain flashed across her face. Mildred also felt a twinge of dread as she remembered the disastrous broomstick display at Hallowe'en the year before.

Now Miss Cackle looked a little shy. 'And there will be my birthday celebration



when I look forward to the little songs and chants which you always prepare for me.'

A gentle groan ran round the room. Miss Cackle's birthday celebration was the most boring event of the year.

CHAPTER
FOUR



AFTER Assembly the girls marched to the music-room for their chanting lesson with Miss Bat the chanting mistress. She was tiny, thin and very old with frizzy grey hair which she wore in a plait twisted around the back of her head. Because of her habit of pressing her jaw into her chest, she had three chins and this looked very odd on top of her thin little figure. She wore circular steel glasses attached to a chain round her neck (not the dainty gold kind but more like a bicycle chain) and she

always had a conductor's baton tucked behind her ear.

She sat at the piano in a black dress with grey flowers and played a rousing march as the girls entered.

'Chanting's ever so dull,' whispered Mildred to Enid as they marched into the music-room.

'Don't you believe it,' Enid whispered back with a surprisingly wicked glint in her eye.

They all took their places, and Mildred managed to position herself with Maud on one side and Enid on the other, though Maud still looked very crochety and wouldn't return Mildred's smile.

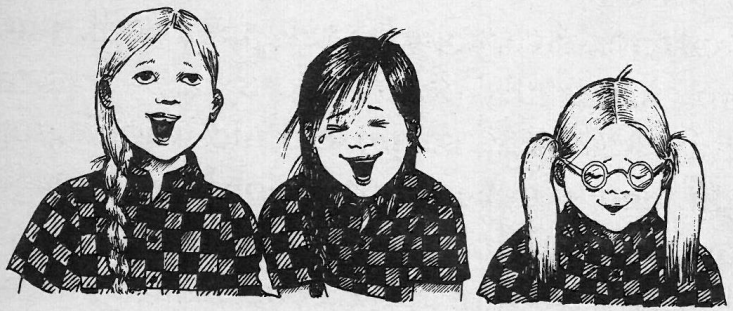
Miss Bat struck up the opening chord to a chant that they all knew very well, and the girls began.

To Mildred's surprise, Enid was singing completely out of tune – not loud enough for Miss Bat to hear, but loud enough so that Mildred couldn't concentrate on the

right note herself. Verse after verse droned on with Enid just missing the correct note and the pupils around her struggling to keep in tune.



Mildred sneaked a look at Enid, who was smiling sweetly and obviously doing it on purpose, then glanced at Maud who was trying desperately to keep a straight



face. A sudden mad burst of uncontrollable laughter welled up in Mildred. She clenched her teeth and racked her brains to think of something sad, but the sound of Enid's voice droning flatly on beside her was too much and a loud snorting noise erupted from Mildred's nose like a motor-bike starting up.

Mildred put her hands across her mouth and even tried stuffing her handkerchief into it, but it was no use, a real fit of the giggles was upon her and she just doubled up with helpless laughter and giggled till her face ached.

'Mildred Hubble!' The inevitable words rang out across the room in a tone which implied that Miss Bat would stand no more nonsense. Everyone had stopped chanting, and Mildred's peals of laughter echoed embarrassingly round the silent walls.

'Come out here at once!' ordered Miss Bat.

Mildred clumped through the rows of

pupils and stood next to the piano. She took a deep breath and managed to look serious, though her face was flaming and the sound of Enid's voice still resounded in her head.

When Miss Bat was angry there were



two things she always did. First, her head would begin nodding (which it was doing now) and, secondly, she would take the baton from behind her ear and begin conducting an invisible orchestra (which she was also doing now). Mildred could tell that she was furious.

'What, may I ask, is so hilarious that you are prepared to disrupt the entire chanting lesson for the sake of it?' inquired Miss Bat coldly. 'No one else seems to be laughing. Perhaps you would let us all in on the joke!'

Mildred stole a glance at Maud and Enid. Maud was staring intently at her feet, and Enid was gazing at the ceiling, the picture of innocence.

'It was –' began Mildred, but a splutter of laughter came out and she dissolved into a giggling wreck again.

At last the wave subsided and she was left breathless, but able to speak.

'*Now*, Mildred,' quavered Miss Bat, in a

voice like a taut violin string, 'I'm waiting for a reasonable explanation.'

'Enid was singing out of tune,' said Mildred.

'Well!' said Miss Bat. 'I hardly think that is a reason for such a display of appalling manners. Come here, Enid my dear.'

Enid came and stood next to Mildred by the piano.

'Now, my dear,' said Miss Bat kindly, 'you must not feel shy because you can't sing very well. I hope you are not too upset just because Mildred decided to make a spectacle of herself on your account. Now, let me hear you sing one or two bars of "Eye of Toad" and we shall see if we can help you along a little.'

Enid obliged in the same wavering, off-key voice as before,

'Eye of toad,
Ear of bat,

Leg of frog,
Tail of cat.
Drop them in,
Stir it up,
Pour it in a silver cup.'

This was the last straw for Mildred, who abandoned all efforts at keeping control and gave herself up to complete hysteria.

As you may imagine, it was also the last straw for Miss Bat, and Mildred found herself on her way to the headmistress's office for the first time that term.

