

Adapted from 'Horse Chestnuts' by D J Brindley

This story is set in a boys' school some years ago. The boy in the story has been collecting conkers from a horse chestnut tree.

'Every time I come into this room you're making a noise! I've had enough of it. This class is always causing trouble. No, don't start making excuses, I don't want to hear any more. It's about time you learnt to behave decently when a teacher's out of the room. You there! Pay attention! And don't smirk when I talk to you- your impudence has gone beyond a joke. Why were you out of your desk, anyway? And what's that you've got in your hand?' **6**

It was Egghead again- he always caught me doing something odd. I suddenly realised that I'd been standing in the middle of the room and shouting at the top of my voice, swinging my six foot string of horse chestnuts: all carefully pierced and threaded (after having been dipped in vinegar to harden them), ready to battle against any presumptuous rivals from 3A. It was the height of the season, and the craze for conker-fights had spread like an epidemic around the school. I had a marvellous array: large and gleaming brown, meticulously threaded on a long string of black shoelaces. **14**

But old Egghead (his real name was Egget) didn't appreciate either the effort of collecting them or the brilliance of their display. He was furious. And he'd hardly got his breath back from screaming before he'd spotted the string and was flying down the gangway, gown outspread, to seize the end. But this was one prize I wasn't going to give up. With a jerk he succeeded in wrenching the one end away from me, but I held on to the other as fiercely as a rat. **20**

'You can't take these away from me,' I cried, 'I wasn't doing anything with them.'

'How dare you be impertinent to me?' Egghead expostulated.

'Because you're impertinent to me!' I replied.

'I've had my fill of you!' he gasped, his eyes bulging and his eyebrows assuming prominence in his forehead.

'Yes, and I've had my fill of you,' I said, my confidence mounting since he had failed to act violently to my first rude retort. **27**

He started to pull, but I held on fast. He tried to yank the string out of my hand and I only gripped tighter. Thoughts flashed through my mind as my mental camera stopped on the scene. I wondered what he might do; send me to the Headmaster? Threaten me with detention? Or maybe, (I was in a slight frenzy by now) ask me to translate the fight into Latin. I was trying to remember whether the Romans had conker-fights in the arena, and if so, what was the Latin for conker, as we pulled and pulled. I began to imagine myself a Roman, and was determined at all costs that I should win. **35**

Then it happened. The string snapped. It was like the collapse of a tug-of-war team. One minute Egghead was there, the veins throbbing in his huge red face, the next he was gone, catapulting backwards over chairs and desks in a most undignified manner, the broken string waving helplessly in his hands. His foot banged down in front of the desk, then shot right under it. I've never heard such a crack as his head made on that desk. I think the mark's there now if you look carefully. But the conkers.... **42**

Six feet of them, beautiful, rounded, polished, picked in the full ripeness of Autumn, went rolling in all directions. Down the gangways, beneath the desks, under the blackboard, and out of the room through the French windows. I started to laugh. Then the whole class laughed. They rolled in the aisles until they were hysterical; they had to pick up conkers to keep sane. And when twenty voices were shrieking aloud, and twenty bodies scrabbling furiously over the floor, the Headmaster walked in. **49**

The scene was like an explosion in a marble factory. Some of the boys were lying full length, reaching out under cupboards and bookshelves; others were finding the scattered conkers and then surreptitiously losing them again to prolong the confusion. In the background I could vaguely see Egghead being helped to his feet by two over-enthusiastic assistants. They supported him beneath each arm, but his spectacles had been lost in the melee, so he only dimly perceived that a new factor had entered the room. He sensed rather than saw the presence of the Headmaster. **57**

Now I had never got on particularly well with old Egghead, but I knew that neither had the Headmaster been too pleased with his total inability to control even a good-natured class like ours. There had been an incident during the previous term when his Latin class had been taught by one of the boys, complete with cane, gown, and a mortar-board* loaned from the Dramatic Society, while he himself had been pleading to be let out of a cupboard. Though he wasn't exactly my best pal, Egghead was a least a fairly decent sort of fellow: after all, he'd played chess for Cambridge, and this impressed me; he had a rather nice wife who sometimes took us home and gave us tea with jam and cream-cakes. One couldn't let this kind of man leave the school without a twinge of conscience, despite the fact that he couldn't teach a word of Latin. (What use was the subject, anyway?) So as awareness of the impending disaster slowly dawned, I started to think very fast. For Egghead it could be a matter of life or death- his Fate was in the balance. **71**

* *mortar-board* a square-topped hat worn by teachers