

'Ow kunnit nofe skusin danger ifzat?' said Ron.

His mouth was so full Harry thought it was quite an achievement for him to make any noise at all.

'I beg your pardon?' said Nearly Headless Nick politely, while Hermione looked revolted. Ron gave an enormous swallow and said, 'How can it know if the school's in danger if it's a Hat?'

'I have no idea,' said Nearly Headless Nick. 'Of course, it lives in Dumbledore's office, so I daresay it picks things up there.'

'And it wants all the houses to be friends?' said Harry, looking over at the Slytherin table, where Draco Malfoy was holding court. 'Fat chance.'

'Well, now, you shouldn't take that attitude,' said Nick reprovingly. 'Peaceful co-operation, that's the key. We ghosts, though we belong to separate houses, maintain links of friendship. In spite of the competitiveness between Gryffindor and Slytherin, I would never dream of seeking an argument with the Bloody Baron.'

'Only because you're terrified of him,' said Ron.

Nearly Headless Nick looked highly affronted.

'Terrified? I hope I, Sir Nicholas de Mimsy-Porpington, have never been guilty of cowardice in my life! The noble blood that runs in my veins —'

'What blood?' asked Ron. 'Surely you haven't still got — ?'

'It's a figure of speech!' said Nearly Headless Nick, now so annoyed his head was trembling ominously on his partially severed neck. 'I assume I am still allowed to enjoy the use of whichever words I like, even if the pleasures of eating and drinking are denied me! But I am quite used to students poking fun at my death, I assure you!'

'Nick, he wasn't really laughing at you!' said Hermione, throwing a furious look at Ron.

Unfortunately, Ron's mouth was packed to exploding point again and all he could manage was 'Node iddum eentup sechew,' which Nick did not seem to think constituted an adequate apology. Rising into the air, he straightened his feathered hat and swept away from them to the other end of the table, coming to rest between the Creevey brothers, Colin and Dennis.

'Well done, Ron,' snapped Hermione.

'What?' said Ron indignantly, having managed, finally, to swallow his food. 'I'm not allowed to ask a simple question?'

'Oh, forget it,' said Hermione irritably, and the pair of them spent the rest of the meal in huffy silence.

Harry was too used to their bickering to bother trying to reconcile them; he felt it was a better use of his time to eat his way steadily through his steak and kidney pie, then a large plateful of his favourite treacle tart.

When all the students had finished eating and the noise level in the Hall was starting to creep upwards again, Dumbledore got to his feet once more. Talking ceased immediately as all turned to face the Headmaster. Harry was feeling pleasantly drowsy now. His four-poster bed was waiting somewhere above, wonderfully warm and soft . . .

'Well, now that we are all digesting another magnificent feast, I beg a few moments of your attention for the usual start-of-term notices,' said Dumbledore. 'First-years ought to know that the Forest in the grounds is out-of-bounds to students — and a few of our older students ought to know by now, too.' (Harry, Ron and Hermione exchanged smirks.)

'Mr Filch, the caretaker, has asked me, for what he tells me is the four-hundred-and-sixty-second time, to remind you all that magic is not permitted in corridors between classes, nor are a number of other things, all of which can be checked on the extensive list now fastened to Mr Filch's office door.'

'We have had two changes in staffing this year. We are very pleased to welcome back Professor Grubbly-Plank, who will be taking Care of Magical Creatures lessons; we are also

delighted to introduce Professor Umbridge, our new Defence Against the Dark Arts teacher.'

There was a round of polite but fairly unenthusiastic applause, during which Harry, Ron and Hermione exchanged slightly panicked looks; Dumbledore had not said for how long Grubbly-Plank would be teaching.

Dumbledore continued, 'Tryouts for the house Quidditch teams will take place on the —'

He broke off, looking enquiringly at Professor Umbridge. As she was not much taller standing than sitting, there was a moment when nobody understood why Dumbledore had stopped talking, but then Professor Umbridge cleared her throat, '*Hem, hem,*' and it became clear that she had got to her feet and was intending to make a speech.

Dumbledore only looked taken aback for a moment, then he sat down smartly and looked alertly at Professor Umbridge as though he desired nothing better than to listen to her talk. Other members of staff were not as adept at hiding their surprise. Professor Sprout's eyebrows had disappeared into her flyaway hair and Professor McGonagall's mouth was as thin as Harry had ever seen it. No new teacher had ever interrupted Dumbledore before. Many of the students were smirking; this woman obviously did not know how things were done at Hogwarts.

'Thank you, Headmaster,' Professor Umbridge simpered, 'for those kind words of welcome.'

Her voice was high-pitched, breathy and little-girlish and, again, Harry felt a powerful rush of dislike that he could not explain to himself; all he knew was that he loathed everything about her, from her stupid voice to her fluffy pink cardigan. She gave another little throat-clearing cough ('hem, hem') and continued.

'Well, it is lovely to be back at Hogwarts, I must say!' She smiled, revealing very pointed teeth. 'And to see such happy little faces looking up at me!'

Harry glanced around. None of the faces he could see looked happy. On the contrary, they all looked rather taken-aback at being addressed as though they were five years old.

'I am very much looking forward to getting to know you all and I'm sure we'll be very good friends!'

Students exchanged looks at this; some of them were barely concealing grins.

'I'll be her friend as long as I don't have to borrow that cardigan,' Parvati whispered to Lavender, and both of them lapsed into silent giggles.

Professor Umbridge cleared her throat again ('*hem, hem*'), but when she continued, some of the breathiness had vanished from her voice. She sounded much more businesslike and now her words had a dull learned-by-heart sound to them.

The Ministry of Magic has always considered the education of young witches and wizards to be of vital importance. The rare gifts with which you were born may come to nothing if not nurtured and honed by careful instruction. The ancient skills unique to the wizarding community must be passed down the generations lest we lose them for ever. The treasure trove of magical knowledge amassed by our ancestors must be guarded, replenished and polished by those who have been called to the noble profession of teaching.'

Professor Umbridge paused here and made a little bow to her fellow staff members, none of whom bowed back to her. Professor McGonagall's dark eyebrows had contracted so that she looked positively hawklike, and Harry distinctly saw her exchange a significant glance with Professor Sprout as Umbridge gave another little '*hem, hem*' and went on with her speech.

'Every headmaster and headmistress of Hogwarts has brought something new to the weighty task of governing this historic school, and that is as it should be, for without progress there will be stagnation and decay. There again, progress for progress's sake must be discouraged, for our tried and tested traditions often require no tinkering. A balance, then, between old and new, between permanence and change, between tradition and innovation . . .'

Harry found his attentiveness ebbing, as though his brain was slipping in and out of tune. The quiet that always filled the Hall when Dumbledore was speaking was breaking up as students put their heads together, whispering and giggling. Over on the Ravenclaw table Cho Chang was chatting animatedly with her friends. A few seats along from Cho, Luna Lovegood had got out *The Quibbler* again. Meanwhile, at the Hufflepuff table Ernie Macmillan was one of the few still staring at Professor Umbridge, but he was glassy-eyed and Harry was sure he was only pretending to listen in an attempt to live up to the new prefect's badge gleaming on his chest.

Professor Umbridge did not seem to notice the restlessness of her audience. Harry had the impression that a full-scale riot could have broken out under her nose and she would have ploughed on with her speech. The teachers, however, were still listening very attentively, and Hermione seemed to be drinking in every word Umbridge spoke, though, judging by her expression, they were not at all to her taste.

'... because some changes will be for the better, while others will come, in the fullness of time, to be recognised as errors of judgement. Meanwhile, some old habits will be retained, and rightly so, whereas others, outmoded and outworn, must be abandoned. Let us move forward, then, into a new era of openness, effectiveness and accountability, intent on preserving what ought to be preserved, perfecting what needs to be perfected, and pruning wherever we find practices that ought to be prohibited.'

She sat down. Dumbledore clapped. The staff followed his lead, though Harry noticed that several of them brought their hands together only once or twice before stopping. A few students joined in, but most had been taken unawares by the end of the speech, not having listened to more than a few words of it, and before they could start applauding properly, Dumbledore had stood up again.

'Thank you very much, Professor Umbridge, that was most illuminating,' he said, bowing to her. 'Now, as I was saying, Quidditch tryouts will be held...'

'Yes, it certainly was illuminating,' said Hermione in a low voice.

'You're not telling me you enjoyed it?' Ron said quietly, turning a glazed face towards Hermione. 'That was about the dullest speech I've ever heard, and I grew up with Percy.'

'I said illuminating, not enjoyable,' said Hermione. 'It explained a lot.'

'Did it?' said Harry in surprise. 'Sounded like a load of waffle to me.'

There was some important stuff hidden in the waffle,' said Hermione grimly.

'Was there?' said Ron blankly.

'How about: "progress for progress's sake must be discouraged"? How about: "pruning wherever we find practices that ought to be prohibited"?'

'Well, what does that mean?' said Ron impatiently.

'I'll tell you what it means,' said Hermione through gritted teeth. 'It means the Ministry's interfering at Hogwarts.'

There was a great clattering and banging all around them; Dumbledore had obviously just dismissed the school, because everyone was standing up ready to leave the Hall. Hermione jumped up, looking flustered.

'Ron, we're supposed to show the first-years where to go!'

'Oh yeah,' said Ron, who had obviously forgotten. 'Hey — hey, you lot! Midgets!'

'Ron!'

'Well, they are, they're titchy...'

'I know, but you can't call them midgets! — First-years!' Hermione called commandingly along the table. 'This way, please!'

A group of new students walked shyly up the gap between the Gryffindor and Hufflepuff tables, all of them trying hard not to lead the group. They did indeed seem very small; Harry was sure he had not appeared that young when he had arrived here. He grinned at them. A