



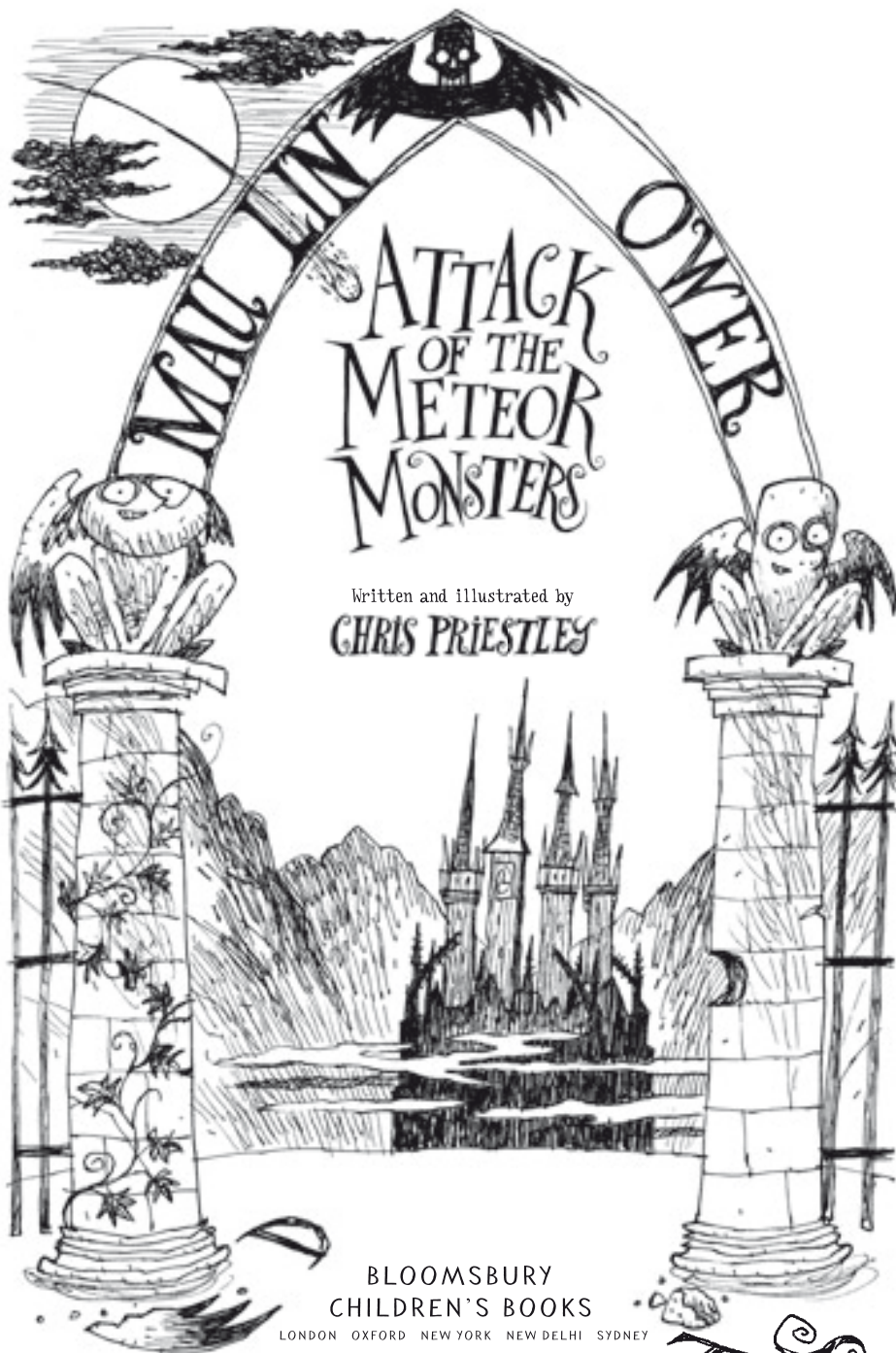
MAUDLIN TOWERS

ATTACK OF THE METEOR MONSTERS



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BLOOMSBURY



MAULIN OWER

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Mildew and Sponge were still gasping for breath at the top of Pig's Pike as the rest of the boys jogged their way back down. The sun was just beginning to rise and drizzle dribbled from the dark sky above them, polishing the blackened pinnacles of the grim and grimy Maudlin Towers.

'I had hoped our new sports master – *gasp* – might drop this twice-weekly torture, Mildew,' said Sponge with a sigh.

'I'm afraid all sports masters are evil, Sponge,' said Mildew.

'But why?' cried Sponge. 'Why?'

'No one knows why,' said Mildew with a sigh. 'They just are. It's one of those things that will never be fully explained. Like opera. Or chemistry.'



Sponge sighed again. Their new sports master, Mr Gruntforth, had proven to be every bit as horribly energetic and enthusiastic as Mr Stupendo and Mr Lithely before him. He was threatening to make the annual Fell-Running Tournament compulsory. They had thought all danger of having to compete in it had gone with the departure of Mr Stupendo.

‘Do you ever wonder how Mr Stupendo got on when the time machine took him back to the age of the dinosaurs?’ said Sponge.

‘No,’ said Mildew. ‘Not really.’

‘No,’ said Sponge. ‘Me neither.’

‘We’ve had a lot of adventures lately,’ said Mildew. ‘What with the time machine, Vikings, werewolves, pirates and so forth. I’m hoping things might

quieten down a bit. I'm growing rather nostalgic for the days when we were occasionally bored.'

'I know what you mean,' said Sponge. 'One can have too much excitement.'

Mildew nodded and then gazed off to the east, at the faint rays of the rising sun leaking out from under the blanket of cloud. He let out a groan.

'Look! It's barely light,' he said, wiping a coating of drizzle from his muzzle. 'I need my sleep, Sponge. I have a note from my mother to that effect.'

'So do I,' said Sponge with a frown.

'What?' said Mildew, seeing his friend's expression.

'What?' said Sponge, frown still very much in place.

'Is this about me supposedly snoring again?'

'Supposedly?' said Sponge. 'Ha!'

'How dare you "ha"! said Mildew. 'I have never snored in my life. The very idea! The Mildews are known throughout Berkshire for their almost complete lack of snoring. It is another of your delusions, Sponge. I worry about you, I really –'

Suddenly there was a blinding flash of light and a terrifying roar as something large and fiery hurtled out of the clouds over their heads and slammed into the summit of Pug's Peak.



Despite the distance, the impact made the ground beneath them judder and sent both boys sprawling backwards into the bracken.

When the friends got to their feet they stared in amazement, trying to come to terms with what their boyish eyes were seeing. There was a pale glow where the thing had crash-landed and an eerie, unearthly hum.

‘Why are you making that eerie, unearthly hum, Sponge?’ said Mildew.

‘I always make an eerie, unearthly hum when I have the wibbles, Mildew.’

‘Well, stop,’ said Mildew. ‘It’s most distracting.’

‘What is that, Mildew?’ said Sponge with a whimper.

‘I don’t know, Sponge. Perhaps it’s a meteor,’ said Mildew.

‘A meteor?’ said Sponge.

‘Yes,’ said Mildew. ‘There was a passing reference to them in *The Bored Boy’s Book of Moderately Diverting Things* in the library.’

‘I love that book.’

‘Me too,’ said Mildew.

‘There aren’t enough books of mildly interesting trivia.’

‘I concur,’ said Mildew. ‘Perhaps it’s time for us to fire off some more letters to the various publishing houses.’

‘Ooh – yes,’ said Sponge. ‘They might even reply this time.’

‘It’s entirely possible. ‘But –’

‘Mildew!’ cried Sponge. ‘What’s that?’

Peering across to Pug’s Peak in the dawn half-light, the boys could just make out something stirring in the glow of the fallen object and then moving stealthily away down the hillside.

‘Probably just sheep,’ said Mildew. ‘You know how sheep are.’

‘I suppose ...’ said Sponge doubtfully. ‘But they don’t look like sheep to me.’

‘Even sheep don’t always look like sheep,’ said Mildew. ‘Not all the time. It depends what angle you look at them from.’

‘You could say that about anything.’

‘Exactly my point. Anyway – we should be getting back. The others must have seen and heard



that monstrous impact and will be terribly worried about us.'

'You're right,' said Sponge.

The two boys set off down the side of Pig's Pike, casting only the occasional glance back in the direction of Pug's Peak and the crash site, which was almost silhouetted now against the gathering light of dawn.



Mildew and Sponge returned to school, hurriedly changed out of their drizzle-soaked shorts and vests and into their school uniforms before scuttling along to the refectory for breakfast, eager to reassure the others they were safe. When they arrived, however, the rest of the boys gave every impression of not being in the least concerned about them.

'It's all right!' announced Mildew. 'Do not be alarmed. Worry not. We're completely fine. I trust we haven't spoiled your breakfast.'

The boys stared at them for a moment and then,



without response, returned to their previous conversations. Soon the room was filled again with chatter and clatter. Mildew and Sponge stared at each other for a moment before Mildew tried again.

‘I said,’ repeated Mildew, more loudly this time, ‘worry not. Sponge and I are unharmed.’

‘Why on earth would we worry about you?’ said Kenningworth without even looking up.

‘Did you not see it?’ cried Mildew.



‘See what?’ said Kenningworth disinterestedly.

‘The meteor!’ said Mildew.

This did at least grab the attention of some of the boys, who turned to face him, although many of them wore expressions of doubt rather than interest.

‘Did you say meteor?’ said Furthermore.

‘What nonsense is this?’ said Kenningworth.

‘It is not any kind of nonsense,’ said Mildew, pushing out his chest. ‘We could have been killed. Tell them, Sponge.’

‘We could have been killed,’ confirmed Sponge.

‘And yet you appear to be utterly unscathed,’ said

Kenningworth, flaring his nostrils. 'No trace of scathing at all. I've never seen two people less scathed. I wonder –'

'Oh, be quiet, Kenningworth,' said Mildew.

'What makes you think it was a meteor?' said Furthermore.

'Well, it fell out of the sky in a ball of fire,' Mildew replied. 'What else could it be?'

'Cheese?' said Hipflask.

'Cheese?' said Mildew. 'Are you suggesting a huge ball of flaming cheese slammed into the top of Pug's Peak?'

'My mother says cheese can make you see all kinds of things,' said Hipflask. 'Especially French cheese.'

Kenningworth chuckled.

'I'm with Hipflask's mother,' he said. 'You're seeing things.'

'It was not French cheese and we were not seeing things,' said Mildew firmly. 'It came hurtling out of the sky and crashed into Pug's Peak. There was a burning glow where it landed.'



'And there were things moving about,' said Sponge.

Here Sponge demonstrated the aforementioned moving about by a wiggling of his fingers.

'Things moving about?' said Kenningworth, peering at the wiggling fingers.

'Although they were probably just sheep,' said Mildew, frowning at Sponge. 'Ignore the sheep.'

'They didn't look like sheep to me,' said Sponge.

Kenningworth heaved a sigh, got up and looked out of the window towards Pug's Peak.

'Well, I can't see any sign of a glow,' he said, 'or anything else for that matter.'

The others joined him and, after a while, they turned with equal scepticism towards Mildew and Sponge.

'Well, the sun has come up a bit more than before,' said Mildew. 'You can't see the glow now.'

'Pah!' exclaimed Kenningworth.



To Mildew and Sponge's dismay, the boys returned to their seats and to their chatter as though nothing had occurred and as though Mildew and Sponge were not there at all.

'I wonder how long it would have taken them to notice had we never

returned,' said Sponge forlornly.

'Never mind them,' said Mildew as they collected their bowls of lumpy porridge from Mrs Glump and sat down together at a different table.

'They don't believe us, Mildew,' said Sponge, gasping with the effort of forcing his spoon into the grey and grimly resistant porridge.



'We'll show them, Sponge,' said Mildew.

'How?'

'I don't know at the moment,' said Mildew. 'But we'll show them, mark my words. It might help matters if you didn't keep going on about sheep. It confuses things.'

'I'm not going on about sheep. I don't even think they were sheep. It's you who –'

'Do you see?' said Mildew. 'Even you're confused.'



A Kerfuffle
in the
Vestibule

With breakfast over, Mildew and Sponge and the other boys trooped unenthusiastically away to prepare for their first lessons. They had not gone far, however, when they noticed a kerfuffle in the vestibule.

‘There’s a kerfuffle in the vestibule,’ said Mildew.

‘What is the vestibule again?’ said Sponge.

‘A lobby area beside the main door to a building,’ said Mildew.

‘What?’ said Sponge.

‘The bit outside the Headmaster’s office,’ said Mildew. ‘Really, Sponge, I wish you’d –’

They stopped to stare wide-eyed and wide-mouthed in horror. Sponge tried but failed to put his mounting dread into words, his chest beating as though it was host to an octopus playing the bongos.

Mildew had to give voice to Sponge's astonishment for him.

'Girls ...'

It was true. Incredible though it seemed to all who observed it, this was indeed the case. None of the boys had ever in their entire lives seen so many girls gathered together at one time.

'How?' said Enderpenny, speaking for all of them. 'Why? What? When? Who?'

No answer was apparent to any of these important and searching questions. The world seemed simply to have gone mad. Perhaps it was the end of days. Chaos had been let loose and had the school in its wild and silly grip.

The Headmaster stood amid this herd of feminine incomers, talking to a tall and rather odd-looking woman who accompanied the girls. He turned suddenly to face the boys, making the more sensitive among them squeal.

'Ah,' he said with his usual crocodilian smile. 'Come here, come here.'

At this, the girls likewise turned towards them, chilling the blood of every boy present. Their twinkling eyes seemed to look into their very souls. Not one boy moved an inch.

'Come *here*,' said the Headmaster a little more firmly, and a little less smiley.



The boys edged forward like anxious piglets.

‘We have some guests, as you can see,’ said the Headmaster, waving his long fingers in indication. ‘I trust you will show them every Maudlin courtesy while they are among us.’

The boys looked at the floor and mumbled something that could have been anything. The Headmaster waited for more and when it did not come he gave Mildew an encouraging nudge in the ear with his elbow.

‘B-b-but ... why, sir?’ stammered Mildew in response.

‘These delightful creatures have met with an unfortunate emergency while travelling this wild and windy country and have been forced to seek sanctuary at Maudlin Towers. Here is their Headmistress, Miss ... ?’

‘M ... T ... 2 ... T.’

‘Miss MT2T?’

‘Affirmative,’ she replied, her stilted outburst punctuated with the faintest of clanks and wheezes.

The boys took a nervous step backward.

‘What an enchanting name,’ said the Headmaster. ‘Is it Welsh perhaps?’

‘Wel ... sh?’ said Miss MT2T.

There was a pause. The Headmaster’s grin wavered a little under the strain of anticipation. It

became clear that this discussion of the origin of Miss MT2T's name had run its course.

'And you had an unfortunate incident with your carriage, I gather?' said the Headmaster eventually.

'Affirmative. One ... of our horse ... machines ... malfunctioned ...' said the Headmistress.

Mildew and Sponge exchanged a puzzled glance. Even allowing for the fact that she was a teacher, Miss MT2T was very, very odd indeed. The girls seemed to grow agitated as the boys stared at her.

'Yes, sir,' said one of them at the front. 'Exploded. Bang. Just like that.'

'Your horse exploded?' asked the Headmaster.

The girls nodded and after a moment or two Miss MT2T did likewise but with rather more squeaking.

'Horses are skittish creatures,' said the Headmaster with a nod. 'I've never entirely trusted them. I have similar reservations about geese.'

There was another long and awkward pause. Miss MT2T again seemed unwilling to add any



more detail to the tale of their predicament. The Headmaster rocked back and forth on his shoes.

‘But rest assured you will be made very welcome at Maudlin Towers,’ he said at last. ‘We do not have our own carriage, I’m afraid, but there is a train from Lower Maudlin every second Tuesday in the month. You shall be our guests until the next one leaves in five days’ time.’

‘You ... are ... very kind,’ said Miss MT2T.

‘Yes,’ said one of the girls. ‘Very kind, sir.’

‘Poppynonsense,’ said the Headmaster with a snort. ‘This is England. We are renowned throughout the potato-eating world for our hospitality. You are part of the Maudlin family now. I shall have someone show you to your accommodation after you have had a chance to relax following your unpleasant mishap.’

The girls smiled and seemed relieved.

‘Very well,’ said the Headmaster after a few moments, clapping his hands together and making everyone jump. ‘Miss MT2T and I will adjourn to my study. You boys can introduce yourselves to these young angels. Mingle, boys, mingle ...’



The assembled group of boys and the corresponding group of girls stood looking at each other for several minutes before Mildew received a hefty shove in the back from Kenningworth and skidded into the void between them.

'Erm ... good day,' said Mildew. 'My name is ... My name is ... My name is ... What is my name again, Sponge?'

'Biscuit,' said Sponge helpfully.

'Try again, old button,' said Mildew.

'Mil ... dew,' said Sponge.

'Yes, of course,' said Mildew. 'Well done. My name is Arthur Mildew. Of the Berkshire Mildews. You may have heard of us.'

Two of the girls turned to each other and shrugged.

‘And this is my good friend, Algernon Spongely-Partwork,’ he said. ‘Although everyone calls him Sponge.’

‘Or twerp,’ said Kenningworth with a snigger.

‘That’s Kenningworth,’ said Sponge. ‘This is Enderpenny, Furthermore, Filbert, Hipflask ...’

The boys each nodded at the mention of their name. The boys behind them stepped a couple of paces back, happy not to be included in Sponge’s introductions.

‘How do you do?’ continued Sponge, a little breathlessly now, sweat beginning to trickle down his face.

‘How do we do what?’ said one of the girls.

‘I ... that is ... well ...’ gibbered Sponge.

Mildew placed a consoling hand on his friend’s shoulder and tried again.

‘What are *your* names, might we enquire?’ asked Mildew.

‘My name?’ said the first girl. ‘Er ... my name is ...’

Mrs Glump went past with a trolley full of breakfast things.

‘Milk,’ she said.

‘Milk?’ said Mildew. ‘As in ... well, milk?’

‘Yes, Milk,’ she said.

‘What a ... what a ... erm ... name,’ said Mildew.



'And yours?' said Sponge, looking at her friend.

'Who, me?' the friend replied.

She gazed around in what looked like panic. The door to the trophy room was open.

'Spoon,' she said. 'My name is Spoon.'

'Spoon?' said Sponge.

'That's right.'

'Oh,' said Sponge. 'Lovely.'

No one quite knew what to say next, and there followed a great deal of shoelace inspection and fingernail fiddling before Mildew summoned up the courage to go on.

'Have you come far?' he asked.

'Quite far, yes,' said Milk.

Spoon and Sponge stared at each other. There were no questions left to ask and yet the girls still gazed at them expectantly. What more could they reasonably want?

‘What is this?’ said Milk, looking at the broken and repaired bust outside the Headmaster’s office. ‘It looks rather like ...’

She pointed at Sponge.

‘Yes,’ said Mildew with a forced chuckle. ‘We’ve often laughed about that, haven’t we, Sponge?’

Mildew and Sponge cast a furtive glance at each other. It looked like Sponge because it was Sponge, but how could they ever explain the existence of a Roman bust of a Maudlin schoolboy? Kenningworth leaned forward, peering at it.

‘It does bear a startling resemblance to you, now she comes to mention it. How have I not noticed that before?’

Sponge wanted to say, ‘Because you’re a self-obsessed blot,’ but he thought it best not to. There were so many things that Sponge wanted to say but didn’t. In fact the things he didn’t say outnumbered the things he did. By quite some way.

‘Why is it broken?’ said Spoon.

‘Ah,’ said Mildew. ‘That’s rather a long story and –’

Big Brian, the school bell, clanged its mighty

brain-rattling clang, shaking Maudlin Towers to its very foundations as usual, and Mildew and Sponge had never been so relieved to hear its din.

In fact, all the boys seemed relieved and were unusually eager to head for their lessons. For Mildew and Sponge this meant the most dreadful of all starts to the day – double maths with Mr Painly.

They left the girls with a swift farewell and wandered into Mr Painly's classroom, slumping themselves down as their maths teacher added some more digits to a baffling equation on the blackboard.

'I trust you didn't find the homework too difficult,' said Mr Painly.

There was a collective groan from the boys so pitiful it would have tugged a tear from the eye of even the most heartless and uncaring of dentists.

'I'm not sure I can cope,' whispered Sponge, 'with having g ...'

'With having what, old kipper?' whispered Mildew.

'With having g ...' repeated Sponge.



‘Spit it out, Sponge!’ hissed Mildew.

Sponge lifted a trembling finger and pointed instead. Mildew gasped. Some of the girls had followed them in. Mr Painly dropped his papers in surprise when he turned to see them. The girl called Milk raised her hand as alarm began to spread through the room.

‘Sir,’ she said. ‘We have been told to join in with the class while we are at the school. If that’s all right with you, sir. The Headmaster insisted.’

‘Of course, of course,’ said Mr Painly with a smile. ‘The more the merrier.’

He dropped some more papers, picked them up, coughed, adjusted his moustache two or three times and continued.

‘I have to warn you that we are flying at a rather high altitude, mathematics-wise. Please don’t feel embarrassed to ask for help if you can’t keep up.’

Mildew and Sponge noticed the girls glance at each other.

‘Sir,’ said Milk with a smile. ‘We have long since overtaken anything your human mathematics can conceive of.’

‘Human mathematics?’ said Mr Painly. ‘A curious way to put it.’

Mildew noticed Spoon nudge Milk hard in the ribs and whisper to her. She said nothing more.

‘Very well,’ Mr Painly continued with a frown and a sniff. ‘Let’s see whether our “human mathematics”, as you put it, can still throw up the odd surprise for you ...’

When Big Brian rang its cacophonous chimes for the end of the lesson, Mildew and Sponge saw the girls trudge out with the weary, stunned and confused expressions they recognised all too well.

‘Not to worry,’ said Mildew to Milk. ‘He has that effect on everyone.’

‘But ... but ... but ...’ said Milk.

‘We know,’ said Mildew consolingly. ‘Maths is an unpleasant business.’

‘It made no sense,’ said Spoon, staring off into the distance. ‘No sense at all.’

Sponge nodded.

‘That’s maths for you,’ he said. ‘It’s simply not meant to be understood.’