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Opening extract from

The Return of a Pig Called Heather

Written by

Harry Oulton

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Praise for

A Pig Called Heather

'A very charming tale of a pig with lots of heart . . .
Funny and heartwarming.'
The Bookseller

'Heather is a pig with star potential, and you can't help
but fall for her porcine charms. Resistance is futile;
Heather won't just warm your heart – she'll win it!'
Damian Kelleher,
Author and Children's Books Reviewer

'It is funny and sad, but above all I couldn't put it down
because I wanted to know what happens next!
I give it 100/100 and I can't wait to read the sequel!'
Alexander, age 8, Lovereading

'Full of character and somehow completely believable . . .
[it will} illicit giggles from all ages.'
Serendipity Reviews

Harry Oulton has worked for Eurodisney in Spain, Coca Cola in Mexico, made television programmes for both the BBC and ITV, and worked in a factory putting sticky labels on boxes. Right now he's now very happily writing children's books and lives in North London with his wife and three children. If you want to know more about him you can find him at harryoulton.co.uk.

The Return Of A Pig Called Heather

Harry Oulton

Piccadilly

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Chapter 1

The Unknown Apple

As the late July sun warmed her back, the pig called Heather rested her snout on her front trotters, yawned and happily swallowed the last of her apple. It had been a good apple, and now that it was inside her she felt stronger and more able to think about things. Trouble was, there were a lot of things to think about and they were all as complicated as each other. Every

time she thought one of them was a happy thought, suddenly there turned out to be a sad bit to it as well.

She had come to London and found Isla, her best two-legged friend. That was definitely happy, but it did mean that now she was miles away from Scotland and her beloved farm, and she had no idea whether she'd see her best four-legged friends, Rhona the goat and Alastair the sheepdog, ever again.

She had escaped from the advertising agency that had made her pretend to be a chicken-farming pig called *Busby*. That was good, but also bad because to do it she'd had to tell a lie and run away from a really nice woman called Nikki and her chatty dog, Izzy. She was also now in disguise, which meant being half-painted black and that was a bit odd and sometimes felt a bit stiff and funny.

She was hiding in London Zoo, surrounded by exotic animals she had never even heard of, let alone lived with before! That was scary but, on the good side, being inside the zoo did mean she was safe from Mr Hornbuckle and his dog Thomas, who'd been hired by the advertising agency to catch her

and had spread lies about her having swine flu.

Normally, Heather tried to avoid having too many thoughts at the same time. They made her head hurt. But ever since her barn had burned down, Isla had moved to London and Heather herself had become really famous, it had been non-stop. One thought after another, so just when she'd got rid of one there'd be another there to take its place. She couldn't remember the last time her head had been nice and empty.

Crossly, she got to her feet and shook her snout from side to side, hoping everything would drop out of her ears and leave her in peace. The shaking made her a bit dizzy but it seemed to work. There was only one thought left. More of a question than a thought, but it was a question that needed answering.

Exactly what sort of apple was it she had just eaten?

Heather prided herself on her knowledge of apples. At the last count, she knew over eighty different varieties, and she sorted them both by appearance and taste. But this was a new one. She headed over to the very apple tree that was puzzling her, sat down on her

bottom and looked up at it. There were plenty of apples dangling welcomingly from its branches and she snouted one of them curiously. It smelt delicious, and as she opened her mouth to chomp it, out of the corner of her eye she noticed a little tag attached to one of the branches. It was faded and quite hard to make out, but as Heather peered at it she could just about see a picture of the apple she had been about to munch, and the writing next to it.

Malus domestica – 'Lady in Red'

Heather had been taught to read by Rhona the goat, but she wasn't expert at it. Those first two words were too big. They didn't even look English. She peered at the next one. Hmmm. She sounded it out just like Rhona had taught her. L-a-d-y. Laddie? Laddie in Red! How excellent. An apple that might have been named for a Scottish Duroc pig! *She* was red, after all. Or she would be when the paint that Isla had used to disguise her had all worn off. She was a lassie rather than a laddie, but never mind. It was a good name for a good apple. She closed her mouth around another one and bit into it. Delicious. Such an interesting

flavour. What was it? She sifted through her memory of tastes and eventually tracked it down. Some time ago, Isla and her dad had taken her to a fair and entered her into the 'best pig' competition. She hadn't won, but she remembered Isla giving her some fluffy sweet stuff on a stick. It had got stuck around her snout and Isla'd had to mop it off, but it had been very delicious. Candyfloss, it was called. That was what this apple reminded her of. She snuffled happily at the memory and stored the information away. *Laddie in Red, pink fleshed, candyfloss-flavoured with a good finish.*

Now feeling rather chirpy, she carried on towards the dark entrance to the enclosure. Isla had told her there were bearded pigs inside and, sure enough, as she rounded the corner she saw two little piglets messing about with an orange. They were striped, which she knew meant they were young. As Heather watched, one of them rolled the orange to the other, who expertly flicked it into the air with his snout, waited for it to come down and then flicked it up again and again and again, sometimes snouting it and sometimes flicking it up with his trotter. Finally he casually

snouted it over towards the other one, who watched it sail through the air and then, at the last moment, dropped his head and caught the orange on the back of his neck. He flicked it back into the air, caught it again, and carried on with the snouting and flicking until eventually the orange split and burst apart mid-flick, getting juice and pips all over the laughing piglets.

Heather coughed. 'Um, excuse me?'

The two piglets turned to look at her. One of them nudged the other and whispered something, then both piglets giggled and high-fived each other's trotters.

The first one raised his snout to Heather.

'Yeah?'

'Um, hello. My name's Heather. Heather Duroc. I'm from Scotland.'

The two piglets looked at her. The first one said, 'I'm Thom,' and the other said, 'I'm Ramelan,' and then together they both said, 'And we're the wild piglets!' They high-fived each other again happily.

'I wondered if your mother or father was around?'

Thom shouted behind him. 'Mum! Someone wants you.'

A voice from inside said something Heather didn't understand and Ramelan rolled his eyes and turned towards Heather. 'Mum says who are you?'

Heather swallowed. 'It's a bit hard to explain. As I said, I'm Heather. I'm —'

Thom interrupted her and shouted towards the dark doorway again. 'It's a pig. Says her name's, like, Arthur or something.'

The foreign voice came again and the piglet turned back to Heather. He jerked his head towards the doorway. 'She says go in.'

There was a deep, rolling rumble in the sky and the next second Heather felt drops of warm, summer rain starting to splash onto her back. The two piglets snorted in delight and raced for a muddy spot where they started to roll happily. Heather looked at them enviously. She'd always loved summer rain and normally she would have joined them – it was ages since she'd had a really good wallow – but she knew she should go and introduce herself to her new friends. Sadly, she took a last look at the frolicking piglets, let a few final drops splash onto her back,

and reluctantly headed through the door.

It was a bit gloomy inside and she could just make out a group of pigs all lying around and chatting. As Isla had said, they did all have skinny bodies with massive heads, and their bearded snouts made them all look very important. The beards reminded her of Rhona, which was good. If they were like her best goat friend then everything would be fine. She took a deep breath and coughed discreetly. Four heads turned round and everything went quiet.

Heather felt all eyes on her. There was total silence and then one of them spoke. 'What are you?'

'I'm Heather.'

'Not *who*. What?

'I'm a Duroc pig. My name is Heather.'

'Durocs are red. You look like a saddleback. Or maybe a hippo.'

The other pigs laughed at this, and the speaker came over to Heather. His bearded snout jerked at her aggressively and he circled her until she started to feel dizzy.

'Why are you here?'

'I'm hiding. You see I'm not really black at all —'

'You don't say.'

Heather ignored the sarcasm. 'I'm normally red. As you say, Durocs are red and I'm a pure-breed Duroc, but I've run away. I'm in hiding – sort of . . . well, it's complicated, but have you heard of this silly thing, you probably haven't but . . . Busby?'

A sudden indrawn hiss of breath stopped Heather in her tracks.

'Busby,' repeated the pig. Then he turned to the others and said something in a language Heather couldn't understand. There was muttering and the other pigs all got to their feet and came and stood around her in a menacing circle. Heather gulped.

'That's right. I mean, I know it's weird, but I am Busby.' She laughed nervously.

'Busby's red.'

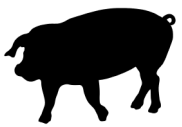
'Yes, well, so am I when I've not been painted black. Honestly, look.' She stood on her hind legs and pretended to be sowing seed, just like she did in the advertisments for Busby's Birds. The pig snarled at her and she dropped down again.

'Busby is famous. Busby is on posters. I think you are a dirty, nasty little mongrel pig who has wandered in here uninvited and unwanted.'

Heather looked around for a friendly face, but they were all a bit daunting and rather frightening. She backed up until her bottom was against the wall. There were now four large bearded pigs all facing her and all looking very unfriendly. The leader spoke again, quieter now.

'I heard Busby'd run away. I heard she was mad. Somebody told me she had swine flu. So, if you're Busby, then you're sick. You know what they do with pigs who've got swine flu?'

Heather shook her head frantically. 'I don't have it! Isla said I didn't have it. She said if I was hungry I must be okay. And I am! Hungry, I mean. I've just eaten one of those nice laddie apples outside but I'm still starving so I'm definitely okay. Definitely! I haven't got anything.' She was frantically turning on the spot, but the bearded pigs weren't listening. They bared their teeth and closed in.



Chapter 2

The Princess and the Pig

'Stop!'

The command was delivered in a low, flat bark, which seemed to come from the shadows on the other side of the room. The bearded pigs grudgingly backed off, snarling as they went, leaving a terrified Heather quivering against the wall.

'Bring her to me.' Again the voice from the

darkness. The pig who'd been about to attack Heather crossly waved his trotter at the darkened corner.

'You heard him. Go over there.'

Heather reluctantly trotted over to a pile of straw in the very darkest corner of the room. As she got closer, she was able to make out a figure. It was a male pig. He looked about her age, but he was much larger than the others, with a bushier and more splendid beard. When he spoke, his voice was deep and rumbling. It reminded her of the storm cloud, but a bit less friendly.

'Who are you?'

'H-H-Heather.'

'You said you were Busby.'

'Heather's my real name. Heather Duroc. That's what Isla's mum called me when I was a tiny piglet. I used to eat heather, you see, and I'm a Duroc pig so —'

He raised a hoof to stop her. 'Then who is Busby?'

'He's a farmer. Chicken farmer. Busby's Birds. That's why they called me Busby. As an advertising thing to sell more chickens. I think.'

'What are you doing here?' he asked.

'I've run away.'

'Why?'

'It's a long story.'

The pig settled down into the straw and blew out through his nostrils. 'I'm not going anywhere. And unless you'd rather go back and spend time with the others, I don't imagine you are either.'

Heather took a deep breath. She thought for a moment about telling him all about Isla, but why should she? That was her business. It was private. She flopped down, resting her head on her trotters.

'Did I say you could sit down?'

Heather looked at him in disbelief. Was he serious?

The mighty pig snorted crossly. He waved his bearded snout towards the pigs sitting on the other side of the room. 'They were about to kill you until I stopped them. I suggest you show me some respect.'

'Oh,' said Heather.

The pig levered himself to his feet. Standing on all fours, he was even more terrifyingly massive and Heather gulped. He towered above her, his body nearly

a metre high. It was ages since another pig had actually made her feel small. He sat back on his haunches which somehow made him seem even taller, and as he spoke, his long, gleaming white tusks twitched menacingly.

'Do you want to know why you are so unpopular? Why your fate was sealed the minute you walked into this room?'

Heather shook her head but he ignored her and carried on. His English was perfect but he had a foreign accent that Heather couldn't place.

'We are the Sus barbatus. Sus meaning pig, barbatus meaning bearded. Of all the pure-breed pigs we are the rarest, the proudest and the noblest. People come from everywhere to see the famous Sumatran and South-Asian bearded pigs. We have the adoration of zoo visitors from all over the world. Our piglets even have stripes! And then what happens? You come along and it all goes out the window. Years of hard-won respect, centuries of culture, breeding and nobility, all destroyed by one ginger celebrity named Busby.'

As he said the name he shuddered, his voice

dripping with distaste and loathing.

'These days all the public ever ask is if there are any Durocs. Nobody is interested in us any more; it's all *Where are the Busby pigs, Mummy?* or *I don't like the ugly beardy pigs, where's the pretty red one?* You want to know why we don't like you? There's your answer.'

Heather was quite scared. Of all the places she could have come to hide, it was just her luck to have picked the one where she was least welcome. But there was something else, too. As she looked at this vast mountain of a pig, this noble giant, the very finest example of her species, she was awestruck, but she was also annoyed. He might be all those things he said, but she was a pure-breed, organically reared Duroc pig! Why should he be more worthy than her? Just because he knew fancy words, that didn't give him the right to speak to her like that. He didn't know her, didn't know anything about her! Angrily, she rose to her feet and stood to face him.

'Get rid of me, then. Destroy what's more famous than you and you'll be top dog again. Come on. I won't squeal.'

It was hard to tell, but she was almost certain the vast pig had smiled behind his beard. Certainly when he spoke there was a different tone to his voice. 'Do you know the story of Scheherazade?'

Heather shook her head. 'No.'

'There was once a rich, cruel king who had everything he wanted. But he was lonely and nobody could make him happy. Every night he called for a different woman, but they were so scared of him they couldn't speak and every morning he would banish them and send them into the wilderness outside his castle. This went on and on until one day it was the turn of a girl named Scheherazade. She told him a story. It was such an exciting story that the king was utterly entranced. Scheherazade stopped the story right at the best bit and said she was tired and wanted to go to bed. The king was furious, but he was enjoying the story so much that he ordered her to come back the next day and finish it. So she did, but then she told him another story and another and another, and every night she would stop at such an exciting point that the king would be desperate for her to come back the next day so he could know the ending. This went on for a thousand and one nights until Scheherazade said she had no more stories, and so she would have to be banished with the others outside the castle walls.'

'And?' asked Heather, curious despite herself.

The giant pig settled down in his straw and arranged his vast body comfortably. He opened his mouth and yawned, his cruel tusks gleaming wickedly as he did so. 'And I'm bored, little Duroc. I have no need of you except to distract me from my boredom. So amuse me. Tell me a story.'

Heather gulped nervously. 'I don't know any.'

'Then make one up.'

So Heather told him a story. The only one she had. About a girl called Isla who lived on a farm with her best friend. Heather told him how happy Isla was as she ran in the fields, skimming stones in the burn, going to pet day at school, and playing with her friend. Then the story took a darker turn, disaster struck and Isla was forced to leave the farm and move somewhere she didn't want to be, with people she didn't know. She'd had to

leave her friend behind and now was lost and upset, suffering in the vast prison of the city, longing for the hills and rocks and openness of the countryside, where her heart still ran free. And now the girl and the friend were so saddened by being apart that they both started to waste away. Heather told how the friend had come to find Isla, eventually tracking her down in the jungle of the city and how the two of them had never been happier, until they were torn apart again.

The vast pig was utterly silent throughout, listening intently and not moving a muscle; and when Heather stopped, he raised his head and stared right through her. 'So where is this Isla now? Why aren't you with her?'

'I didn't say it was about me,' said Heather.

The pig grunted, his beard quivering as he spoke. 'Those emotions you describe. You have to feel those to know them. Nobody could tell a story like that if it wasn't about them. Why aren't you with her?'

'Because a man called Mr Hornbuckle is hunting me. I'm hiding here. Isla says I'm safe from him in the zoo.'

The pig nodded. 'She's right. What happens next?'

'I don't know,' said Heather truthfully.

The large pig raised his mighty head and bellowed to the other pigs. 'Thom! Ramelan! Fetch our guest a bowl of water and something to eat.'

The twin piglets appeared a few minutes later, pushing a bowl of water with two apples bobbing in it. Heather hadn't realised how hungry she was and tucked into the apples (*Golden Delicious, the classic apple, crisp and juicy with an almost sugar-cane sweetness)* with gusto. Then she sat back, burped, stuck her snout into the water and drank deeply. In the past she'd never really seen the point of water. She couldn't be certain but she suspected there might actually not be any sugar in it at all. But this bowlful was delicious.

With some food inside her, Heather felt a little stronger and more like herself. She cleared her throat.

'So can I stay? For a bit, I mean. Until Isla tells me where we're going next?'

He stared at her thoughtfully. 'Harbouring a fugitive is dangerous. We could get into trouble.' He

paused and then smiled, his tusks twitching. 'I like danger. It makes life so much more fun.'

'So, is that a yes? Only the others didn't seem so…' Heather jerked her head towards the others.

'I will talk to them.'

Heather rolled onto her back and pointed her trotters at the ceiling.

'Why have you got an accent? They haven't.'

'They were born here. That's another reason they're so angry with you. They have all been bred and raised in captivity. It's hard for them when they hear about life outside the zoo.'

'Where were you born?'

'My ancestors originally came from the Basque country, a small region at the top of Spain. Some years ago, there were only twenty Basque pigs left in the world, so my great-grandfather was taken to Borneo and crossbred with the bearded pigs there. Basques are very proud, so in order to preserve our roots, every male calls their first-born son Aitor, a traditional Basque name which means "good father". So, although I was born on the island of Borneo,

although I grew up by a schoolhouse listening to the stories and lessons of a teacher who spoke to his pupils in the many and beautiful languages of Borneo, I know that my name is Aitor, and the blood of Basque pigs flows through my veins like an unquenchable fire.'

'Blimey. I'm just a Duroc from Scotland. Nothing fiery in me, I'm afraid. Mind if I have a snooze? Only I'm a bit sleepy.'

She snuggled down in the straw and yawned hugely. 'By the way, did she die?' mumbled Heather. 'Sheherry-thingy?'

Aitor cleared his throat. 'On the one thousandth and first night the girl said she had run out of stories and would have to be banished. The king was horrified, for he had fallen in love with her, so he begged her to stay and be his wife. The girl refused, saying how could she marry someone so cruel? The king promised to change if she would stay with him. Scheherazade agreed, but said if he was ever mean or cruel again she would leave him and join all his other victims outside the castle wall. True to his word, he

became the best king the country had ever had, and Scheherazade was his queen for the rest of their lives.'

But Heather didn't hear a thing. She was fast asleep, dreaming about another girl who was very stubborn and never stopped talking. She was dreaming about Isla.

To: Millie Raphael-Campbell
From: Isla Wolstenholme

Hi Millie,
Great to see you at the zoo! Did you get into loads of trouble for helping me break into the zoo and hide Heather?!!! She's really well, and you should see the bearded piglets. So stripy and cute!!! Email me back.
Love Isla
xxxxxxxx
PS How is Miss Stephenson? Was she really cross?

To: Isla Wolstenholme
From: Millie Raphael-Campbell

Hi!
We got into loads of trouble but it was really cool and such fun. I sat next to Tullynessle Morag on the way home and I told her about you sneaking Heather into the zoo but said it was completely a secret and she thought it was really cool!!!
Love Millie
xxxxxxxxxxx
PS Say hi to Heather!

Chapter 3

Friendship is Blind

After her conversation with Aitor, Heather found that things got a lot better. Everyone was more friendly towards her and she started to relax. They decided it would be best if she stayed hidden in the building where they slept, and so she spent her time inside, eating, sleeping and trying not to think about Isla.