

opening extract from

The Demon Headmaster

written by

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1

A Girl in the House

'Our last moments of freedom,' Lloyd said darkly. He glowered round at the battered walls of the playroom, at the motorbike posters peeling off the wallpaper and Harvey's model aeroplanes neatly ranged on top of the bookcase. 'She'll be sticking up pictures of flowers and ballet dancers when she comes, I bet.'

He mooched about gloomily, kicking at the furniture. 'Take care of her, Mum said. What does she expect us to do? Hold her hand and tell her bedtime stories?'

Harvey, curled in his chair, stolidly went on reading *The Aeromodeller.*

'H!' Lloyd banged him crossly on the shoulder. 'Why don't you say something?'

Harvey looked up and grinned. 'You've gone all red in the face.'

That only made Lloyd angrier. 'Red in the face? I should just think I have. Purple pancakes! Don't you realize how awful it'll be? Having a girl come to live here!'

'But you've known for ages,' Harvey said mildly. 'Mum's always wanted to have someone to foster.'

'I thought she meant a baby,' Lloyd spluttered.

'That would have been OK. Just a bit of screaming at night. But a girl! A horrible girl, as old as me! She'll never be out of our hair. We'll have to take her to *school* with us.'

'So?' Harvey shrugged. 'Might be a good thing. She might be on our side. Another Normal.'

Lloyd looked at him scornfully. 'Is it likely? I ask you. There's only five of us in the whole school. No, she'll be one of *them*. And what about the others? What will they say?'

'Have to wait and see, won't we?' Harvey picked up his magazine again. Enraged, Lloyd leaped across and knocked it out of his hands. 'Harvey Hunter, you're an *idiot*! Can't you see what it means? We'll have a little goody-goody about the place all the time, going on about how wonderful school is, and how marvellous the Headmaster is. I can't bear it. It'll be like having a spy in the house.'

For a moment, Harvey looked troubled. Then he brightened. 'Might not be as bad as that. If she watches us, we could watch her too.' A distant expression came over his face. 'You never know. We might actually be able to discover something. Find out what's going on.'

Lloyd stopped pacing the room and stared coldly at him. 'I've told you a hundred times,' he hissed, 'that's crazy. It'll just get us into trouble. We've worked out a good system for having a

quiet life. I don't want anyone interfering with it.'

'But don't you ever *wonder*?' Harvey said dreamily. 'I do. In the afternoons. I sit and stare across at the Hall and wonder what the rest of them are doing, and why they're so—'

'Shut up!' Lloyd caught him by the shoulder and shook him hard. 'I've managed to keep you out of real trouble ever since you came to the school. And it's been a nightmare. Four years of watching and being careful. I won't have you mucking everything up now. You just behave yourself and—'

'OK, OK.' Scarlet in the face from the shaking, Harvey held up a hand to push Lloyd away. 'Keep your hair on. You don't want to be looking like a raging demon when she gets here.' Coolly he picked up his magazine and started to read again. Lloyd stared at him in disgust.

'Just wish I *did* look like a demon. That might frighten her away.' And he resumed his restless, furious pacing round the room.

'They're such a nice, *normal* family,' Miss Wilberforce said encouragingly, as the car jerked to a stop at the traffic lights. 'I'm sure you'll like living with them, Dinah. Lloyd and Harvey, the two boys, are very sensible and ordinary. It's a pity

you couldn't meet them beforehand, but I'm sure you'll get on.'

'Yes, Miss Wilberforce,' Dinah said woodenly.

'Of course, it's hard on you, having to change schools. I hope you won't find the work too difficult. You'll just have to put your back into it.'

'Yes, Miss Wilberforce.'

Miss Wilberforce sighed and looked round at her, taking one hand off the steering wheel. 'You don't seem very relaxed, dear. Are you, perhaps, just a teeny bit afraid? Mmm?'

'No, Miss Wilberforce.'

Miss Wilberforce sighed again. 'Hmm. Oh well, we're here now.' She steered the car in towards the kerb. 'Let's go in and meet them all.'

'Yes, Miss Wilberforce.' Dinah climbed out and stood stiffly on the pavement while Miss Wilberforce got her case out of the boot. Then the two of them marched up the front path of the Hunters' house and Miss Wilberforce rang the doorbell.

'Don't worry if you feel a bit strange at first,' she whispered. 'They'll do their best to make you at home.'

The door opened.

'Dinah, dear, how nice to see you again,' Mrs Hunter said. She held out her arms and gave Dinah a friendly hug and kiss. Dinah's body stayed quite stiff.

'Hello, Mrs Hunter. Hello, Mr Hunter,' she said, without expression.

'Come in and take your coat off. The boys are dying to meet you.'

'Oh,' said Dinah.

'I'm sure Dinah's looking forward to meeting them, too,' Miss Wilberforce put in quickly. 'But she's bound to be a bit shy, aren't you, dear?'

'No,' said Dinah.

Mr Hunter grinned at her. 'At least you know your own mind. Go into the living room. I'll call the boys.'

Dinah went in and sat on the edge of the sofa, with her knees pressed together. Her eyes flicked from side to side of the room. It was just what she had expected. Three piece suite. Television. A shelf of ornaments. A very ordinary room. She sighed softly. Then she sat up straighter as everyone else came in.

'Here they are,' Mrs Hunter said proudly. 'Lloyd's the big one, and Harvey's the little fat one.'

'Cheek!' Harvey protested amiably.

Dinah looked them up and down. Lloyd was taller than she was, with a mop of wild hair and a cocky look. Harvey was roly-poly and cheerful. There did not seem to be anything special about either of them. She held out a cold, rigid hand.

'Hello,' she said unenthusiastically.

2

Not a Good Beginning

'Hello', Lloyd said back, just as unenthusiastically.

He stared down at her hand, but he did not take it. She was even worse than he had expected. A pale, pinched face and two stringy plaits. Crimson cabbages, she looked just like a wooden doll.

She gazed awkwardly at the two of them, and they gazed back.

'I'll tell you what,' Mrs Hunter said briskly. 'I'm sure you'll get on better without a lot of grown-ups breathing down your necks. Why don't you boys grab some tea from the kitchen and take Dinah into the playroom? Then you can get to know each other properly. Off you go.'

With excessive politeness, Lloyd held the door open for Dinah while Harvey went out to the kitchen for some food. A few moments later, the three of them were sitting round the playroom table silently eating sandwiches.

'Have another cheese sandwich, Dinah?' Lloyd held out the plate.

'No thank you.'

'How about peanut butter?' Harvey said helpfully.

'No thank you.'

'Another glass of Coke?' Lloyd picked up the bottle.

'No thank you.'

With a sudden snort, Lloyd exploded. 'That's all you've said so far. "Yes please." "No thank you." What are you? A robot?'

'Perhaps she's shy,' Harvey said kindly.

'Well?' Lloyd looked at her. 'Are you shy?'

'No,' Dinah said.

'Go on then.' Lloyd prodded her. '*Say* something. Tell us about yourself.'

Dinah drew a breath. 'My name is Dinah Glass. I'm eleven. My mother and father died when I was one. I've lived in the Children's Home for ten years.' Her mouth snapped shut again.

'Suffering crumpets!' Lloyd made another clutch at his chaotic hair. 'She *is* a robot.'

Harvey smiled at her encouragingly. 'No she's not. Go on, Dinah. Say some more. Aren't there any questions you want to ask us?'

Dinah sat for a moment, frowning slightly while she considered. Then she said, 'Tell me about the school.'

'I told you, H, I *told* you!' Lloyd rolled his eyes dramatically upwards and banged the table. 'That's all she's interested in. School! It's going to be terrible.'

Dinah looked at him coldly. 'What's the matter?'

'What's the matter?' Lloyd jumped up, knocking his chair sideways. 'What's the *matter*? Scarlet sausages, why should I want to talk about school when I'm not there? You'd think anyone would be glad to escape for a day or two and not have to think about—' He paused, panting for breath.

'He doesn't like our school,' Harvey said.

'So I see,' Dinah said. 'Why not?'

Lloyd looked craftily at her. 'Guess. What's the worst thing you can imagine in a school?'

With one finger, Dinah rubbed the end of her nose thoughtfully. 'Chaos. Children running round shouting everywhere, and nobody keeping any order.'

Lloyd gave a loud bellow of laughter and Harvey grinned and shook his head. 'Nothing like that. Try again.'

Dinah frowned. 'Vandalism? Kids smashing everything up?'

Harvey giggled, and Lloyd looked scornfully at her. 'You haven't got a clue. Not a clue. Just you wait until Monday. It won't be at all the way you expect.' He reached forward and switched on the television.

'You're not going to tell?' Dinah said.

'Nope,' Lloyd said annoyingly. 'Don't want to go on talking about school for ever, do I? Anyway, can't you see what time it is?'

Dinah glanced round at the clock. 'Six o'clock. But what does that—?'

'Don't know what six o'clock on Friday means?' Lloyd sniffed. 'Didn't they watch the Eddy Hair Show at your Children's Home then?'

'Oh. Yes.' Dinah shrugged. 'I just forgot.'

'Good thing Lloyd remembered,' Harvey said. 'We don't want to miss the Great School Quiz at the end of the programme, because—OUCH!'

Lloyd had given him a sharp kick. 'Will you *shut up* about school, H!'

'So I can't even ask *him* about it?' Dinah said stiffly.

With an irritating grin, Lloyd wagged his finger at her. 'Got you guessing? *That's* how I like it!'

The television snapped on and then a picture swam into focus. A man with long purple hair and a purple-painted face was standing on his head, waggling his feet at the camera. 'Got you guessing?' he said chirpily. '*That's* how I like it.'

Dinah pulled a face at the screen. 'I think Eddy Hair's stupid. And you're even more stupid, Lloyd Hunter. I'll find out about your daft school on Monday.'

For the rest of the weekend, Dinah avoided Lloyd and Harvey even harder than they avoided her. Whenever Mrs Hunter sent them up to play with

her, she was curled on her bed, reading a book and not wanting to be disturbed. They hardly spoke to her again until Monday morning. Then, when they clattered down the stairs, late for breakfast, she was already sitting at the table, neat and prim in a white blouse and a blue skirt and jumper. Lloyd stared at her.

'What's that you're wearing?'

'School uniform.' She smoothed her skirt. 'From my old school.'

Harvey was looking worried. 'The Headmaster won't like it.' He sat down and heaped sugar on to his porridge. 'All green, he likes. We all have to be green.'

'Or else,' Lloyd said with relish.

Dinah ate her last spoonful of porridge and folded her napkin precisely. 'Or else what?'

'You'll see,' Lloyd muttered darkly. 'Pass the sugar, H. We don't want to be late.'

'Or else?' said Dinah sweetly. She looked at them over her cup as she drank her tea. 'Scared?'

'I'm not scared of anyone,' Lloyd blustered. 'Not even the Headmaster.'

'Bet you are,' Dinah said.

'Bet I'm not.'

Dinah smiled annoyingly.

'*I* am,' Harvey said calmly. 'I'd be a fool if I wasn't. He—'

'Shut up!' Lloyd said sharply. 'Don't tell her a

thing. Let her find it all out for herself.' He went on eating his porridge.

Harvey spooned his breakfast quickly into his mouth. He still had not finished when Mrs Hunter bustled in.

'Hurry up, hurry up.' She flapped round the room. 'You'll all be late if you don't go in five minutes. I wish I could come with you, Dinah dear, but the gas man's coming and I daren't go out. We'll freeze to death if we don't get the central heating mended soon.'

'That's all right,' Dinah said politely.

'I've written a letter to the Headmaster, and the boys will take care of you. They know—oh, Harvey, do get your coat on!'

Shoving and nagging, she pushed them out of the front door and they walked up the road in an awkward threesome. Dinah was on the outside so that she had to step into the gutter, trailing her feet through frosty leaves, whenever they passed anyone. Lloyd kept as far away from her as he could and watched her carefully out of the corner of his eye.

As they approached the school, they began to see groups of children, all neatly dressed in green with white shirts and striped ties. They walked sedately along the pavement, without laughing or joking, and Dinah looked at them curiously.

'Funny,' she said. 'Don't they play or fight or anything on the way to school?'

'Never,' Lloyd said shortly. As the school came in sight, he and Harvey fell into step, marching with their eyes straight ahead.

'Faster,' Harvey said anxiously. 'I've got to take the registers round. Remember? The Headmaster told me on Friday.'

Lloyd groaned. 'Why didn't you say, you idiot? You'll be late.'

'We could run,' murmured Dinah.

'No we couldn't,' snapped Lloyd. 'No one runs.'

She opened her mouth to say something and then shut it again as they reached the school gates. Without any comment, all the children had stopped. Taking combs out of their pockets, they combed their hair neatly, put their hats straight and smoothed their ties. Dinah stared. Lloyd was dragging a comb through his unruly curls and Harvey twitched nervously at the lapels of his blazer.

'Will I do? He won't complain?'

'You're fine.' Lloyd clapped him on the back. 'Perfect. And I think you've just got enough time for the registers. Go in and do it as quietly as you can, so no one notices you started late.'

With a nod, Harvey plodded round to the

playground, behind the school, and began to walk up the steps into the building. Dinah glanced at him as she and Lloyd followed.

'Why was he worried? I thought he was quite tidy *before* he combed his hair.'

'You would,' muttered Lloyd. 'You don't understand. I just hope he gets the registers out without any trouble.'

'Why should there be any *trouble* about *registers*?' Dinah sniffed. 'That's silly.'

Lloyd opened his mouth to answer her, but before he could say anything a tall, fair-haired boy came slouching across the playground towards them. He did not seem in any hurry, but as soon as he was close to Lloyd he whispered, with great urgency, 'Quick! What was Harvey doing, going into school? I tried to catch his eye, but he didn't see me.'

'That's OK, Ian,' Lloyd said. 'He's gone in to do registers.'

'Registers?' Ian's face did not change from its casual, cheerful expression, but his voice sounded horrified. 'No he's not. Rose came out and told Sharon to do them, because it was so late. She said the Headmaster wouldn't have anyone else in there before school started.'

'Oh no!' Lloyd gasped. 'Orange onions with silver skins! I'd better go in and try to get him out before anyone sees him.'

'It won't matter, surely,' Dinah said. 'If anyone sees him, they'll just send him out again.'

Lloyd and Ian looked contemptuously at her. 'You'll see,' Lloyd said. 'Here.' He fished his mother's letter out of his pocket. 'Take this. I've got to go and look for Harvey.'

Without another word he was off, hurrying up the steps into the school. Ian turned away and Dinah was left standing all alone in the playground, shivering in the bitter, wintry wind. She looked thoughtfully up at the school. At one window, she could see a motionless figure, in a green blazer with a large white P sewn on to one pocket. It was gazing through the window, but not at her. Its eyes were fixed on the steps up which Harvey and then Lloyd had just hurried. Dinah stared at it for a moment and then, with a shrug, turned back to the playground.

3

The Headmaster

It was a big playground, full of groups of strange children. No one so much as glanced at Dinah and she felt very awkward. But she was not a person who showed her feelings. Her pinched mouth did not relax for a moment. She looked round, wondering if there were any games she could join in. She thought there would be football, skipping, and Tig. And lots of people shouting and telling the latest crazy jokes from Friday night's Eddy Hair Show.

But it was not like that at all. All the children were standing in small neat circles in different parts of the playground, muttering. Carefully Dinah sidled up to the first circle, trying to catch what the voices were saying. When she heard, she could hardly believe it.

'Nine twenty-ones are a hundred and eighty-nine,

Ten twenty-ones are two hundred and ten,

Eleven twenty-ones are two hundred and thirty-one . . . '

Extraordinary! She left them to it and moved across to another group, wondering if they were doing something more interesting. But they seemed

to be reciting too. Only what they were saying was different.

'William the First 1066 to 1087,
William the Second 1087 to 1100,
Henry the First 1100 to 1135 . . . '

She stood beside them for some time, but they did not waver or look round at her. They just went on chanting, their faces earnest. Behind her she could hear a third group. There, the children were muttering the names of the capitals of different countries.

'The capital of France is Paris,
The capital of Spain is Madrid,
The capital of the United States is—'

'New York,' said a little girl's voice.

'Lucy!' A bigger girl took her by the shoulder and shook her. 'You know that's not right. Come on, quickly. What is it?'

'I can't—I can't remember,' Lucy said in a scared voice. 'You know I've been away. Tell me. Please, Julie.'

'You know we're not supposed to tell you if you haven't learnt it,' Julie said crossly. 'Now come on. The capital of the United States is—'

Miserably, Lucy chewed at her bottom lip and shook her head from side to side. 'I can't remember.'

The whole circle of children was looking accusingly at her and Dinah was suddenly annoyed

with them for being so smug. Stepping forwards, she whispered in Lucy's ear, 'It's Washington DC.'

'The capital of the United States is Washington DC,' Lucy gabbled, with a quick, grateful smile.

From the rest of the circle, cold, disapproving eyes glared at Dinah. *Never be too clever*, she thought. *I should've known that.* Her face pinched up tight again as she stepped back and heard them start up once more. 'The capital of Russia is Moscow. The capital of Brazil is—'

Woodenly, Dinah walked on round the playground, waiting for the bell to ring or the whistle to go.

But there was no bell. No whistle. Nothing. Instead, quite abruptly, all sounds in the playground stopped and the children turned round to stare at the school.

There on the steps stood a row of six children, three boys and three girls. They were all tall and heavily built and they were marked out from the others by a large white P sewn on to their blazer pockets. Without smiling, the tallest girl took a pace forwards.

'Form—lines!' she yelled into the silence.

'Yes, Rose,' all the children said, in perfect unison. As quietly and steadily as marching soldiers, they walked together, forming neat straight lines which ran the length of the playground. Each child stood exactly a foot behind the one in front. Each line

was exactly three feet from the one next to it. Not quite sure what to do, Dinah stood by herself, a blotch of blue among the green.

The tallest boy on the steps walked forwards.

'Lead—in!' he bellowed.

'Yes, Jeff,' chorused the children.

Still in total silence, they began to march forward, row by row, up the steps and through the door into the school, their eyes fixed straight ahead and their feet moving in step. There was no giggling or whispering or pushing. The whole thing was utterly orderly, the only sound being the steady tramping of feet.

Dinah continued to stand still, watching, until the playground was almost clear. As the last line marched off, she tacked herself on to the end of it and walked towards the school. When she got to the top of the steps, Rose stuck out an arm, barring her way.

'Name?' she said briskly.

'Dinah Glass,' Dinah said. 'I'm new, and—'

'Just answer the questions,' Jeff interrupted her. 'What's that you're wearing?'

'It's my old school uniform. I—'

'Just answer the question,' he said again. There was no friendliness in his voice and as he spoke he looked not at Dinah but over her shoulder. 'It is not satisfactory. All pupils here shall wear correct green uniform. Kindly see to it.'