

The Demon Headmaster

them and made them lose,' he murmured. 'But I shan't have to do that now. Shall I?'

'No. No, of course not,' Dinah said quickly, afraid. But she was not too afraid to risk another question. 'And what *will* you do after – after you've had your minute on television?'

But he just smiled at her and turned back to the stage, with a shudder. Eddy Hair had started to fling pepper at the spaghetti. He had three or four huge scarlet pepperpots with black stripes and he was shaking them frantically, spraying showers of pepper everywhere. And the spaghetti was sneezing. Its pale strands whirled everywhere like the arms of an octopus.

Dinah was left to wonder, desperately, what was going to happen. She was so deep in her own thoughts that she jerked with shock when the sound engineer prodded her.

'Quick!' he said. 'On to the stage.'

'What?'

'Didn't you hear? The Quiz is about to start.'

CHAPTER 15



The Great School Quiz

Lloyd, slumped in his chair at the front of the Hall, watched as the two teams filed out. The stage was a disgusting mess. Bits of spaghetti, broken eggs and torn paper lay all over the floor. On Dinah's chair lay one of the huge scarlet pepperpots which Eddy Hair had used in his fight with the spaghetti. Lloyd saw Dinah pick it up and put it on the table in front of her while the Headmaster, with an expression of revulsion, kicked away a squashed banana from near his foot.

'Ghastly, isn't it?' Eddy Hair said cheerfully. 'The

Headmaster
country must be in a mess when a show like this is so popular.'

He began to explain the rules of the Quiz. "Ten questions for each team, with thirty seconds to answer. If you can."

Dinah sat in her chair, with her hands clasped on the table in front of her. On her face was an expression of complete, total wretchedness. *It's worse for her than it is for us*, Lloyd thought suddenly. *We've only got to wait, but she's got to help him win*. He felt a sudden burst of pity for her and was surprised at himself. Was he getting soft?

'Right.' Eddy Hair reached for the question paper. "Manor Road School first, and it's a real brain-buster. "King Zonk of Zoldovia has a hundred children. Ninety per cent of them have curly noses, eighty-five per cent of them are bald, eighty per cent of them have one leg and seventy-five per cent of them lisp. How many bald, one-legged, lisping children with curly noses must he have?"

Wow! thought Lloyd. But Alec Bates was already smiling confidently and scribbling on the paper in front of him. A moment later, he had answered.

'Thirty.'

'Right!' yelled Eddy Hair. 'And how pretty their holiday snaps must look. One point to Manor Road. Next question to the home team. And here it is. "Every room in my house has as many old women in it as there are rooms altogether. Every old woman knits as many knee-warmers as there are old women. I share the knee-warmers out among seven of my worst enemies, giving

The Great School Quiz
each the same number and as many as possible, and I still have more than enough to cover my knees. How many have I got?"'

Dinah picked up the red pepperpot in front of her and stared thoughtfully at its black stripes, but she did not bother to write anything down. 'Six,' she said in an unhappy voice.

The Headmaster gave a pleased smile as the scores drew level and Lloyd felt a cold shudder creep up his back. Only another nine questions each. And if they were no more trouble than that one, how could Dinah help winning?

But he had not counted on Alec Bates. Alec was the only one of the Manor Road team who seemed to have any brains at all, but he was crammed with them. Every time Eddy Hair asked him a question, he gave the same conceited grin and scribbled away furiously on his piece of paper. And, every time, his answers were right. When the score stood at 8-8, Lloyd suddenly realized that it could be a draw. What would happen then? The Headmaster had obviously realized it too. He was frowning and staring at Alec as the next question was asked, as if he were willing him to fail.

'Right, Smart Alec,' Eddy Hair said sarcastically, 'how about this one? "I have a certain number, made up entirely of sevens. One seven after another. And I can divide it by a hundred and ninety-nine. I want you to give me the last four figures of the answer. But - and here's the catch, folks - I'm not going to tell you how many sevens make up the number."'

Alec stared at him.

Eddy Hair did not say anything else. Just turned and looked at the big clock behind him where the second hand was ticking round from 30 to 0. 'Five seconds left,' he said at last. 'Come on, Genius. What's the answer?' 'I - I don't know,' Alec said, as the bell sounded. He did not sound embarrassed. Only furious.

'And the score is *still* 8-8!' Eddy Hair jumped off his barrel and turned a quick cartwheel. 'Goodness me, the excitement's mounting here. What about our other genius? Will she be able to answer her question?'

Dinah looked at him, white-faced, and beside her the Headmaster smiled triumphantly. She gripped the pepperpot hard between her hands, until the knuckles showed white, and glanced across at Lloyd and Harvey, Mandy and Ingrid. When she answered the question, Lloyd could almost feel her reluctance. The score was 9-8 to them, now.

'My, my!' Eddy Hair looked out over the Hall and then raised his eyebrows at the Headmaster. 'What a quiet lot of children you have here. It's the first time your team has gone into the lead. Why aren't they cheering?'

The Headmaster shrugged. 'They can cheer if you want them to.' He raised a hand and instantly, obediently, all the children in the Hall started to cheer loudly and enthusiastically. Then he dropped his hand and they stopped. At once.

Eddy Hair gave him an odd look. 'That's remarkably well organized. I've never seen a school like it.' He

grinned at the camera, baring his uneven yellow teeth. 'It's a good thing these bossy teachers don't run the country, isn't it, folks? They'd have us all doing just what they want. Like robots. And where would I be then?'

He chortled merrily. But the Headmaster's face gave a sudden, irritated twitch.

And all at once, Lloyd understood! That was it. That was what the Headmaster wanted. To run the whole country, so that it was as organized and joyless as the school. So that everything was neat and tidy and there was no freedom. He looked frantically at Dinah, wishing there were some way he could tell her.

But, as his eyes met hers, he knew that there was no need to tell her. She had understood too. Her mouth had dropped open and her eyes were stretched wide, in complete horror. As the cameras turned towards the Manor Road team, waiting for their next question, she began to mouth furiously at Lloyd.

'That's what the prefects were talking about,' she said soundlessly. 'He's got them all set up to move people into work camps and -' Her mouthing became faster and more desperate, and Lloyd lost track of what she was saying. But he did not need to know any more. It was too terrible even to think about. It would be like having school everywhere, with no escape.

The Headmaster had seen her, too. He frowned and pointed down into the Hall, straight at the members of SPLAT. Then he looked at Dinah, his eyebrows raised in a question. Miserably, she shook her head. Lloyd could

just imagine how trapped she was feeling. Now she knew what the plan was, she could still do nothing to stop it. Not without killing them all.

And there was not much time left. Alec had answered his last question and was grinning again.

'So the score is 9-9,' Eddy Hair said. He ran his fingers through his curls. 'The tension is killing me. Will it be a draw? Everything hangs on the last question.'

Lloyd looked anxiously at Dinah. She was gripping the pepperpot so hard that he wondered it didn't crack and she looked as though she were about to burst into tears.

'So,' Eddy Hair bellowed. 'Here we go. And it's a complicated one, so listen carefully. "I woke up and found I had lost my memory. I couldn't even remember what year it was. So I asked a man who was walking past. He told me: if you multiply my age now by twice my age next birthday, you will get the number of the year we are in. And I can tell you that I don't remember Queen Victoria, but I hope to live to the year two thousand." Got it?'

Dinah nodded. She was just about to open her mouth to give the answer. But before she spoke, she looked across at Lloyd.

And he knew that he could not let her do it. Even if it meant being killed. The idea of having the whole country run by the Headmaster, for ever, was too horrible. Frantically, he shook his head, over and over again, until it felt as though it would fall off his neck.

Dinah shut her mouth again.

'Come on,' Eddy Hair looked at the clock. 'You can have a clue if you like. You only score half a point then, but that's enough to let you win. Do you want the clue?' 'Give it to her!' The Headmaster said sharply. He was looking incredulously at Dinah.

'The clue is this,' Eddy Hair looked down at his piece of paper. "'By the way," the man added, "I'm not quite as old as my cousin, Winston Smith." Got it?'

Dinah nodded sadly, as though that fitted in with what she thought, but she still did not say anything. Glaring at her, the Headmaster looked down at the children in the Hall and cleared his throat, as if he were about to speak. Lloyd braced himself. Here it came. The end. *Sorry, H, he thought, I couldn't protect you after all. This is more important.*

Then, from the other side of Dinah, came an excited yelp. Lucy, who had sat silently in her chair all through the Quiz, was bouncing up and down.

'I know the answer!' she yelled. 'I know it. Winston Smith's the name of the man in that funny book you told me about, Dinah! It's nineteen eighty-four!'

'That's the right answer,' Eddy Hair said gleefully. 'Well done, Tich. You've saved the day.'

As the giant panda appeared behind the chair of Manor Road's Headmaster, Lloyd began to shake uncontrollably.

Their own Headmaster had reached up and taken off his glasses. Ready for his turn to speak.



'Look into My Eyes'

That's dealt with the losers,' said Eddy Hair cheerfully, as the Headmaster of Manor Road tried to unwind the eels that the giant panda had tipped over his head. 'Now, how about the winners? A fantastic performance. Not a question missed. Come on, Headmaster. Tell us how you do it.'

With a feeling of sick defeat, Dinah saw the cameras swivel, pointing towards the Headmaster. He smiled into them, his large green eyes alight, and said softly, 'If you all look into my eyes, I will tell you. You must be feeling ready for some sense after all the crazy mess of this show. You must be longing to have everything sorted out tidily,

everything settled for you.'

For ever, thought Dinah. *For ever and ever*. Oh, how could she stop what was going to happen? If she did not, life would never be worth living again. But if she tried, it would mean death for everyone else in SPLAT. She could see Lloyd leaning sideways now, whispering to them, explaining what was about to take place. And, as they understood, they all gasped.

'You are all feeling exhausted by the mess,' the Headmaster was saying into the camera. 'Tired and weary and ready to sleep . . .'

Through her misery, Dinah felt the familiar sleepiness start to creep over her. And all over the country, people sitting in front of their televisions began to nod over their cups of tea, wondering why they were suddenly yawning.

' . . . you can hardly keep your eyes open. With every second that passes, your eyelids are growing heavier and heavier . . .'

Millions of cups of tea, in homes everywhere, dropped to the ground unheeded as people slumped forwards in their chairs. In the Hall, the audience nodded and Dinah's eyes began to close. She struggled hard to keep them open, but the lids dropped irresistibly.

Then, just before they finally shut, she saw Harvey leap to his feet. He was pointing straight at her, pointing to the table in front of her. Muzzily, she looked at his lips, trying to see what it was that he was mouthing. If only she did not feel so tired . . .

Harvey wagged his finger, pointing in a frenzy. And at last she managed to make out what it was he was saying.

'In your hand!' Funny, she thought sleepily. Why was he interested in her hand? She looked down, forcing her eyes to stay open for a second longer. Oh yes, she thought vaguely. She was still clutching that silly red pepperpot with the black stripes.

'... so, so, so, sleepy ...' She gave a huge, exhausted yawn. Pepper? she thought. Then - pepper!

That was it! Dragging together all the energy she could muster, she forced herself agonizingly to her feet, wrenched the bottom off the pepperpot and flung the contents, as hard as she could, straight into the Headmaster's face. Then she sank back on to her chair, knowing that she could not do anything more to resist that creeping, soothing voice.

But what had happened to the voice? It had stopped. For a moment there was silence, and she turned her head slowly sideways.

The Headmaster had gone purple in the face, his lips pressed tightly together, his green eyes bulging ludicrously. As she watched, his mouth was forced uncontrollably open in an enormous, a stupendous, sneeze.

'A - A - A - TCHOO!'

As though the strength of the sneeze had blown away her sleepiness, Dinah suddenly found herself wide awake. And, right across the country, people in easy chairs sat up and looked in bewilderment at the spilt tea on their carpets. In the Hall, everyone stirred and gazed in amazement at the sneezing Headmaster. His nose streamed, his

mouth gaped ridiculously and his head jerked backwards and forwards.

'Atchoo! Atchoo! Atchoo!'

Then, from all over the Hall, unbelievably, came the sound of laughter. All the children were laughing at the Headmaster. Dinah could see the powerless rage in his eyes, but he could do nothing to stop them. From time to time he tried to speak. He managed to stutter out, 'Des - des - des -' in an effort to give his command to destroy the straw dolls, but every time he got as far as that, another huge sneeze overtook him, and he collapsed.

Eddy Hair was gazing at him ecstatically, as if a sneezing headmaster was what he had always wanted on his show. Raising his voice, he said, above the noise of the sneezes and the laughing, 'Well, folks, beat that if you can for a way to run a school! You know what I always say about this show - *you never know what's going to happen next!*' As the final music began, he winked at the audience and cartwheeled away across the stage.

The Headmaster was just beginning to be able to control his sneezes. He pulled a spotless handkerchief out of his pocket, mopped his face and glared at Dinah with total hatred.

'Do you realize what you have done, you stupid girl?' he gasped. 'You have destroyed this country's chance of becoming the first properly organized, truly efficient country in the world.'

'No I haven't,' she said happily. 'I've saved it from being a miserable place full of scared robots, like this school. And I'm going to think of a way of saving the

school from you, as well.'

'The school?' The Headmaster jumped to his feet and waved a scornful hand at the rows of giggling children. 'That rabble? Do you think - a - a - tchoo! - that I want to go on wasting my talents merely looking after them? When you've made a laughing-stock of me? A - a - tchoo! I shall resign at once, and let them all sink back into chaos.'

'What are you going to do, then?' Dinah said quietly. He stood over her, glaring down. For a moment she was afraid that he was actually going to strangle her, in front of everyone. His large hands jerked, and his face was a mask of rage. Then he took a deep breath, and an unpleasant smile spread across his lips. 'Do you think I shall be so foolish as to tell you my plans? No, Miss Clever Glass. You must find them out for yourself. *If* you are clever *enough*. You have defeated me this time, but I know I was meant for greatness. I shall succeed in the end!'

With a loud, scornful laugh, he stalked off the stage and began to stride down the Hall, between the chairs. As his black-clad figure went by, the children stopped laughing and glanced fearfully at him. He did not look either to the right or to the left, but passed them like a tall shadow.

Halfway down the Hall, he suddenly stopped, his body shaking.

'A - a - a - TCHOO!'

As if they had been released from a spell, the children began to giggle again, and Lloyd and Harvey grinned happily up at Dinah, while Ian, Mandy and Ingrid jumped

up and danced a jig.

But Dinah did not grin back. She found that her hands were trembling, and she followed the Headmaster with her eyes, all the way, until the Hall door closed behind him.

'How did the show go?' Mrs Hunter said, opening the door. 'We were going to watch it, of course, but I'm afraid we had a - visitor.'

'It was fabulous! Marvellous!' Lloyd said jubilantly, bouncing into the house. 'We -'

'Can you save it?' his mother said, frowning slightly. 'We want you all to come into the sitting room. There's something we've got to talk to you about. Then you can tell us *all* about it.'

Lloyd winked at Dinah behind his mother's back. 'She'd get a shock if we did, wouldn't she?' he mouthed.

Dinah winked back happily, and walked into the sitting room. And stopped abruptly. There, on the settee, was Miss Wilberforce, looking solemn.

'Hallo, Dinah.'

'Hallo, Miss Wilberforce,' Dinah said, in a cold little voice.

Miss Wilberforce sighed, and looked at Mr and Mrs Hunter. 'I'm afraid you're right,' she said. 'It doesn't look as though she feels at home at all. And I was so *sure* she'd feel happy and relaxed here.'

'I don't think it's her fault,' Mr Hunter said sternly. 'I blame the boys.'

Lloyd stared round at them. 'What do you mean?

What are you all talking about?

'We're talking about Dinah,' Mr Hunter smiled apologetically at her. 'Mrs Hunter and I like having you here, dear. We've grown fond of you. But you don't seem to get on with the boys. You've been at each other's throats all the time, haven't you? So we've agreed with Miss Wilberforce that it would be better for everyone if you went back to the Children's Home.'

Dinah felt as though someone had hit her with a large lump of very cold ice. Her face stiffened. 'Yes, Mr Hunter,' she said, in a small voice.

'But you can't -' burst out Harvey. He stopped and looked helplessly at Lloyd.

Lloyd sat down deliberately in a chair and looked round at the grown-ups. 'I think you're all mad,' he said loudly. 'Why ever do you want to send Dinah away? Plum-coloured pumpkins! We want her here. For ever and ever. I think Mum and Dad ought to adopt her properly.'

Mr and Mrs Hunter goggled, their mouths dropping open. 'You like her?'

'Well, of course,' Lloyd said, as if it were a ridiculous question. 'I think she's fantastic. Except -' he grinned across at her '- except for being a bit thick, of course.'

Dinah had gone rather pink, and was staring at her feet. She did not speak until Miss Wilberforce said gently, 'Well, Dinah? How do you feel about it?'

In a choking voice, as though she could hardly speak, Dinah said, 'Please. Oh please.'

'That's all right, then,' Lloyd said in a satisfied tone.

'Look into My Eyes'

'Now please can we have something to eat? We're all absolutely starving.'

His mother looked at him in bewilderment. 'But you took a packed tea to school. You can't be hungry again. Whatever have you been up to?'

Lloyd, Harvey and Dinah looked at each other and grinned.

'Oh, nothing much,' they said. In perfect unison.