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and well behaved. Why is
this and why does Dinah
find herself conforming?

What is the secret of the
Headmaster's control? With
the help of her foster
brothers, Lloyd and Harvey,
Dinah is determined to
unravel the mystery of the
sinister Headmaster.

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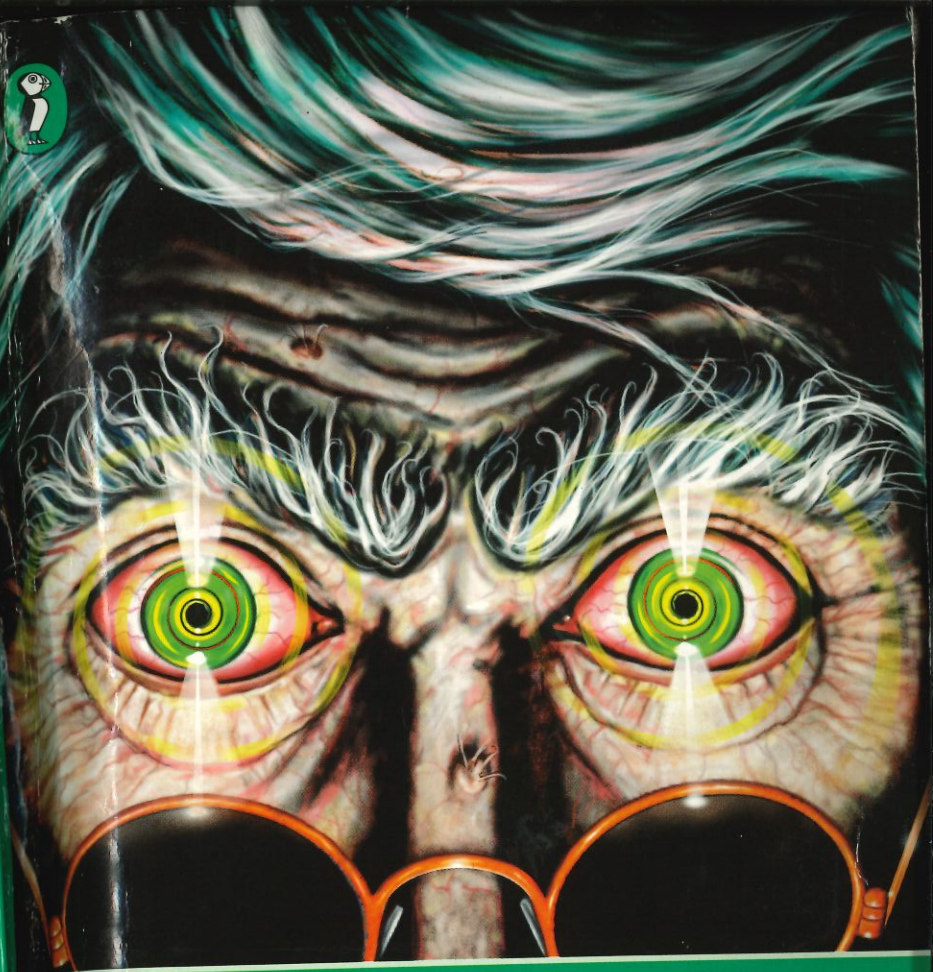
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GILLIAN CROSS

The Demon Headmaster

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CHAPTER I



A Girl in the House

‘Our last moments of freedom,’ Lloyd said darkly. He glowered round the battered walls of the playroom, at the motorbike posters peeling off the wall-paper 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*.

'Hi!' 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 wretched 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 jolly difficult it's been. 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.

'Hallo, Mrs Hunter. Hallo, 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.

'Hallo,' she said unenthusiastically.

CHAPTER 2



Not a Good Beginning

'Hallo,' 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.'

Not a Good Beginning

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. Rotten 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 screen flickered and then a picture swam into focus. A man with long purple hair and a purple-painted face was standing on his head, wagging 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 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.'

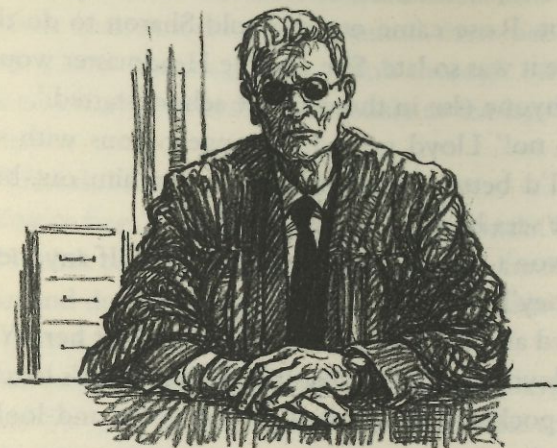
'Oh no!' Lloyd gasped. 'Orange onions with silver skins! I'd better go in and try to get him out before anyone sees him.'

'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.

CHAPTER 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 He. 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

The Headmaster

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 - rows!' 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.'

He looked so haughty and spoke so stiffly that Dinah was irritated.

'I don't know why you're being so bossy,' she said coldly. 'Anyone'd think you were one of the teachers, instead of a measly kid like anyone else.'

The Demon Headmaster

'All pupils shall obey the prefects,' chanted Rose, in the same stiff voice. 'The prefects are the voice of the Headmaster.'

Dinah felt puzzled, but she was determined not to show it. She thrust her chin up and looked straight at them. 'Well, I think you should take me to see the Headmaster. I've got a letter for him.'

The prefects looked doubtfully at each other. Then Jeff vanished inside the school, while the others stood barring Dinah's way. It had grown colder and the icy wind was turning her fingers blue. She lifted them to blow on them.

'Hands by your sides,' Rose rapped out instantly. 'Good deportment is the sign of an orderly mind.'

Stubbornly, Dinah went on blowing. At once, Rose said, 'Sarah! Simon!'

Dinah's hands were instantly seized by two of the other prefects, who forced them down to her sides and stood holding them like that until Jeff reappeared.

'The Headmaster will see you,' he said. 'Follow me.'

Thoroughly bewildered now, Dinah walked into the school after him and along a straight corridor. At her old school, all the walls had been covered with pictures and drawings done by the pupils, but these walls were completely blank, except for a framed notice hung half-way along. Dinah swivelled her head to read it as she passed.

The man who can keep order can rule the world.

Frowning slightly, she went on following Jeff until he

The Headmaster

came to a stop in front of a door which had the single word HEADMASTER painted on it.

He knocked.

'Come in.'

Jeff pushed the door open and waved Dinah inside, pulling it shut behind her.

As she stepped through, Dinah glanced quickly round the room. It was the tidiest office she had ever seen. There were no papers, no files, no pictures on the walls. Just a large, empty-topped desk, a filing cabinet and a bookcase with a neat row of books.

She took it all in in one second and then forgot it as her eyes fell on the man standing by the window. He was tall and thin, dressed in an immaculate black suit. From his shoulders, a long, black teacher's gown hung in heavy folds, like wings, giving him the appearance of a huge crow. Only his head was startlingly white. Fair hair, almost as colourless as snow, lay round a face with paper-white skin and pallid lips. His eyes were hidden behind dark glasses, like two black holes in the middle of all the whiteness.

She cleared her throat. 'Hallo. I'm Dinah Glass and I -'

He raised a long, ivory-coloured hand. 'Please do not speak until you are asked. Idle chatter is an inefficient waste of energy.'

Unnervingly, he went on staring at her for a moment or two without saying anything else. Dinah wished she could see the eyes behind the dark lenses. With his eyes hidden, his expression was unreadable.

Finally, he waved a hand towards an upright chair, pulled round to face the desk. 'Sit down.' He sat down himself, facing her, and pulled a sheet of paper out of a drawer.

'Dinah Glass,' he said crisply, writing it down in neat, precise script. 'You are being fostered by Mrs Hunter?'

Dinah nodded.

'Answer properly, please.'

'Yes, sir.'

'And why is she not here, to introduce you?'

'She couldn't come, but she's sent you a letter.'

Reaching across the desk, the Headmaster twitched it out of her hand and slit the envelope with a small steel paper knife. As he read the letter, Dinah settled herself more comfortably, expecting to be asked a string of questions.

But there were no questions. Instead, he pushed a sheet of paper across the desk towards her. 'This is a test,' he said. 'It is given to all new pupils.'

'Haven't you got a report on me?' Dinah said. 'From my other school?'

'No one else's reports are of any use to me,' said the Headmaster. 'Please be quiet and do the test.'

His voice was low, but somehow rather frightening. Dinah took a pen out of her pocket and looked down at the paper.

The questions were fairly hard. Mostly sums, with a bit of English thrown in and one or two brain-teasers. She knew that most children would have found them difficult to answer and she paused for a moment, working

out where she was going to make her deliberate mistakes. Not too many. Just enough to avoid trouble.

Then she picked up the pen and began to write. As she scribbled, she could feel him watching her and every time she glanced up he was the same. Pale and motionless, with two black circles where his eyes should have been. She was so nervous that she stumbled once or twice, getting some of the answers right where she had meant to make mistakes. To keep the balance, she had to botch up all the last three questions. Not very good. It did not look as convincing as it should have done. Her hand trembled slightly as she passed the paper back across the table.

The Headmaster scanned it carefully for a moment, then looked up at her.

'You are an intelligent girl.'

Dinah's heart sank, but, with an effort, she kept her face calm, meeting the Headmaster's gaze steadily. At last, he said, 'But you make too many mistakes. I wonder -' He chewed for a moment on his bottom lip. Then he shrugged. 'It doesn't matter. I dare say we shall find out all about you in due course.'

She looked down to the floor, trying not to seem too relieved, and waiting to be told which class she should go to. But the Headmaster did not seem in any hurry to get rid of her. He crumpled the test paper in his hand and dropped it into the rubbish bin. Then, slowly, he reached up a hand to take off his glasses.

Dinah found herself shivering. Ridiculously, she expected him to have pink eyes, because the rest of

his face was so colourless. Or perhaps no eyes at all . . .

But his eyes were not pink. They were large and luminous, and a peculiar sea-green colour. She had never seen eyes like them before, and she found herself staring into them. Staring and staring.

'Funny you should be so tired,' he said, softly. 'So early in the morning.'

She opened her mouth to say that she was not tired, but, to her surprise, she yawned instead.

'So tired,' crooned the Headmaster, his huge, extraordinary eyes fixed on her face. 'You can hardly move your arms and legs. You are so tired, so tired. You feel your head begin to nod and slowly, slowly your eyes are starting to close. So tired and sleepy.'

He's mad, Dinah thought muzzily. *The whole school's raving mad*. But she felt her eyes start to close, in spite of all she could do. She was drifting, drifting . . . All she could see was two pools, deep green like the sea, and she seemed to sink into them as she drifted off and off . . .

She opened her eyes again and gave a nervous laugh. 'I'm sorry. What did you say?'

'You fell asleep,' the Headmaster said coldly. 'You have been asleep for a long time.' He put his glasses on again.

'Asleep?' Dinah stared.

'For the whole morning.'

She looked at him in bewilderment and then glanced round at the clock on the wall. To her amazement, the hands pointed to twelve o'clock. 'But I don't understand.'

'Perhaps you should go to bed earlier,' he said, with a strange smile. 'Now go and have some dinner. The dining hall is at the end of this corridor. After dinner, you will go into the Hall with Class One.'

Still puzzled, Dinah nodded.

The Headmaster looked disagreeably at her. 'Your uniform,' he said, 'is not what I require.'

'It's what I had for my other school. When I was at the Children's Home.'

His lips narrowed. 'I dislike argument. It serves no useful purpose. You will appear in the correct school uniform by next Monday. I am sending a list to Mrs Hunter to ensure that she buys the proper items. I like to see all my pupils dressed in an orderly manner.' His voice rose a tone. 'I will not *endure* disorder. It is inefficient. Now go and have some dinner.'

Shakily, Dinah stood up and made for the door. As she reached out her hand for the handle, the Headmaster spoke again.

'I have put you in the same class as Lloyd Hunter, but I wish you to have as little as possible to do with Lloyd and Harvey. They are not a good example. They do not fit in at this school.'

'That -' Dinah had been going to say that it would be difficult. But just in time she remembered that he did not like argument. Better to be quiet and obey. Until she had had time to think everything over, to try and work out why the school was so strange. 'Yes sir,' she murmured.

As she went out and shut the door, her head was

The Demon Headmaster

humming with thoughts. Asleep? All the morning? It did not make sense. And had the Headmaster simply sat and stared at her all that time, without trying to wake her up? She shuddered and put a finger into her mouth to suck it thoughtfully.

Something made her take the finger out again and look at it. It was sore. There was a small red patch at one end, as if a pin had been driven into it. But she did not remember having pricked her finger. Frowning, she walked along the corridor towards the dining hall.

CHAPTER 4



'The Best School I've Ever Been To'

At the door of the dining hall, Dinah stopped. She must be too early. There was no sound coming from inside, none of the hubbub of chatter that she associated with dinner time. But when she pushed the door open she saw that the room was full. Table after table of demure children in green uniforms eating platefuls of sausages and chips. Going to the counter, she collected a tray and looked round for Lloyd and Harvey.

It was easy to see them. Although the dining hall was crowded, the table they sat at was half empty. The two of them were sharing it with Ian and two girls, one tall and red-haired and the other short and chubby. The

The Demon Headmaster

remaining five seats were vacant. Dinah walked across and sat down in one of them.

No one spoke to her. Harvey gave a shy smile, but Lloyd scowled and looked away and the others all stared at her, in a hostile way. Dinah chewed calmly for a moment before she said anything. Then she turned to Lloyd.

'I'm in your class.'

'Oh good,' Lloyd said sarcastically. 'Where've you been all the morning, then?'

'Went to see the Headmaster.' She finished off her first sausage.

Lloyd and Harvey exchanged glances and Ian looked at her curiously. 'What do you think of him?' he said.

Dinah opened her mouth to say that she thought he was creepy and peculiar. Instead, she heard her voice say, 'He is a marvellous man and this is the best school I've ever been to.' She put her knife and fork down.

'Ah ha!' said the chubby little girl savagely. The red-haired girl prodded her.

'Be quiet, Ingrid.'

'But Mandy -'

'Be quiet.'

The five of them went on eating stolidly, while Dinah studied their faces. But she could not guess anything from them. They were determinedly blank. After a moment or two, Mandy said casually, as if the question had not been asked already, 'What do you think of the Headmaster?'

Automatically, Dinah found herself repeating the same

'The Best School I've Ever Been To'

words. 'He is a marvellous man and this is the best school I've ever been to.'

'Ah ha!' said Ingrid again, unrepentantly. The others simply snorted and went on eating their dinner.

'But I don't understand.' Dinah looked round at them.

'They all say that.' Lloyd shrugged. 'All of *them*.' He waved a hand round at the rest of the dining hall. 'Try asking them some time. They think he's just as marvellous as you do. I can see you're going to fit in beautifully.'

Dinah looked over her shoulder at the green-uniformed children. Then she looked back at the hostile faces opposite her. She could not understand what was going on. She was not used to not understanding things. And she did not like it at all.

'I bet he said you were to go into the Hall after dinner,' Ingrid said sneeringly.

'Well, yes, he did. Doesn't everyone?'

'No,' Mandy said quietly. 'We don't. Everyone else does.'

Ian gave a languid, amused smile. 'We have extra work. With one of the prefects to watch over us.'

'And you needn't go thinking we're thick or anything.' Lloyd slurped up the rest of his semolina, the noise sounding disastrously loud in the quiet canteen. 'It's not that at all. We just aren't like the others.'

'Oh,' said Dinah. She still did not understand anything, but she made up her mind not to say so. She would just watch and wait.

Lloyd got to his feet. 'Mind you're not late to the

Hall,' he said nastily. 'You don't want to get into trouble on your first day, do you?'

He turned away, and the others followed him. Harvey, going last, whispered 'Good luck,' and then hurried after, as if he were afraid the others might have heard him. As the five of them passed down the long canteen, two hundred pairs of eyes watched them expressionlessly, while two hundred sets of teeth chewed in rhythm.

Ten minutes later, as if at a signal, everyone stood up. As Dinah was beginning to expect, the children formed a neat crocodile, without any pushing, and began to file silently out of the canteen.

Waiting until nearly everyone had gone, Dinah found herself walking behind Lucy, the little girl who had not known the capital of the United States. She reached out and touched her on the arm. Lucy turned round with a jerk and then smiled timidly.

'Thank you,' she whispered. 'For what you did in the playground.'

'S all right.' Dinah smiled back. 'Can't think why the others wouldn't tell you.'

Lucy shrugged and started to turn away again, but Dinah had had an idea.

'Have you been at this school a long time?' she murmured.

'Since I was five,' Lucy whispered. 'Ssh! We're not supposed to talk.' She looked nervously over her shoulder.

'There's no one there,' Dinah said encouragingly. 'We're the last. Do you like the school?'

She had half expected the answer, but it was still a shock when she heard it. Lucy turned to look at her and said in a rather mechanical voice, 'The Headmaster is a marvellous man, and this is the best school I've ever been to.'

'It's the *only* school you've ever been to,' Dinah said.

But Lucy only looked puzzled and put her finger to her lips. Dinah walked on quietly, her thin face wrinkled with concentration. There was something very queer here. Something not like a school at all. Perhaps she would understand it better after she had seen what the Assembly in the Hall was like.

Following Lucy in, she sat down in a chair at the back of the Hall. It was full of children, and teachers were seated on chairs round the edge, as silent and stony-faced as their pupils. After a moment, the Headmaster appeared. He stalked up the aisle between the chairs, his long gown flapping behind him, seeming even taller than Dinah had remembered. Slowly he climbed the steps up to the stage and turned to look down on the crowded hall below him. There was no need for him to call for silence. Everyone, teachers and children alike, was gazing at him. With a thin smile, he reached up and took off his glasses and his huge green eyes stared out at them.

Dinah felt that he was looking directly at her. She could not move her eyes away from his steady green stare. Then he began to speak.

'Funny,' he said gently, 'that you should all be so tired. So early in the afternoon.'

But that's what he said before, Dinah thought, with a

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'Funny,' he said gently, 'that you should all be so tired. So early in the afternoon.'

But that's what he said before, Dinah thought, with a

jerk of surprise. *When I was in his office. It's peculiar.*

Her amazement had jolted her out of the dreamy vagueness that his voice was producing in the others. All of a sudden, she felt grimly stubborn. She had had enough peculiar happenings for one day. She tried to turn her attention away from the tall black figure on the stage, so that she could think. But it was very difficult. There seemed to be no escaping those eyes. Then, all at once, like a light, she had a little flicker of understanding.

That's it! She thought triumphantly. *When he takes his glasses off – when I see his eyes – I want to go to sleep. And that's when things get peculiar.*

With an almost gleeful feeling, she shut her own eyes tightly, blacking out the Hall, the rows of yawning children and the compelling green stare. This time she would not get caught.

'You all look very tired,' said the Headmaster's hissing voice.

No I don't, Dinah said rebelliously, inside her head, behind her closed eyes.

'So tired,' he went on. 'Your hands and feet are heavy, and your eyelids are like lead.'

No they're not, Dinah thought ferociously. She turned her head sideways and, with great caution, opened one eye. All around her, she could see heads starting to nod. Children were rubbing their eyes. Teachers were giving huge, uncontrollable yawns. Then, gradually, the eyelids closed. Dinah shut her own eyes again and listened.

'You are asleep,' the Headmaster hissed down the Hall.

Ha ha! No I'm not, Dinah's inside voice said rudely

and triumphantly. She was going to do it. She was going to get the better of him.

'When you wake up,' his voice went on silkily, 'you will remember that you saw a film about ants. If anyone asks, you will say, "It was a film about ants. It was very interesting. We saw how they build their nests and look after their eggs and how their queen lives." If you are asked any more questions, you will say, "I don't remember." Now, repeat that, please. What did you do in Assembly today?'

'It was a film about ants . . .' the children started, their voices wooden, in perfect unison. Dinah joined in, trying to sound as lifeless as the rest of them, but all the time she was gloating, because *she* knew that what she was saying was a lie. Even if she did not understand why she was supposed to be lying.

As the children stopped speaking, there was a pause and, unable to resist the urge, Dinah opened her eyes a fraction to glance at the rows and rows of apparently sleeping children, their faces turned to the front and their hands clasped in their lap. There was something sinister about the sight and, before she could stop herself, she shuddered. Instantly, she closed her eyes tightly and dropped her head forward, imitating theirs, but it was too late. From the front of the Hall she heard heavy footsteps coming down the aisle towards her.

'Dinah Glass, open your eyes,' said the Headmaster's voice softly.

Mechanically, she opened them, letting her gaze settle on a distant point, way past the Headmaster, hoping that

he would think she was asleep. She could not see his face, but for a moment she thought that she had succeeded in deceiving him. He stood perfectly still, watching her.

Then she heard him say. 'Your left arm is completely numb. You can feel nothing.'

Oh yes I can, her mind said obstinately – a split second before she realized what he was going to do.

He leaned forward and she felt a sharp pain, darting into her left forearm. Unable to stop herself, she winced, looking down to see him pull out the pin with which he had pricked her.

'As I thought,' he said sharply. 'Pretending. Look at me, Dinah, when I'm speaking to you.'

She went on looking stubbornly at the floor.

'Look at me!' This time his voice was loud and threatening. Frightened in spite of herself, Dinah looked up.

He was staring straight at her, a lock of pale hair falling over his forehead and his green eyes wide and translucent.

'I can see that you are not yet accustomed to our ways,' he said, more quietly. 'I hope you are not going to be a person who won't cooperate with me.'

'It depends what you want,' Dinah said coldly.

'But it's not what *I* want.' He sounded almost amused. 'It's what *you* want.'

'What I want?'

'Yes,' he crooned. 'What you want. You want to go to sleep. Because you're so tired. So very, very tired.'

Too late, she realized that she had let herself get caught off guard. This time, try as she would, she could not

close her eyes or turn them away from those great pools of green that seemed to swim closer and closer . . .

'You are so sleepy,' murmured the Headmaster. 'You feel you have to go to sleep . . .'

I'll forget it all, Dinah thought frantically. *I'll forget everything I've discovered. What a waste.*

As her eyelids began to droop, she gathered all her energies together, to try and fix something in her mind.

Remember it, remember it, hypnosis, hypnosis, HYPNOTISM. Grimly, she struggled to concentrate. *Remember it, remember it, hypnosis, hypno-, hyp- . . .*

But the words in her head drifted off into silence and floated away on a great tide of sleep as she slumped slowly forwards in her chair.

This time she did not feel a thing when the Headmaster stuck the pin into her arm.



Assembly – Keep Out

Harvey looked up from his page of sums and stared out of the window, fidgeting. All around him, the others were working hard. Ian was writing steadily, in his elegant, sloping script, Mandy was frowning over a difficult problem, and Ingrid was running her hands through her untidy hair and chewing the end of her pencil. Even Lloyd was not paying him any attention. But Harvey could not concentrate. Because Dinah had made him think about Assembly again. What *did* go on in the Hall when they were all in here?

'Harvey!' said Rose sharply, looking up from the book she was reading. 'Why aren't you working?'

'I'm just thinking for a moment.' That was true enough, anyway. He waited until Rose was bent over her book again and then prodded Lloyd. 'What d'you think they're doing?' he mouthed noiselessly, pointing towards the Hall.

Lloyd frowned at him and mouthed back. 'Films, of course. Get on with your work.'

Harvey looked across at the Hall and frowned. The blackout curtains were certainly drawn, as if for a film. But all round the edges of the curtains he could see thin streaks of light. And it was always like that. Every day. He often looked across while he was supposed to be working, and he had never seen the lights go out. Not once. So they could not really be watching films. What *were* they doing? He wriggled in his chair with frustrated curiosity.

'Harvey Hunter, *will* you sit still and get on!' Rose was really irritated now. Harvey could see that he would have to be careful, or something nasty would happen. He was just about to go back to his sums when he suddenly had an idea.

'But I can't concentrate, Rose,' he said, making his voice into a whine. 'I want to go to the toilet.'

Rose looked even more annoyed. 'You should learn not to be so disorganized.'

'Please, Rose.' He knew he sounded stupid, but he could not bear it any longer. He *had* to go and have a look in the Hall. 'Please. I can't wait till the end of school.'

She looked rattled for a moment, as the prefects always

did when you asked them something unexpected. Then she nodded reluctantly. 'Oh, all right. But be as quick as you can.'

As he jumped up, he saw the others looking at him. Mandy's gentle face was worried. She had guessed he was up to something. He slipped quickly out of the door before she could mouth a question at him and ran along the corridor on tiptoe, until he reached the Hall doors.

The double doors had glass panels at the top, with heavy curtains drawn across. By stretching up and peering, he could see through a narrow gap at one side, and he stood there looking.

There was no screen on the stage, no projector, no sign at all of anyone getting ready to show a film. Instead, everyone in the Hall, teachers and children, were staring fixedly at the stage.

On the stage stood the Headmaster, stooped forward like a giant vulture. Harvey saw, with amazement, that he had taken off his dark glasses. *But I've never seen him like that*, Harvey thought. *Except on the first day I came here*. He leaned further forwards, pressing his nose against the glass in an effort to try and find out what was going on.

The Headmaster seemed to be reading aloud from a book that he held in his hands. As Harvey watched he stopped, then glanced up and spoke a few words. Immediately, all the people in the Hall started to chant in a regular monotone, as if they were repeating back, from memory, what he had read. It must have been pages

long, because the voices went on and on and on. But, struggle as he might, Harvey could not make out more than a few words. He caught '... system ...' several times and, once, a number '... minus twenty-six point nine ...', but none of it made any sense. And still the voices went tirelessly on.

It was tempting to stay, to try to find out more, but just in time Harvey remembered that he would spoil his excuse if he did not get back quickly. Gnawing his bottom lip, he hurried away along the corridor.

He did not look back. If he had, he would have seen Jeff slide out from behind a tall bookcase beyond the Hall doors and stare after him with a gloating smile on his face. But it never occurred to him to glance over his shoulder. He was too busy getting back to the classroom.

As he let himself in, Rose scowled at him.

'You were too long.'

'Sorry.' He slid into his chair. Better write hard for a bit, until she had stopped watching him. He scratched away industriously, keeping an eye on her under his eyelids. When he was certain that she was deep in her book, he scrawled a message on a spare piece of paper.

They weren't watching films, so sucks. They were listening to the Headmaster.

With great care, he flicked it across on to Lloyd's desk. Lloyd gave him a disapproving frown, but when he had read the note he raised his eyebrows and a few moments later another note landed on Harvey's desk.

We'll ask Dinah when we get home.

As they sat over their tea, Dinah was even quieter than usual. She gazed into her cup, watching the brown liquid swirl round, and Mrs Hunter had to ask her three times whether she wanted another piece of cake.

'Sorry.' She looked up at last.

'Thinking about school?' Mrs Hunter smiled. 'I was going to ask if you had a nice day. What did you think of it?'

'I think,' Dinah said steadily, 'that the Headmaster is a marvellous man and this is the best school I've ever been to.'

Harvey sniffed scornfully and looked at Lloyd, but Lloyd was watching Dinah. Her face had gone white, almost as if she were frightened by what she had said. The next instant, she had lowered her eyes and began to munch her piece of cake.

'Let's all go in the playroom,' Lloyd said suddenly. 'Come on, H. You coming, Dinah?'

Dinah swallowed her mouthful of cake. 'If you like,' she said carefully.

She followed them through and sat down as Lloyd closed the door.

'Now,' he said, 'suppose you tell us what you were all doing in the Hall this afternoon.'

Dinah said mechanically, 'We saw a film.'

Lloyd looked knowingly at Harvey. 'Oh yes? What was it about?'

Dinah took a deep breath and began to talk as if she were reciting. 'It was a film about ants. It was very interesting. We saw how they build their nests and look

after their eggs and how their queen lives.' She stopped abruptly.

'What else was it about?' Lloyd said.

'I don't remember.'

'Did the Headmaster talk to you about it afterwards?'

'I don't remember.'

'Rubber ravioli!' Lloyd burst out, 'don't you remember anything? You're a proper dunce, aren't you?'

Harvey giggled suddenly. 'She'll never be on Eddy Hair's Great School Quiz.'

'Oh, shut up about stupid Eddy Hair,' snapped Dinah. 'What's all this about, anyway?'

'Oh, nothing,' Lloyd said airily. 'We just wanted to know what happened, that's all. But if you're too thick to remember anything . . .'

'I *always* remember things,' Dinah said slowly. 'Always. I don't quite understand.' For a moment she looked as if she were going to go on. Then her face snapped shut and she shook her head. 'I've told you what I can. I can't tell you any more.'

'But I can tell you something,' Harvey said.

'Be quiet, you idiot.' Lloyd gave him a shove.

'No.' Harvey looked obstinate. 'It's not fair to ask her questions and then not tell her. Besides, I want to hear what she's got to say.' He turned back to Dinah. 'I sneaked out of our room and had a look through the Hall door. I didn't see any sign of a film.'

Dinah stared at him and he nodded.

'That's right. Nothing. No screen or projector or anything. And I was watching from across the playground

all the rest of the time. The lights in the Hall didn't go out once. So you can't have seen a film. You're lying.'

'What did you see?' Dinah said hesitantly.

'I saw you all sitting looking at the Headmaster on the stage. He read something long out of a book and you all repeated it back. I don't know what it was, but you must know. You all said it from memory.'

Dinah frowned harder and shook her head. 'I don't remember anything like that happening.'

'Huh!' Lloyd sat down and stretched his legs out. 'What did happen then?'

'I told you. We saw a film. It was a film about ants.' She was talking in that steady, reciting voice again. 'It was very interesting. We saw how they build their nests and look after their eggs and how their queen lives.'

'That's what you said before.' Harvey bounced up. 'It's *exactly* what you said before.'

'And it's not true.' Lloyd banged his hand down on the table. 'So why do you keep saying it?'

'I - I don't know.' For a moment, Dinah looked bewildered. Then her face pinched. 'I don't want to talk about it. Why do you keep going on about it?'

'Because it's ridiculous,' Lloyd snapped. 'You heard what Harvey saw.'

Dinah was beginning to look annoyed. A faint pink flush ran along her cheekbones, and the tip of her nose turned white.

'You hadn't got any business to be seeing anything,' she said crossly. 'What did you think you were doing, snooping around like that?'

'I thought there was something peculiar going on,' Harvey said mildly. 'And I was right, wasn't I?'

'You don't know anything about it,' Dinah muttered. 'And if you go on nosing, you'll get into trouble.'

'I told you not to tell her anything, H!' Lloyd burst out. 'Bright green baked beans! Suppose she goes off and tells the Headmaster what you said?'

Harvey turned pale. 'Oh, but she wouldn't do that. Would you, Di?'

'Of course not,' Dinah started to say. Then she stopped and looked craftily at Lloyd. 'At least, I might be tempted to. If you don't leave me alone.'

'Don't you dare!' Lloyd jumped to his feet. 'Harvey hasn't done anything wrong.'

'Oh no?' Dinah said triumphantly. 'Then why is he looking so scared?'

She was right. Harvey's round face had crumpled with fright, and he was twitching nervously at the edge of his jumper.

'He was silly, that's all,' Lloyd said. 'I've told him a hundred times not to get involved with things. But he didn't do anything *wrong*.'

'Can't he speak for himself?' Dinah said scornfully. 'Look at him. He's shaking like a jelly. He's nothing but a baby. Running round the school and peering in at windows. It's so childish.'

'That's all you know.' Lloyd had gone red in the face. 'It was a silly thing to do, but it was very brave. Only I don't suppose you would understand.'

'Why not?' Suddenly, Dinah went very quiet. She

stopped looking at Lloyd and turned to Harvey. 'Why don't you explain to me? I know *he* doesn't like me -' she waved a hand towards Lloyd '- but you've been quite nice really. And I want to understand. Why was it so brave of you to look in at the Hall?'

'Don't tell her a thing,' Lloyd said sharply.

'Go on,' Dinah said in a soft voice. 'Tell me, Harvey. What's going on in that school? Why is everyone so well behaved? And what do you think happens in Assembly?'

'I - I don't know,' Harvey stuttered, 'but -'

Suddenly, Lloyd darted at Dinah, pushing her through the door and into the hall, with one gigantic shove. Slamming the door shut, he leaned against it and glared at Harvey.

'Haven't you got any sense at all, H? Can't you get it into your thick head that she's one of them? If you tell her anything - anything at all - she'll probably go off and repeat it all to the Headmaster. And then you'll get me and all the others into trouble as well.'

Harvey went even paler. 'I don't think she would. Not really. Would she?'

'I don't know,' Lloyd said grimly. 'We'll just have to wait and see, won't we?'

Harvey chewed nervously at the end of his finger.

From outside in the hall came the sound of voices. Mr Hunter had come in and he was saying to Dinah, 'How did you get on at school, then? What do you think of it?'

Dinah's mechanical voice came clearly through the door.

'I think the Headmaster is a marvellous man and this is the best school I've ever been to.'