

THE DERRING-DO CLUB

and the

Empire of the Dead

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WATLEDGE BOOKS

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CHAPTER I

Miss Deering-Dolittle

It was during Latin that the Austro-Hungarians arrived with their dogs and zombies to kill everyone at the Eden College for Young Ladies. As the lesson started with the conjugation of 'amo', Miss Earnestine Deering-Dolittle lifted her skirts and crossed the threshold into the East Wing. This forbidden zone was protected by a thick rope spanning the wide corridor, an 'Out Of Bounds' sign and - strongest of all - Miss Hardcastle's long lecture during assembly about expulsion: the shame such a punishment would inflict upon their families and the commensurate decline in the marriage prospects of the disgraced young lady.

"And, girls, I have turned off the heating."

Earnestine's breath condensed in the still air. She longed to be expelled: she could bear the shame and didn't give two hoots for marriage; after all, she'd read Mary Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*. However, she would never be able to bring herself to explain such appalling disobedience to her two younger sisters, Georgina and Charlotte. Indeed, that very morning she had given her two siblings a very stern lecture about the necessity of controlling their curiosity: they were here to study and not to go exploring.

It had been Earnestine's burden as the eldest sister to cut the trail for them to follow. She knew she was well suited with her sharp, angular features and her pragmatic common sense. Georgina was the beautiful one, with a lovely round face that far was too trusting, and Charlotte was simply pretty and frivolous. They were both so naïve:

their looks, or others' reactions to their looks, insulated them from the ways of the world.

So, she had raised her finger and had said, clearly and firmly: "No more adventures!"

It was dark and mysterious in the East Wing, but Earnestine had come prepared with both a dark lantern and her trusty Misell Electric Device. The latter was known as a 'flashlight', which was both its name and its instructions. She flicked it on for a moment, and then let the yellow light go out. To keep it lit continuously would be to drain the battery. Her father had bought the almost magical object back from a visit to New York, where all the policemen had been given one by the American Electrical Novelty and Manufacturing Company.

Once she felt she was deep enough in the forbidden zone, Earnestine used a Bryant and May safety match to light the dark lantern. As soon as it had flared into life, she slid the shutter down to create a narrow beam of illumination. Even so, she kept her lamp as carefully shielded as she could, so as not to be seen, but her hand could not contain the light any more than her mind could grasp her reasons for this reconnoitre.

She was not, under any circumstances, going 'up the river', but her thoughts meandered, which would not do at all. Put simply, she was a Prefect investigating an incident before reporting it, that was all, and it mattered not a jot that it involved the new Gardener's Hand, a mere youth, who would insist upon greeting her every morning as she crossed the quad.

"Good morning, Miss Earnestine," he said in his thick Germanic accent.

It was intolerable. For goodness sake: she was the eldest, so the proper greeting was 'Miss Deering-Dolittle'.

And he was only a gardener, less than a proper gardener, and also a presumptuous oik. She wouldn't even have known he'd been bundled towards the East Wing by his fellow gardeners, if she hadn't been looking out for him. There seemed to have been a lot of gardeners hired recently. Hopefully, they'd give him the good thrashing he deserved for his attempts to consort with the girls; rightly so, for how irritatingly he murdered his vowels, how jolly grating was his endearing smile, how sparkling his bright blue eyes, how tousled his dark hair, how tall he stood and-

Earnestine stopped still and, in a heartbeat, determined to do the right thing and go straight back to the Prefect's Room.

As Earnestine crept on, shafts of flickering yellow from her lamp played across the moulded plaster ceiling and along the oak panelling, chasing shadows as she went deeper into the maze of the East Wing.

Her trail followed a sound long before Earnestine realised there was anything to hear. It was hard to make out: a distant choir perhaps, fractured and disjointed, sometimes silent, and beguiling. The damp brickwork funnelled the echoes up through the chimneys and dumb-waiters from below. She stopped and listened, heard nothing more; she shook her head to clear it of any wild imaginings.

This was stupid: Miss Hardcastle would give her lines if she found out. *I must not explore*, a thousand times. *I must not explore*, she repeated to herself, a thousand times, *I must not explore*. It was a mantra now, something that had lost all meaning, for her footsteps took her further along the passageway to the stone steps that led to the basement as if drawn down by distant baritone sirens. She knew her way around the East Wing having explored (not 'explored', 'wandered', that was a better word)... wandered through

every nook and cranny when she first arrived at the Eden College for Young Ladies. It had always been dark, even when the summer meant it was 'in bounds'.

Except there had been lights the other night as there had been for over a week at least, so the Family Curse had reared its head and up the river she went... no, no! She was stronger than that.

I must not explore, I must not explore.

She swapped the lamp to her left hand as her right cramped. Having exhausted the delights of English, French and Latin, she'd have to scrawl the repetitions in Greek next.

At least Georgina and Charlotte weren't affected. Earnestine was thankful for that. If she could keep them safe from the wanderlust, then she would consider she had done her job. Let Miss Hardcastle catch her, let her have five hundred lines - a thousand - just so long as her sisters didn't find out. Any penance was worth that. She'd give herself lines when she returned to the school proper.

Keep them safe, mother had said, no exploring, no trouble, no adventures.

Voices, without question: still distorted by the echoes and full of hard, sharp consonants. There were Slavic, German or one of those other harsh Latin-less languages that grated as much as romantic French poetry when droned by girls who didn't know the meaning of the stanzas.

Earnestine froze: aware of her lamp swinging vast shadows across the wall and sending its beam forward.

Closer now, she could distinguish more than one voice, each heavy, deep and jolly definitely male.

"Es ist kalt."

"Ja."

Eden College for Young Ladies boasted three male members of staff: a Mathematics Professor, a Caretaker and a Gardener, but none of those doddering old gentlemen ever had a stamp as heavy or a voice as deep. They must be those extra Gardeners, all gathered together in the forbidden East Wing.

I must not explore, thought Earnestine, craning her head around the corner.

The room beyond had been emptied of all its academic trumpery and instead a card table and some chairs had been set up. Three men gathered around.

The one facing her had buck teeth and his colleague was a small man, probably smaller than Earnestine herself. A third man, bulkily built and wearing a hat indoors, paced, stamping his feet again to keep his circulation going. For all the world, they looked like giant toy soldiers having a tea party while they waited for their tale of adventure to begin, and it reminded Earnestine of *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*: the March Hare, the Dormouse and the pacing Mad Hatter, except that instead of cucumber sandwiches, the table was covered in discarded playing cards from an abandoned hand of whist or bridge... or one of those salacious gambling games.

Behind her: a cough.

Earnestine spun round - a fourth man was so close that she had to step back. Chairs scrapped loudly as the other men stood.

This new man in front of her was young, perhaps in his mid-twenties, with the beginnings of black stubble that shadowed his features and made his bright eyes sparkle. It was the Gardener's Hand, cutting a dashing figure in a bizarre uniform.

“Wer sind Sie?”

“Was ist das?”

“Mühe!”

“Excuse me,” said Earnestine, “but I think you should explain yourselves - at once!”

She stood her ground, chin up, shoulders back, defiant.

“Es ist ein der Mädchen.”

“I would trouble you not to speak in that appalling... whatever it is, and answer me directly.”

“Was machen wir?”

“Do any of you speak English?” Earnestine rounded on the company, taking them all in. “Do you speak English, Eng-*lish*! Parlez-vous français? Operor vos narro Latin?”

“I speak the English,” said the Gardener’s Hand.

Earnestine turned on him. He smiled - damned impertinence - and Earnestine felt her resolve softening inexplicably. Not that she intended to show that, of course: “Would you care to explain yourself, Sir.”

“My... friends and I are playing a little card game to pass the time.”

“I can see that! And clearly you thought dressing up in military costume was part of card playing. Perhaps I didn’t make myself clear: what are you *men* doing in my *girls*’ school?”

They honestly looked crestfallen.

“You may well be the March Hare, Mad Hatter, Dormouse and the...” Earnestine ran out of characters around the table at the Tea Party and looked to the young man’s amused smile for inspiration: “Cheshire Cat, but-”

Gunshots sounded from above, accompanied by barking dogs.

“Was ist das?”

“Ich erklärte Ihnen, dass ich etwas gehört habe.”

“Wo ist Hans?”

“English and answer the question.”

The March Hare went over to the corner and pulled out some rifles wrapped in rags, which he handed to the others.

“Haben Sie Ihren Revolver?”

“Ja!” said the Gardener’s Hand. He took out a revolver from a holster hidden beneath his coat, flipped it open to check it was loaded, and then tucked it back beneath his layers.

“Ich sollte das überprüfen.”

“Konnten Sie gesehen werden?”

“All this show... excuse me, I am speaking!”

“Nein, aber wir müssen gehen.”

“Und die Kinder?”

“Wir können nichts anders; die Zukunft von Europa ist in Frage.”

The Gardener’s Hand pointed at the glaring Earnestine: “Und sie?”

“Was!?”

“Wir nehmen sie mit uns.”

“Wir können das nicht.”

“Wir lassen sie nicht,” said the Gardener’s Hand standing directly in front of the tallest.

“Wir können sie nicht mitnehmen. Gehen wir.”

“Wir können sie nicht verlassen.”

There was a stand-off now between the Gardener’s Hand and the others: the Cheshire Cat looking up to the bigger, older and well-built Mad Hatter, but the Cheshire Cat dominated.

“This is all jolly fascinating, I’m sure, but-”

“You are coming with us,” said the Gardener’s Hand.

“I most certainly am not,” Earnestine said.

“I am afraid you must.”

“Who are you to be giving orders?”

“I am...” He looked at the others briefly. “Pieter.”

“Well, Mister, I don’t care if you are Peter the Great, I am not-”

He looked over her shoulder: “Metz.”

Earnestine was seized from behind, a greatcoat thrown over her, and they bundled her backwards. As she struggled defiantly, she lost her footing and dropped the lantern; it clattered away, its light useless in the enforced, suffocating darkness. Her boots struck it a few times. Her hand found her flashlight, which she held like a baton, but her arms were pinned so it too slipped from her fingers. She kicked out, some of her attacks found their mark, but the thick material was smothering, overpowering, all encompassing...

...I must not explore, I must not explore...

Miss Georgina

Georgina could see distant figures moving towards the college in an arrow formation. They were dark shapes against the virgin snow like a daguerreotype negative of Miss Price’s screeched chalk didactics on the blackboard. She longed to be out there, or indeed anywhere, instead of being trapped in the airless sepia dungeon of Classroom 5.

“Again!”

Georgina joined in the monotone: “Amo, amas, amat, amamus, amatis, amant...”

It was a lovely day, or had been before the grey clouds rolled over the distant mountains, and the time should have been spent striking out amongst the peaks and valleys on a long, bracing walk, but the School Rules were very clear on the matter: girls were not to exert themselves. They had to stay indoors in an ever diminishing Bastille as the Principal, Miss Hardcastle, strove to save on heating. Everyone knew that Miss Hardcastle would rather squirrel

away their fees in a local bank than stock up the coal bunker. Classes were now forced to cram together in one half of the sprawling building as the entire East Wing had been abandoned early.

Through the ice crystal-etched window and across the quad, Georgina saw the supposedly dark windows of the forbidden wing. There had been a light, she was sure of it, just before that huge shadow had travelled over the school accompanied by the whirring sound of... who knew what? Certainly something like a firefly had flitted from window to window on the ground floor. The East Wing was occupied; she was sure of it. Before first bell, she and her sisters had gathered in the ski locker room and Georgina had told the others of her observations: the lights, the smoke and the ice melting from the eaves - all sure signs of occupation. All the girls had been in class, she'd pointed out, and all the teachers never left the roaring fire in the staff room.

But Earnestine had told her not to be silly: Oh Georgina, how foolish, the caretaker must check for leaks in the roof and needs a light to see his way; he must check the chimneys, hence the smoke, and, finally, did she not realise that the sun does melt ice. The East Wing was 'Out of Bounds' and that's all there was to it.

Georgina had looked to Charlotte for support.

Charlotte had beamed with pleasure at being included in the discussion and had said: "Do you think soldiers polish their buttons every day?"

Charlotte - oh, honestly.

If only she could get out, Georgina thought: somewhere else, anywhere else, anywhere at all.

Outside, the men were closer, tearing up the white landscape as if scrawling black marks across an empty page. They reached the border of the college and filed

through the stone archway into the quad. Behind them, shambling through the snow, were numerous other figures like an approaching army.

Miss Price thwacked Georgina on the back of her hand to snap her attention back to the lesson. The other girls giggled until Miss Price's angry scowl raked the classroom.

"Miss Georgina," Miss Price said, "do pay attention."

"Miss?"

"And?"

Georgina panicked: "And, Miss?"

"The third person second participle?"

"The third person... of..."

"Amo?"

"Oh, yes, Miss, am, er...um?"

Miss Price sucked on her teeth and then tutted, an angry explosive sound that was her habit.

"*Amerum*, a novel conjugation, certainly," said Miss Price. The rest of the class giggled at their teacher's wit. "Honestly, Georgina, you are an utter disappointment. Your mind wanders like the tributaries of... what was that river your father and mother went up: the Nile, the Amazon?"

"Miss, it was-"

"I wish..." Miss Price searched her mind for the most cutting remark possible and, with an unerring accuracy, she found the most apposite phrase: "...you were more like your sister?"

Georgina's face burned more than the back of her hand. She wanted to see Miss Price dead. She knew to which sister the Latin harridan was referring and it wasn't Charlotte. Charlotte was silly, Charlotte was foolish, Charlotte was... never even expected to emulate the oh-so-wonderful eldest. Everything Georgina did was measured against the yardstick of the perfect Miss Deering-Dolittle,

Earnestine, who never did anything wrong; whereas Georgina was always considered lacking.

“Julietta.”

“Amazo, *amazon*... sorry Miss - I was a little lost. I mean, amo, amas, amat, amamus, amatis, amant.”

“Very good, Julietta.”

Julietta beamed a smile just for Georgina.

It was so unfair, because it had been Charlotte whose action had led to their incarceration in this Swiss-bordered prison, and yet somehow it was Georgina's fault for not keeping an eye on the wayward child. The responsibility was surely the faultless Miss Deering-Dolittle's: after all, it had been her idea to delegate. But the blame had landed on Georgina, who was such a disappointment: the older Earnestine had even gained credit for having the fortitude to bear the indignities heaped upon her by her younger sisters.

The problem was that no-one understood how much worse life was for the middle sister of three: Earnestine had that bearing and deportment that came naturally to one with such a regal, elegant appearance, and Charlotte had blonde prettiness on her side, but Georgina knew that she was dumpy with a round, blank face. She was the one who would be passed over when it came to marriage.

Miss Price marched between the desks to the front and began stabbing the Latin word for 'love' with her long rule.

A pellet of paper struck Georgina from behind and when she turned round, several of the other girls were pulling faces. Georgina ignored them and tried to concentrate on the board instead, but her gaze was drawn back to virgin snow before Miss Price reached the first person plural.

When the first group reached the College buildings, men split off to go left and right around the building.

Georgina continued to watch as the distant majority, a mass that lurched forward with a strange mix of marching and stumbling, negotiated the stone archway into the grounds. There were dogs too, great barking beasts that strained at their leashes with a wild ferocity.

In the first group, the lead figure, striding ahead, looked by his bearing like an officer. He pulled off his leather gloves, gathered them together and then slapped his palm before glancing up: Georgina caught sight of his aquiline features, dark moustache and saturnine beard. She jerked back like any guilty schoolgirl and when she leant forward again, her breath freezing on the pane and creating a complex craquelure of ice, he had vanished from view.

“...amant,” said Miss Price.

Somewhere in the distance, a bell jangled for attention and Georgina heard barking and male voices.

Glancing across to the East Wing, Georgina saw that light again and this time it was joined by another.

There was pounding on the front door and she heard the Caretaker’s voice, shouting and then subdued. It couldn’t have been the Caretaker in the East Wing then, Georgina realised, could it, because he couldn’t be in two places at once? She’d tell Earnestine and that would show her, the pompous-

There was a sharp crack, like a distant shot.

“Georgina!”

Georgina snapped her head round to study the conjugation of ‘amo’.

“The third person second participle is?”

Georgina was saved by a commotion outside the room.

“Wait here, page fifty two onwards,” said Miss Price. She went outside, ready to vent her spleen at the girls responsible for the noise; however, she returned forthwith. “Girls, we’re wanted downstairs. Girls!”

The class rose quickly, eager to be away from Latin, and began filing out.

“Leave that!” Miss Price commanded: “Hurry along now!”

At the top of the stairs, Georgina saw the other classes gathered below in the hallway with a group of officers. There was a barking dog and some strange shambling men. Miss Hardcastle was arguing with them, but they seemed adamant. Charlotte would probably be able to identify them as Dragoons or Fusiliers or-

Oh my giddy aunt!

Charlotte was not with her class. The stupid girl had wandered off - just typical, absolutely typical. Didn't the silly thing hear any of the taunts and jibes from the other girls? Earnestine wasn't there either. She was probably searching for Georgina, armed with disapproving looks, to ask why Georgina had lost Charlotte - again.

The man-in-charge was shouting: “All of you in the library! All, I say!”

Georgina tarried, knowing just where to slip out of line and down a side corridor to the back stairs.

A voice shouted after her, mocking: “Off exploring!” It was Julietta, smiling in that sweet and irksome manner.

The others joined in: “Amazo, Amazon, I'm-a-spot, am-as-gone, am-as-lost, as-an-ant?”

Georgina turned back: “Don't be so childish.”

“Derring-do, derring-do...”

“Drop dead.”

“Oooh...” but one of the teachers shuffled the line along and Georgina slipped away.

The back stairs had been the servants' stairs before Miss Hardcastle had taken over the building. Down Georgina went and then along to the Geography Room.

This was where Charlotte would be, daydreaming about soldiers no doubt.

Except, she wasn't.

Nor was she in the next classroom, History, reading about famous battles.

"Georgina!" It was Miss Trenchard. Georgina was in trouble now, but at least it wasn't Earnestine scolding her. "What are you doing here, girl?"

"Miss, I'm trying to find Charlotte."

"Are you lost, Georgina? Going off to search for another family member?"

Georgina's face burned: it was awful getting these comments from her school 'chums', but utterly unbearable for the teachers to be joining in.

"I'm sure she can find herself," Miss Trenchard continued. She tapped her yardstick on the floor impatiently. "Come along, you are wanted in the Library."

"Why, Miss?"

"Don't be impertinent, girl."

Miss Trenchard ushered her into the corridor and propelled her along towards the library. When Georgina glanced back, the teacher was just going into the Geography Room, presumably to check for other errant pupils.

Georgina's head stopped first, her feet a moment later, so that she was left leaning backwards, sniffing. The smell was off-putting and it took her a moment to fail to recognise it. What was that?

At the far end, a group of men shambled towards her. Perhaps they would know, she wondered, but something was wrong, very wrong. They moved awkwardly like puppets, as if they weren't put together properly, and a low moaning issuing from their throats. Their clothes were old, worn and filthy, and their skin was yellow. On the

side of each of their heads was a brass box that - Georgina saw with wide eyes - was nailed into their skulls! A spark, like miniature lightning, played inside the metal casing, and the creatures jerked and straightened up.

“Ach,” said a smart officer standing behind the monsters, “do you like my little pets?”

He held up a device, wooden with brass fittings, and pressed a switch. The boxes attached to the men sparked again and the creatures shuffled towards her.

Georgina turned and fled.

A cry came up behind her: “Achtung!”

The moaning increased and she could hear the sounds of pursuit.

Georgina sprinted back the way she had come, paying little heed to the risk that the polished parquet represented. She had to get away: Earnestine, she needed Earnestine. Her sister would know what to do.

“Don’t run in the corridor!” Miss Trenchard shouted after her. “Girls should not exert themselves.”

Where would her sister be?

Georgina was panicking as she skidded to a halt by the entrance to the East Wing. Earnestine would not have crossed the ‘Out of Bounds’ sign, so where else could she be?

Behind her, Miss Trenchard screamed like a frightened child, a high-pitched and harrowing trill. Georgina looked back and wished she hadn’t. The teacher defended herself, her yardstick striking at the brute, but to no avail. Georgina ran away in the only direction left to her, fear driving her onward, and, without having a plan, she found herself in the ski locker room.

Get help, she thought, outside help.

Everything was locked away.

She'd need something to keep warm outside, but there was no time; perhaps she could keep warm by running. Running did seem like a good idea.

She pulled open the outer door and plunged into the whiteness. Gunshots sounded and an angry bee zipped past her left ear, but she didn't look behind her. Instead, she kept going, aiming for the small stone archway that was her escape route from the grounds. It was close, closer, and she was there. The stonework shattered, spreading shrapnel in her path: she held her hand out to ward it off as she sprang through, and sharp stabs of pain peppered her palm.

Above, a terrifying black shape dominated a worsening sky as a massive, ominous lump hung impossibly in the air. Huge propellers whined and complained as they manoeuvred the bulk above her. The turbulence picked up the snow falling and whipped it into huge spirals. This was the incredible object that had cast a shadow across the school earlier.

There were distant shouts behind her: "Lassen Sie die Hunde los!" and the mad barking of the dogs changed pitch suddenly.

Beyond the arch was an open area, hidden by the wall, and then there was the treeline.

Her boots disappeared into the drift with each step to slip and stumble on who knew what. The hem of her long dress became soaked, the heavy snow leaching into her petticoats and pulling her down. Cold water reached her toes and it seemed that icy fingers rose up her stockings. She went downhill and suddenly a huge white arena opened up as she reached the frozen river. Slipping at first, she found a gait that worked and began running across the wide open space.

She heard snarling and risked glancing back: huge dogs smashed through the undergrowth towards her. The three mastiffs slid around too, but their four legs were more stable, and so they pounded onwards getting closer all the time.

Georgina ran, her lungs aching from forcing the cold air in and out.

The middle of the frozen river was marked by a cut where the water flowed still. To her right, the river narrowed to stepping stones and to her left, someway off, was the waterfall leading down to the valley. Which way?

The dogs were nearly upon her.

Georgina turned to run along the irregular channel, but her speed was too great. She slipped, fell and hurtled towards the churning water, scrabbling as she slid to slow herself.

Her hunters realised the danger too. One squealed as its paws came from under it and it crashed into Georgina. Animal and human went into the water.

The air slammed out of Georgina as the cold shocked her. The water frothed as the dog thrashed about. The other dogs tried to reach Georgina as she grasped the edge of the ice sheet, her hands blue, and she tried to pull herself up towards the snapping, biting jaws. She knew that she had to get out of the freezing water, had to.

But she couldn't and slid back, pulled by the current under the ice.

Deep breath!

Above her, the two dogs clawed and attacked the thin transparent sheet that protected her as she slipped away underneath.

Miss Charlotte

As for the youngest of the Deering-Dolittle sisters: Charlotte knew that Georgina would murder her and, far worse, Earnestine would disapprove - for Charlotte was on the Zeppelin when it took off...

*...and the adventure continues
in paperback or ebook:*

The Derring-Do Club and the Empire of the Dead