

G.P. Taylor

DG
THE
DOPPLE GANGER
C H R O N I C L E S

THE FIRST ESCAPE


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THE FIRST ESCAPE

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FOR
GRACE AND RACHAEL,
JOHN AND PAUL,
AND EVERY TWIN I HAVE EVER MET



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Chapter One

Porridge

IN THE DINING ROOM of Isambard Dunstan's School for Wayward Children, all was not well. Shards of lightning blasted from a black morning sky and burst upon the heath outside. Rain beat and battered against the leaded windows that reached upward in vast stone arches.

Staring down upon a sheltered gathering of children was the pointed face of Isambard Dunstan himself. The noted explorer's likeness had been captured in stained glass for two hundred years, a look of dread upon his face and a scowl upon his lips.

He had left the house to be a home for children abandoned by their parents, but no one who had the misfortune to live there was sure whether his action was a blessing or a curse.



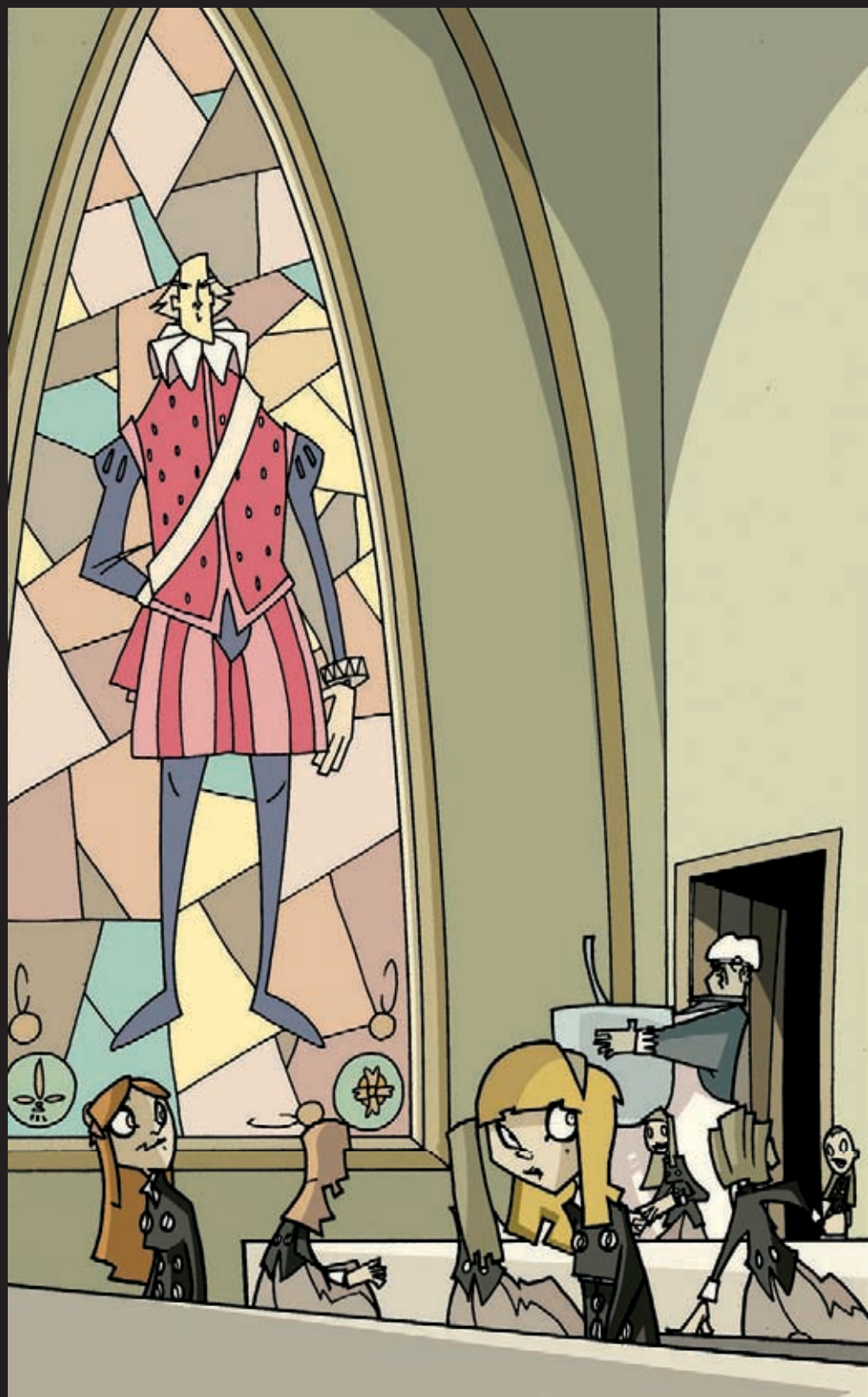


A large wooden door swung open and a fat cook barged through.

In her stubby fingers she carried a massive pot of brown gruel that steamed and gurgled like the rumblings of a cow's belly. She glanced up at the image of Isambard Dunstan, who scowled at her as she began ladling the food from the dirty tureen into 166 bowls.

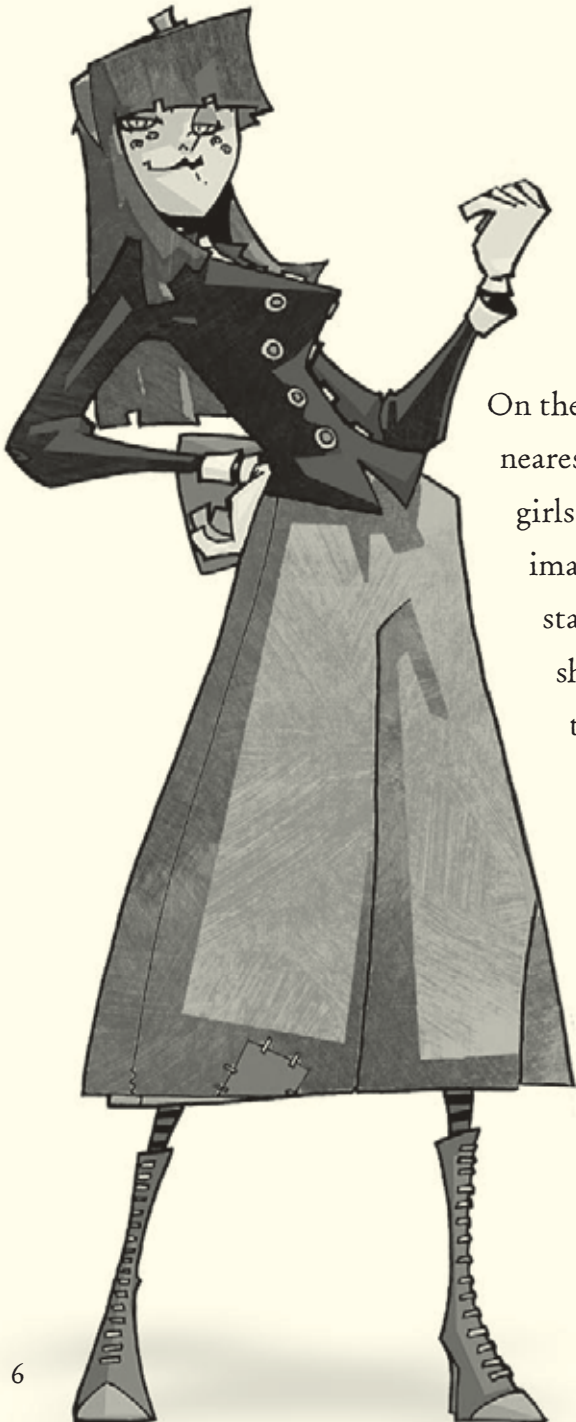
Every eye gazed hungrily. Sniveling noses sniffed each bowl as it was passed from one hand to the next. Fingers dipped quickly into the gruel and then popped into mouths as each child waited to begin breakfast.





“No one
eats!”

screamed the cook, spitting the words from her toothless mouth. “You eat when I eat and not a moment before.” The fierce look on her face dared anyone to take one morsel without her permission. If there was one thing Mrs. Omeron hated more than children, it was children who ate before she did.



On the far side of the room, nearest to the fire, were two girls. Each was a mirror image of the other. Each stared about the room as she waited to eat. Around them, row upon row of neatly dressed girls sat silently in starchy

collars, gray jackets, and tall boots. The twins fidgeted, unable to keep still even for a moment. They moved in concert like two puppets connected by invisible strands.



them

Known to everyone who worked at Isambard Dunstan's School for Wayward Children as *them*, they were known to each other as Sadie and Saskia Dopple. Each was the likeness of the other in almost every way. They had identical ears, identical noses, identical lips, and even identical moles upon their chins. The only thing that set them apart was that Sadie had a yellow right eye and



a blue left and Saskia a blue right eye and a yellow left. Apart from their eyes, the only difference between them was that Sadie thought before she acted or spoke. She was the quieter of the two—and in many ways the most dangerous. Together, they were like two wild cats that had taken human form, sent by an avenging angel to wreak havoc on humanity.

The children had been sitting at the table since six-thirty. Seven o'clock had come and gone, and still they waited. The porridge they were fed every morning had chilled to a congealed mush. In desperation, Sadie nudged Saskia and scoffed under her breath, "Old wart face, who does she think she is?"

"*I think I'm the cook!*" shouted Mrs. Omeron, whose ancient ears had become attuned to the sarcastic mutterings of children. With that, she picked up a spoon from the table and threw it at Sadie, hitting her upon the head with it before she could say another word.

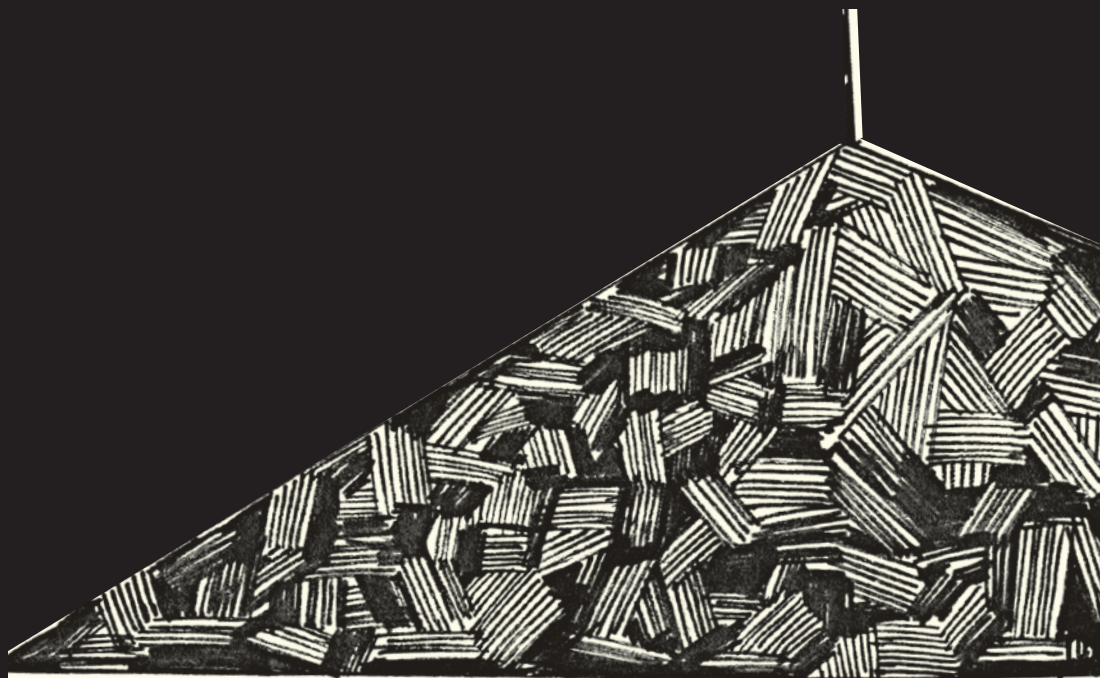
Sadie looked stunned but quickly recovered. As she turned to look in the cook's direction, another smug face caught her eye. There, smiling at Sadie from across the table, sat the loathsome Charlotte Grimdyke.

"Something wrong?" Grimdyke asked with the lopsided grin of a baboon. "Get hit by a spoon?"

“You’ll pay for that . . .” Sadie said through her teeth, staring first at Grimdyke and then at the cook.

“Whatever,” Grimdyke muttered again, holding the palm of her hand toward Sadie as if to stop her from speaking.

“Speak to the
hand,
Miss
Dopple,
Speak to the
hand.”



Sadie knew this was not the time or place to bring about her vengeance. But when the moment came, she would bring torment to Grimdyke's life. In the meantime, there was no harm in having a little fun. Quietly and carefully Sadie put a hand on the bowl before her and set her spoon to the side as she gazed innocently at the ceiling of the refectory. Hanging from the thick oak beams was the swinging pendant of the only electric light in the whole room. It dangled like a gallows as it swayed from side to side, casting cold shadows across an even colder room.



All eyes were turned toward the large mahogany clock that clucked and crowed as it ticked the seconds. The children waited eagerly as the long hand swung slowly toward the half of the hour. No one spoke; no one moved. Every hand was poised, clutching a long spoon. Above their heads, the clock began to whirl. Suddenly, there was the tightening of a spring and then the first strike of the hammer. But before the clock could chime again, the silence of the room had gone.

In one quick motion, Sadie scooped a large dollop of sticky brown porridge with her hand and plastered it on her forehead.





Erik! We have to get out of here!

Saskia Dopple's turned into a werewolf that creates vampire dogs!

Werewolves don't create vampire dogs, Jenny. That's just silly.

I've seen it all before. In fact I saw it all yesterday as I was cleaning --

-- when Sadie and Saskia took the herrings from their plates, covered them in ketchup --

-- and wore them as bloodied kipper hats.

Charlotte Grimdyke thought they were crawling across their heads and threw up before she fainted.

I had to clean it up, and it was full of carrots and tomatoes.

The food here smells even more disgusting after it's been in Grimdyke's stomach.

Eww!

ARF!

Get her off me!
Get her off me!

If Saskia keeps that up Charlotte will be sick again --

-- or my name's not Erik Morrissey Ganger.



The door of the refectory crashed open to reveal the headmistress, Miss Rimmer, scowling and grunting under her breath like a raging bull. She was dressed in thick tweed, and a tight bun clung to the back of her head like a large wart.

Miss Rimmer had been the merciless ruler of Isambard Dunstan's School for Wayward Children since the previous headmistress, Olivia Dart-Winston, had disappeared a year before. Miss Olivia, as she was called, had simply vanished without warning or explanation, and Miss Rimmer had been quick to take over, turning the once-pleasant home into a place where discontent and rebellion reigned.

Now Miss Rimmer stood in the doorway shaking with anger. By her side grunted her only friend—Darcy, a short, fat dog that looked like a stunted pig covered with fur and drooling through a set of sharp and very serrated teeth.

“Who is responsible for all this mayhem?” demanded Miss Rimmer as she charged into the room, brandishing her cane.







Darcy lay sprawled upon the polished floor. Miss Rimmer, seeing that her precious pet was dazed and drooling, dropped Saskia to the ground and turned her attention to the animal.

“Darcy, darling, what has happened to you?” she asked in a voice that made the Dopplesisters want to be sick. “Is my Darcy hurt?”

“It was . . . Sa . . . Sa . . . Sa . . .” began Grimdyke, but she was mysteriously struck dumb as a hard-boiled egg bounced off the back of her head. Rimmer spun on the soles of her thick leather boots and looked at Grimdyke, who held her head and spluttered into tears.

None of
You deserve to
be here,
none
of You!



Like a hungry lion, Rimmer eyed the room, searching every face for a sign of weakness and some clue as to the culprit.

“Don’t think I don’t know who would do such a thing,” she bawled as she looked at Sadie. “Some people here have forgotten what it is like to be grateful. Think, my dear, frail children. Where would you be without Isambard Dunstan’s? On the street in a cardboard box, living under the arches of Charing Cross? Picking through the trash bins in St James’s Park? Think of it, children. Without me that would be your life.

*“None of you deserve to be here—*none of you.” Rimmer paused as she lifted her disoriented pet from the floor and looked into the dog’s dazed eyes. “Some of you . . . some of you have overstayed your welcome, and if I could rid myself of you I would. Wait until the day you are sixteen and I see you slide down the banister and into the street for the last time.

“Then—~~then~~—will you rue the day you treated me and this poor, unfortunate animal so badly.”

Miss Rimmer sniffed and held out Darcy for all to see as she nodded her head like a great actor at the end of some fine speech.

Charlotte Grimdyke began to quietly applaud, cooing like a pigeon. Miss Rimmer gave her an approving smile. Behind her, Saskia folded her arms, raised a thin black eyebrow, and rolled her eyes.

“*Don’t think* I have finished with you,” Rimmer said as she spun again, almost casting Darcy across the room and only just managing to hold on to her by the tail. “I will see both you and your troublesome sister in my office at eight o’clock. Be not a minute late—or else!”

Saskia looked at the floor and swallowed the laughter in her throat like a gulping frog. Tears began to slowly roll across her white cheeks, and her lips began to quiver as she fought to keep the laughter in. Thinking Saskia was about to cry, Miss Rimmer threw her a look of disgust as she rushed from the room, muttering under her breath.



"When Dad first brought me here, I thought it was another house to break into, to steal from. He made me keep watch a lot."

Stay here -- until I get back.

Just popping to the shops for some cigarettes and then we'll be off.

"I thought for several days after that it must have been a very long way to the tobacconist."



"But my father never returned. He had given me to the orphanage."

And what do we have here?

You look frozen, boy! Get into the warm!

"As Isambard Dunstan's was for wayward girls, I was the only boy in the building."

We can give you a room in the tower -- away from all the noisy girls, if you like?

"But I didn't mind, and after my life of crime, I was happy to work for my keep."

"During the days, I would be allowed to attend the makeshift lessons --"

"-- where I would sit quietly at the back in a world of my own."

When I turned fifteen, I was even given a pair of Rimmer's tweed trousers to cut down to fit me --

-- as I had outgrown my own clothes.

Of course -- that wasn't the only thing I was given --





Now I wash the dishes, clean the plates, sweep the floors.

And every day I look out the window at Hampstead Heath and the people waiting for the omnibus to London.



"In London, anything can happen."

"In London, a boy who cleans dishes can become anything."



London -- a city of gold.

One day I'll go too -- and make my fortune.

One day.



Day-dreaming, Erik?

Whatever.



It's eight o'clock.

You can't leave Miss Rimmer waiting.



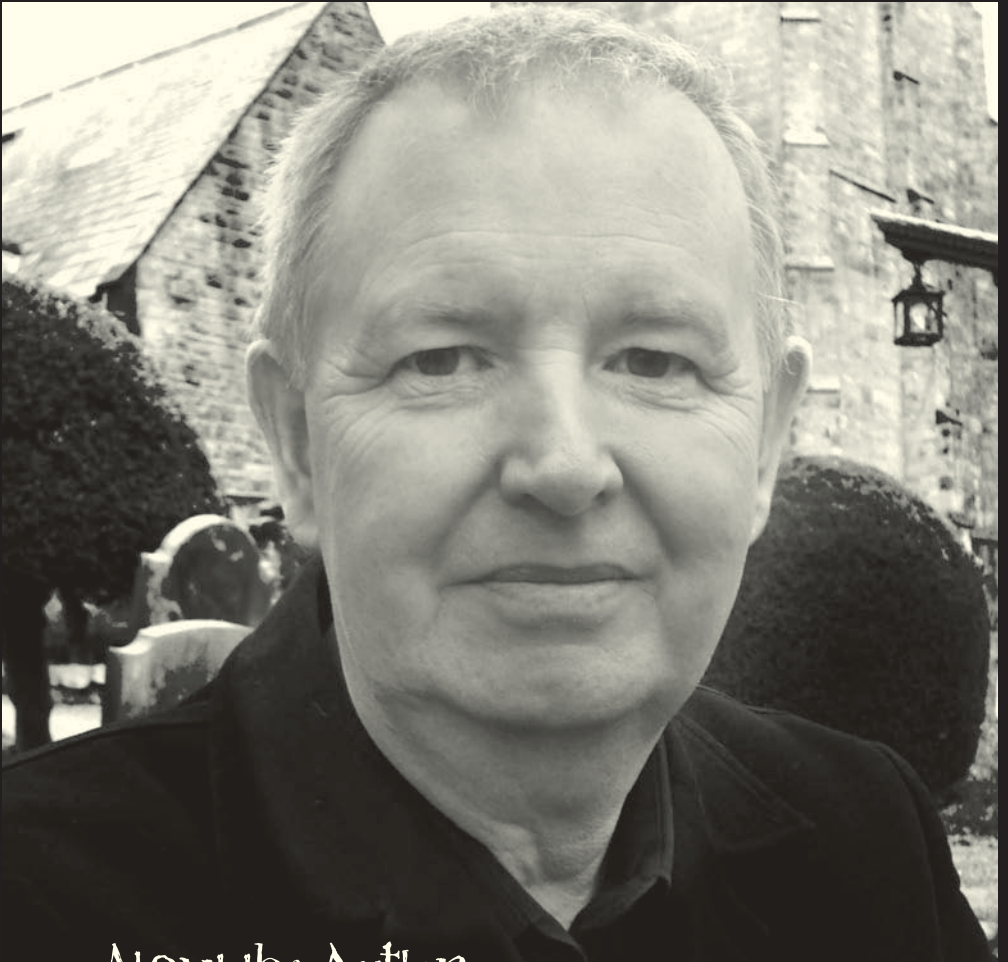
And I saw those eggs you stole....

About the Artists

DANIEL BOULTWOOD was born in London. He studied illustration at Richmond College and went on to work in computer game concept design. From there he moved into flash animation, creating games for DreamWorks and Warner Bros. It was here that he refined his style to the animation-inspired work it is today. He lives in London in a shed with two cats.

JOSEPH SAPULICH is an award-winning artist who has worked in the film industry for over fifteen years. He has been an art director on several projects for Disney, and he has also served as an art director and visual development artist for feature films and television. He recently illustrated a children's Bible and is busy working on several film and book projects. Joseph lives in Chicago with his wife and two children.

TONY LEE (adapter) began his career in games journalism and magazine features, moving into radio in the early nineties. He spent over ten years working for television, radio, and magazines as a feature and script writer, winning several awards. In 2005 he adapted G. P. Taylor's SHADOWMANCER novel into a graphic novel for Markosia.



About the Author

A motorcyclist and former rock band roadie turned Anglican minister, G. P. Taylor has been hailed as “hotter than Potter” and “the new C. S. Lewis” in the United Kingdom. His first novel, *SHADOWMANCER*, reached #1 on the *NEW YORK TIMES* bestseller list in 2004 and has been translated into forty-eight languages. His other novels include *WORMWOOD* (another *NEW YORK TIMES* bestseller, which was nominated for a Quill book award), *THE SHADOWMANCER RETURNS: THE CURSE OF SALAMANDER STREET*, *TERSIAS THE ORACLE*, and *MARIAH MUNDI: THE MIDAS BOX*. Worldwide sales for Taylor’s books now total more than 3 million copies.

G. P. Taylor currently resides in North Yorkshire with his wife and three children.