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The Manchester
Grammar School

Entrance Examination 2011
English Paper 2

Comprehension Passage

Do not open this booklet until told to do so.

Read through the passage very carefully. We recommend that you spend at least five minutes reading and re-reading the following material before you begin to answer the questions.

The Beating

This story is set over a hundred and fifty years ago. It is written from the point of view of David, who is about ten years old, and lives at home with his mother. Mr Murdstone lives with them, and acts as David's tutor. Miss Murdstone is Mr Murdstone's sister. She too is part of the household.

In those days, teachers made pupils learn the lessons in their text books off by heart. Although David is an intelligent boy, he is not doing well in his lessons with Mr Murdstone. Mr Murdstone believes that David should be punished if he does not learn the lessons he has been set. He has persuaded David's mother to allow him to take a very strict approach.

Mr Murdstone had threatening black eyes. I always felt frightened when I looked at him, and wondered what he was thinking about. His hair and whiskers were black and thick. The paleness of the lower part of his face, and the strong black beard he shaved close every day, reminded me of a wax-work.

One morning when I went into the study with my books, I found Miss Murdstone sitting in the corner as usual and Mr. Murdstone binding something round the bottom of a cane – a slender, flexible cane. He left off binding when I came in, and poised and slashed the cane in the air.

I felt apprehensive as Mr. Murdstone's eyes stared at me.

'Now, David,' he said, 'you must be far more careful today than usual.' He gave the cane another slash, and another swipe. He laid it down beside him, with a nasty look, and took up his books.

I felt the words of my lessons slipping away, not one by one, or line by line, but by the entire page. I tried to remember all that I had learned, but all my knowledge seemed to skim away.

We began badly, and went on worse. I had come in with an idea of distinguishing myself, believing that I was very well prepared. But it turned out to be quite a mistake. Book after book, subject after subject, was added to the heap of failures.

Miss Murdstone watched me fiercely all the time. She was a gloomy-looking lady; dark- haired like her brother, whom she greatly resembled in face and voice. She had very heavy eyebrows, nearly meeting over her large nose. She always carried a hard steel purse, which she kept in a jail of a bag which hung upon her arm by a heavy chain. I had never, at that time, seen such a metallic lady as Miss Murdstone.

Finally, when I made yet another mistake, I saw him wink, solemnly, at his sister. He rose and took up the cane: ‘David, you and I will go upstairs, boy.’

He walked me up to my room slowly and gravely. I am certain he took delight in that formal march, as if he were escorting a criminal to the gallows. When we got to my room, he suddenly twisted my head under his arm.

‘Mr. Murdstone! Sir!’ I cried to him. ‘Don’t! Please don’t beat me! I have tried to learn, sir, but I can’t learn while you and Miss Murdstone are both watching me. I can’t!’

‘Can’t you, indeed, David?’ he said. ‘We’ll see about that.’

He had my head in a stranglehold, but I twisted round him somehow, and stopped him for a moment, begging him not to beat me. He paused, then he hit me hard. By chance, I caught his hand in my mouth, between my teeth, and bit right through it. It still sets my teeth on edge to think of it.

He beat me then, as if he would have beaten me to death. Above all the noise we made, I heard my mother running up the stairs, and crying out. But Mr Murdstone commanded her not to enter the room. Finally he stopped beating me, and left. The door was locked and I was lying, fevered and hot, and torn, and sore, and raging in my pathetic way, upon the floor.

When I became quiet an unnatural stillness seemed to reign through the whole house. I sat listening for a long while, but there was not a sound. I crawled up from the floor, and saw my face in the glass. It was so swollen, red, and ugly that it almost frightened me. My cuts and bruises were sore and stiff, and made me cry every time I moved; but a sense of guilt for biting my tutor began to creep up on me. I felt like a criminal.

It had begun to grow dark, when finally the key was turned, and Miss Murdstone came in with some bread and water. These she put down upon the table without a word, glaring at me in angry silence. She then left, locking the door after her. I was once more alone in my prison.

Long into the night I sat there, wondering whether my mother would come and comfort me. But she did not appear. The Murdstones had probably ordered her not to see me. Finally, I undressed, and went to bed. I began to wonder fearfully what would be done to me. Was it a criminal act that I had committed? Would I be arrested by the police, and sent to prison? Was I at all in danger of being hanged?

END OF PASSAGE

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