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opening extract from

Black Book of Secrets

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Chapter One

Fragment from
The Memoirs of Ludlow Fitch

When I opened my eyes I knew that nothing in my miserable life prior to that moment could possibly be as bad as what was about to happen. I was lying on the cold earthen floor of a basement room lit by a single candle, no more than an hour's burning left. Instruments of a medical nature hung from hooks in the beams. Dark stains on the floor suggested blood. But it was the chair against the opposite wall that fully confirmed my suspicions. Thick leather straps attached to the arms and the legs were there for one purpose only: to hold down an unwilling patient. Ma and Pa were standing over me.

''E's awake,' crowed Ma excitedly.

Pa dragged me to my feet. He had me in an iron grip, my arm wrenched up behind my back. Ma held me by the hair. I looked from one to the other. Their grinning faces were only inches away from mine. I knew I should not look to them to save me.

Another man, concealed until now in the shadows, stepped forward and took me by the chin. He forced open my mouth and ran a blackened foul-tasting finger around my gums.

'How much?' asked Pa, drooling with anticipation.

'Not bad,' said the man. 'Thrupence apiece. Maybe twelve in all.'

'It's a deal,' said Pa. 'Who needs teeth anyway?'

'Someone, I hope,' replied the man drily. 'I sell 'em for a living.'

And they laughed all three, Ma and Pa and Barton Gumbroot, the notorious tooth surgeon of Old Goat's Alley.

Once the money for my teeth was agreed with Barton they moved quickly. Together they dragged me over to the surgeon's chair. I kicked and shouted and spat and bit; I wasn't going to make it easy for them. I knew how Barton Gumbroot made his living, preying on the poor, pulling their teeth, paying them pennies and selling them on for ten

times as much. I was racked with fear. I had no protection. I was going to feel it all. Every single nerve-stabbing twinge.

They came close to succeeding in their evil quest. Ma was struggling with a buckle around my ankle, her hands shaking from the previous day's drinking, while Pa was trying to hold me down. Barton Gumbroot, that loathsome monster, was just hovering with his gleaming tooth-pull, snapping it open and shut, open and shut, tittering and salivating. I believe to this day his greatest pleasure in life was inflicting pain on others. So much so that he couldn't wait any longer and before I knew it I could feel the cold metal of his instrument of torture clamped around a front tooth. He braced himself with his leg on my chest and began to pull. I cannot describe to you the pain that shot through my skull, my brain and every nerve end in my body. It felt as if my whole head was being wrenched off. The tooth moved slightly in my jaw and another white-hot shooting pain exploded behind my eyes. All the while Ma and Pa laughed like maniacs.

Rage swelled in me like a mountainous wave. I heard a roar worthy of a jungle beast and I was taken over by seething fury. With my free leg I kicked Pa hard and sharp in the stomach and he collapsed on the floor. Barton, caught

by surprise, let go of the tooth-pull and I grabbed it and walloped him around the side of the head. I unstrapped my other leg and jumped down. Pa was groaning on the floor. Barton was leaning against the wall holding his head. Ma cowered in the corner.

'Don't hit me,' she begged. 'Don't hit me.'

I will not deny I was tempted, but this was my one chance to escape. Pa was almost on his feet again. I dropped the tooth-pull and in a matter of seconds I was out of the door, up the steps and running down the alley. I could hear Ma screaming and Pa shouting and cursing. Every time I looked back all I could see was Pa's snarling face and Barton's hooked tooth-pull glinting in the yellow gaslight.

As I ran I tried to think where to go. They knew so many of my hiding places. I decided on Mr Jellico's, but when I reached his shop the place was in darkness and the blind was down. I hammered on the window and shouted his name but there was no reply. I cursed my bad luck. I knew if Mr Jellico was gone at this time of night he might not be back for days. But knowing this was little help in my current predicament.

So where to now? The bridge over the River Foedus and the Nimble Finger Inn. Betty Peggotty, the landlady, might

help me. I ran out of the alley and on to the street, but they were already waiting for me.

'There 'e is,' screeched Ma and the chase was on again. They surprised me, Pa especially, with their stamina. I had not thought they would last so long. For at least a half-mile they chased me down the uncobbled narrow alleys and the filthy streets, tripping over bodies and avoiding snatching hands, all the way to the river. Every time I looked back they seemed to be closer. I knew what would happen if they caught me again. The ache in my bleeding jaw was all the proof I needed.

By the time I staggered on to the bridge I was barely able to hold myself upright. Halfway across I saw a carriage outside the Nimble Finger. Just as its wheels began to turn, I clambered on the back, hanging on for my life. As the carriage pulled away the last thing I remember is the sight of Ma sinking to her knees. She was screaming at me from the river bank and the monster, Barton Gumbroot, was shaking his fist in rage.

My name is Ludlow Fitch. Along with countless others, I had the great misfortune to be born in the City, a stinking

place undeserving of a name. And I would have died there if it had not been for Ma and Pa. They saved me, though it was not their intention, when they delivered me, their only son, into the hands of Barton Gumbroot. This act of betrayal was possibly the greatest single piece of luck I ever had. Ma and Pa's diabolic plan brought about the end of one existence and the beginning of another: my life with Joe Zabbidou.

Chapter Two

Fragment from
The Memoirs of Ludlow Fitch

I didn't know at the time, but I had hitched a ride on a carriage that belonged to, and contained, a Mr Jeremiah Ratchet. We rattled along for hours, he inside snoring like a bellows, so loud I could hear it above the clatter of the wheels over the ruts, while outside I was clinging on like an organ-grinder's monkey. The weather worsened and it started to snow. The road narrowed and the potholes became larger, deeper and more frequent. The driver had no thought for passenger comfort. If it weren't for the fact that my hands were frozen in position I might well have fallen off. Despite this, and my churning innards (I suffer terribly from travel sickness), towards the end of the

journey I was dozing. The carriage began to climb a steep hill and finally we reached the place that was to be my home for the near future, the mountain village of Pagus Parvus.

Under any other circumstances I would not have chosen to come to Pagus Parvus, but at the time of travelling my destination was out of my hands. At last the carriage stopped outside a large house and the driver climbed down. I heard him rap on the carriage door.

'Mr Ratchet,' he called. 'Mr Ratchet.'

But there was no reply so he went to the house and rang for the maid. A young girl came out looking none too pleased. The driver called her Polly. Together they dragged Ratchet up the steps accompanied by much snoring (his) and grunting (theirs) and hauled him inside. I took the opportunity to jump down and sneak a look in the cab, wherein I found a leather purse, a fringed printed silk scarf and a pair of gloves. I wrapped the scarf around my neck and slipped the gloves over my numb fingers. The purse contained only a few pennies but it was a start. I got out and saw the young girl standing in the doorway looking straight at me. There was a slight smile on her face and her eyes held mine for a long second. I heard the driver coming back and knew it was time to go. I could have gone either

way, up the slope or down, but for some unknown reason I chose to climb.

The hill was treacherous. As I climbed I heard the church bell strike four. Although it was no longer snowing the wind was sharp as a knife and I knew I needed shelter. Despite the hour, and the lack of street lights, I could see well enough where I was going. It was not the moon that lit my way, for she was only a sliver, but all the lights ablaze behind the windows. It seemed that I was not the only one still awake in this village.

I stopped at an empty building at the top of the hill. It stood alone in the shadow of the church, desolate and separated from the other houses and shops by an alley. I was looking for a way in when I heard approaching footsteps in the snow. I ducked into the alley and waited. A man, hunched over, came carefully down the hill. He was carrying a large wooden spade over his shoulder and he was mumbling to himself. He passed right by me, looking neither to his left nor his right, and crossed over the road.

As he melted into the night another figure appeared. To this day I remember the man emerging from the gloom as if by magic. I watched him climbing steadily towards me. He took long strides and covered the distance quickly. He

had a limp, his right step was heavier than his left, and one footprint was deeper than the other.

I believe I was the first person to see Joe Zabbidou and I know I was the last. Was it just coincidence had us both arrive here together? I suspect other powers were at work. Unlike me, he wasn't fleeing. He had a purpose but he kept it well hidden.