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Opening extract from

The Bone Magician

Written by

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A Note from F. E. Higgins

When we last met, I was snowbound in Pachspass, the ancient mountain village where Ludlow Fitch and Joe Zabbidou had such trouble in *The Black Book of Secrets*. While I waited for the thaw, intending to follow in their footsteps, I uncovered the seeds of another story in a city to the south. Its name was Urbs Umida and that is where I went, for I had to see the place from which young Ludlow had fled his evil Ma and Pa.

Hardly altered by time, the River Foedus flows silently as ever through the heart of the City. The north side has flourished but the south side is practically abandoned. After three days of searching, using what sparse clues I had from Ludlow's memoirs, I found the narrow alley where Lembart Jellico, Ludlow's good friend, had kept his pawnshop. To my surprise, the shop was still standing and occupied, by a Mr Ethelred Jelco, who dealt in antiques. It was he who sold me the exquisite wooden box containing the battered remnants of Pin's Journal and the articles from

the *Chronicle* wherein I first read of Benedict Pantagus and Juno.

The Bone Magician is neither a sequel to *The Black Book of Secrets*, nor a prequel. It is what I like to call a 'paraquel'. The events in this story took place at the same time as the adventures of Joe Zabbidou and Ludlow Fitch in Pagus Parvus. To read this story it is not necessary to know what came before, but perhaps after this you will want to go back to find out.

As ever, it is not my place to advise you, only to reveal to you what I know.

F. E. Higgins
England

Prologue

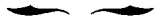
Pin's Journal

How I have come to hate this place of evil, this city of nightmares. Urbs Umida they call it, Dank City, and well it deserves its name. It has taken everything that was precious to me. But I shall leave one day, soon, when I know the truth. I shall pass through those gates and it would please me greatly to not look back. Imagine, never again to inhale the stink of rot and decay, never again to see despairing eyes in the shadows, and never again to hear the name Deodonatus Snoad or to read the lies from his poisonous quill.

Fiends, but this place is cold. Winter marches on, the last day of February today. Ah, I can write no more, my fingers are numb. I want to sleep, to wrap myself in

darkness. Sometimes I think that maybe *this* is the dream and that soon I will open my eyes and everything will be the way it was. But then, when such small hope has dared to surface in my heart, I smell the river and I know that her stench is very real.

Chapter One



Strange Company

A corpse on the cusp of putrefaction could hardly be considered the most entertaining company on a winter's evening but Pin Carpue didn't do what he did for the conversation. He did it for the money. Tonight, however, things were different. If the body he was watching – her name, when alive, was Sybil – had revived and tried to engage him in some sort of discourse he couldn't have replied even if he had wanted to.

For Pin had just succumbed to a soporific drug.

Hardly able to move, certainly unable to speak, he lay in a semi-comatose haze on a bench in the corner of the dark room. The last thing his soggy brain recalled was

leaving his lodgings. As for his immediate whereabouts, it was a mystery.

With a supreme effort Pin finally managed to open his heavy eyes. He stared into the gloom but it was difficult to make any sense of his surroundings when he had double vision. His thoughts were like clouds floating in the sky, shapeless and gently moving. Overall, he decided, this feeling, this woozy buzzing between his ears, was not wholly unpleasant.

Somewhere in the room soft voices were whispering and, if Pin had allowed them, they would have lulled him back to sleep. But another part of him was conscious enough to know that he wanted to stay awake. For any other boy it most certainly would have been beyond his capabilities to keep his eyes open under such difficult circumstances, but Pin was used to staying awake until the early hours. It was part of the job.

The job of watching corpses.

He also had a powerful ally in his pocket, a glass phial, full to the brim with the waters of the River Foedus. It was a distasteful job, gathering her noxious liquid, but now he was silently thankful that he had filled it earlier. If he could only reach it! His fingers, usually nimble, were like soft

rubber and he fumbled just trying to lift the flap of his coat pocket. Eventually he managed to grasp the phial and bring it out. He rested before he engaged in the next struggle, removing the stopper. His hand couldn't do it, so, with a tremendous effort, he raised the bottle to his mouth, though his arm felt as if it was moving through deep water, and pulled the cork out with his teeth. He took a long, deep sniff and immediately his eyes began to smart and the inside of his nose stung sharply as if he had bitten down on a mustard seed.

'Fiends,' he exclaimed in his head and blinked. But the brew had the desired effect and a second sniff brought him slowly back to his senses. Thus slightly revived, though quite exhausted, Pin focused his mind on his situation.

Now he remembered where he was. This was the *Cella Moribundi*, the waiting room for the dead, in Mr Gaufridus's basement. For some reason he had been drugged by those people, the three shadows that were moving around at the table in the centre of the room. He did not think to try to escape, his deadened limbs would not have allowed it. Besides, he had a feeling that *they* were not interested in him but in the body lying on the table.

'He's waking up.'

A girl's voice sent a shot of panic through Pin's veins. He could see a figure moving slowly towards him out of the darkness. Inside he was gripped with fear and tried to cry out but he was unable. So he closed his eyes tightly. If she thought he was asleep she might leave him alone. He knew when she was right beside him. She smelt of juniper and the sleeping drug, aromas he would not easily forget. Pin felt her sweet breath on his face.

'Give him some more,' instructed a man's voice.

'No, I think he is still under,' she said finally. Then all was quiet.

Slowly, cautiously, Pin dared to open his eyes again. The waters of the Foedus and the lingering effect of the girl's drug were a potent combination leaving him in a sort of in-between world. He noticed that the candles had been relit and from the voices he knew there was the old man, the girl and a younger man (he sounded like a southerner). In his present state there was little he could do. So he lay back to watch, wholly entranced, the strange drama that was about to play out in front of him.

Chapter Two

Grave Matters

Only a few hours earlier Pin had been in complete possession of his senses. He left his lodgings in Old Goat's Alley after a small supper of ale, bread and a piece of fish on the turn and trudged off through a shower of hail that was rapidly turning to snow. Pin was always glad to see the back of the place. Old Goat's Alley was considered the worst street south of the River Foedus which, if you knew what the rest of the streets were like, was a frightening thought. Whereas other streets might have a redeeming feature or two, perhaps a slight slope to allow the ever-present sludgy waters to flow away, or a more even distribution of potholes, there was nothing that could be said in favour of Old Goat's Alley.

The tall, narrow houses were poorly constructed, hurriedly built and squeezed into any space available. The rooms had been divided and subdivided so many times that each house was labyrinthine within. This made it very difficult for the constables when chasing criminals. As did the numerous exits and narrow alleys behind the houses. The buildings leaned slightly forward which gave cause for alarm if you looked up. It also meant that large amounts of snow slid off periodically into the street below. Few people did look up, however, weighed down as they were with their cares (and ever mindful of the pickpockets). Old Goat's Alley was badly lit, which made it a haven for every sort of criminal that existed. Some nights the lamplighter wouldn't turn up at all and although this was inconvenient for a few, it must be said that many inhabitants were happy to carry out their business in the dark.

As for the rest of the City, certainly on the south side of the river, most pavements were in a state of disrepair and the streets themselves were little more than a mire of noxious debris, churned up daily by the horses and carts that wheeled through and the herds of cattle, pigs and sheep that were driven along on market day. Each evening the mire froze on account of the extreme temperatures

that were currently being experienced. It was a winter like no other.

Barton Gumbroot's lodging house was towards the end of the alley. It was a filthy hovel which Barton had split into as many rooms as possible to maximize rental income. Pin was always uneasy about returning to his room, day or night. His fellow residents were without exception a strange lot and each had particularly nasty features or habits, often both. As for Barton Gumbroot, Pin wouldn't trust the man as far as he could throw him. It was well known that he practised as a tooth surgeon, another lucrative profession, down in the cellar. Night and day everyone heard the shrieks but no one had the stomach to investigate. In fact, Barton had intimated on more than one occasion that he would take a tooth or two in exchange for a week's rent but Pin had refused. All this and more was going round Pin's head as he hurried along beside the river. Just before the Bridge he stopped at the top of a set of stone steps that led down to the water.

'The rich really are different,' he thought ruefully as he looked across the water. The Foedus was always a foul smelling river, but the odour was hardly noticeable on the north side because of the prevailing wind. Thus even the

air the rich breathed was better. From his vantage point Pin could make out the silhouettes of their fine houses. He didn't need daylight to know what they looked like: double-fronted with sparkling glass, fancy woodwork and glossy doors, polished brasswork and red tiles and frowning gargoyles.

And he knew what sort lived in them, the sort who spent their money on frivolous things, for idle amusement to alleviate their boredom. And this money was not worked for. God forbid that those perfumed men over the water with their frilled cuffs and silken breeches might have to do a day's honest toil. And as for their good ladies with their noses in the air, and their skirts so wide they couldn't fit though a door, well, by all accounts, daily they took their ease, drinking tea, drawing and singing. No, their wealth in the main was inherited but that was no guarantee it was come upon honestly. Money wasn't the only thing the rich inherited. The duplicity of generations was in their blood. Perhaps they didn't commit the same crimes as took place nightly over the river – the rich liked to keep their hands clean – but they still stole from their fellow man and murdered, just in a more sophisticated way and usually with a polite smile on their faces.

'It might be a fine thing to live over the river,' thought Pin, 'but I wonder, is it better to be in a beautiful house looking at an ugly one, or to be in an ugly house looking at a beautiful one?'

Yes, he thought, as he descended carefully to the sticky black mud below, life on this side is harsh and dirty and noisy, but for all its unpleasantness, there was an honesty of sorts among the southerners. You knew what they were from looking at them. They couldn't hide it beneath fine clothes and words.

The tide was out but on the turn. Pin made his way as quickly as he could to the water's edge. It was not unusual to find sailors' trinkets in the mud, fallen from the ships, but tonight Pin was in a hurry and wasn't looking. He took from his pocket a small two-handled glass phial and removed the cork. Holding one handle delicately between thumb and forefinger, he dipped it just under the surface and dragged it along until it was full of the dark water. Then he corked it carefully and ran back to the steps.

The smell of the Foedus was renowned far and wide but, exposed to something on a daily basis, a person can get used to most things. It was a rare day in Urbs Umida that the stench was so bad people actually remarked upon

it. There is a theory that over time native Urbs Umidians developed a sort of immunity to the smell. This theory might also account for their apparent ability to eat rotting food with impunity. If you can't smell it, you can't taste it. For Pin, however, this was not the case. He had a sensitive nose and was acutely aware of the most subtle changes in the river's odour.

By the time Pin reached the churchyard it was snowing heavily. He passed through the gates, head down, narrowly avoiding a young girl who was coming out. She held up her pale hands in fright. Pin caught the faintest scent as he brushed past her, sweeter than one would have expected, and felt moved to mumble an apology before going on through.

As a place of burial St Mildred's was almost as old as the City itself. Like a bottomless pit, it held far more people below than was indicated by the headstones above. This was not as difficult as it sounded for the earth was unusually wet and acidic. These factors combined to speed up the process of decomposition considerably. Given that the churchyard was on a hill, all these decaying juices seeped underground down the slope into the Foedus. Just one more ingredient to add to her toxic soup. It was not