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PART THE FIRST

A DIVIDED CITY

Ode to Urbs Umida

Urbs Umida, Urbs Umida!

O city, dark and dank.

Would that I could call you sweet,

But by the holy your air ’tis rank!

I took a boat across the Foedus

And looked into the water.

Two fish I saw but dead they were

And swam not as they oughter.

I walked across the cobbled Bridge

Went in the Nimble Finger.

A fight broke out, I ducked a punch

And thought best not to linger.

Urbs Umida, Urbs Umida!

No matter where I roam,

The Foedus’s nostril-stinging stench

Will always lure me home.

Beag Hickory

A Note from F. E. Higgins

Extract of

A letter from Hector Fitzbaudly to Polly

. . . It was my father taught me how to kill a butterfly. To take it in your hand, unsuspecting as it is, and to pinch it underneath with finger and thumb, at the thorax, to stun it. Then to place the body swiftly in the killing jar, tighten the lid, and allow the fumes to finish it off painlessly. Father often asked me to net the butterflies, because I was nimble and had a lightness of touch; they were never damaged when I caught them. It is still a source of wonder to me that from a lowly caterpillar, such a beautiful creature can come into existence.

Then, when I was older, I learned to mount them. We worked in father's study, in the comforting glow of the fire and beneath the soft light of the gas lamps. I remember how he gathered together, quietly and unhurriedly, the equipment from shelves and drawers and I laid it out neatly on the desk, boards and pins and paper. Next, with a flourish he would present me with the butterfly, a bright yellow Brimstone or perhaps an Orange Tip, and I would begin.

I knew father was ever watching closely from behind me and I was always keen to show him that he had taught me well. Slowly, so slowly, I would push the long, pointed insect pin through the middle of the butterfly's body, right between the wings, careful not to rub off the tiny scales that gave them their captivating iridescence, and in to the mounting board. Next I would position the wings open, exactly how I wanted them, with their patterns matching, before pinning them in place, one at a time, just behind the larger veins. Finally, I would place light pieces of paper over each wing to prevent its curling up while the insect dried. Father wouldn't say anything, just place

his hand firmly on my shoulder, and I always knew from the look on his face that he was pleased.

Father gave me a gift shortly before it all happened, a small ebony cocoon to wear around my neck. I still have it and every time I touch it I am reminded of those happier days.

But, Polly, that all seems a very long time ago . . .

The description above of the process of butterfly mounting, a common hobby of the age in which this was written, is to be found in one of a number of letters still surviving from a correspondence between a young lad named Hector Fitzbaudly and the girl called Polly (her surname is never given). I found the letters deep in the heart of the Moiraean Mountains, tied together by a leather cord with the ebony cocoon mentioned above hanging from it. I don't think they were all there, and I cannot say if they were ever sent, but I suspect not.

This revealing bundle is just one of many items I have picked up on my travels since last we met in Urbs Umida, that vile city whereat I uncovered the mystery of the enigmatic Bone Magician and the Silver Apple Killer. I have travelled further abroad since then and my collection of oddities has grown considerably. It now contains;

1 One wooden leg

2 Some incomplete, hand-written documents; being a young boy's memoirs and a black leather-bound book of secrets and confessions

3 A beechwood box containing a personal journal and articles from the Urbs Umida Daily Chronicle

4 A silver apple

5 The aforementioned letters and ebony cocoon on a leather string

6 Articles from the Northside Diurnal Journal

7 One gold-rimmed and diamond-studded cracked false eyeball

The story that follows relies heavily upon this correspondence. And together with the false eyeball, what a story they tell! As is often the case, I am left with more puzzles than answers.

But let us tarry no longer! Hector's tale awaits . . .

F. E. Higgins, 2008

CHAPTER ONE

SOUTHBOUND

‘*Tartri flammis*,’ cursed Hector as his stomach tightened in a knot and his chest jerked violently with every beat of his heart. He rotated slowly on the spot, panting from the chase. His nose tingled with the stench that filled the air. Already his ears were pricking to the menacing sounds around him; screeches and wails, scraping and dragging, and the ominous unrelenting moaning.

So this is fear, he thought. In a strange way it excited him.

He stood at the centre of Fiveways, an open cobbled space where five dark alleys converged. It was late-afternoon but regardless of the time of day it was difficult to see anything clearly in the strange half-light that bathed this part of the city. Hector had crossed the river only twice before, but had never ventured this far. His mistake had been to give chase to the thieving vagabond who had taken his purse. In a matter of seconds the light-fingered boy had led him a merry dance down the unlit, claustrophobic streets and lanes until he was completely lost.

‘Wait until I get my hands on him,’ muttered Hector. But he knew he wouldn’t. The pickpocket was long gone.

Or was he?

A sudden movement to his right caused him to turn sharply. He watched with mounting unease a small dark figure slip out of the alley and come silently towards him. He saw another figure, and another. From each alley they came, ten boys in all, creeping closer and closer to surround him. The leader, the tallest, stepped out from the sharp-eyed encircling pack. He lifted his coat slightly and Hector was certain he saw the glint of a blade in his waistband. The boy spoke with the confidence of one

who knows he has the upper hand.

‘What’s your name, Nor’boy?’

‘Nor’boy?’ queried Hector. He was surprised at how feeble his voice sounded. He clenched his fists and held them to his sides to stop them shaking.

‘Yeah, Nor’boy,’ repeated the lad. ‘You’re from the north side, int ya?’

‘Oh, yes, of course,’ he replied. Then, more boldly, ‘As for my name, it is Hector, like the Greek hero.’

The leader was unimpressed. ‘So, ’Ector, what else can you give us?’

‘Give?’ The sarcasm was lost on the boys.

‘I likes ’is boots,’ said one boy.

‘And ’is ’at,’ said another, and quick as lightning he produced a long stick and hooked Hector’s hat, tossing it artfully to land on the leader’s head.

‘Hey!’ Hector cried out, albeit half-heartedly. He was outnumbered, a stranger in hostile territory. If they wanted to let him go, they would. If not? Well, he didn't like to think where he might end up. He had not dealt with such boys before.

‘Very well,’ he said slowly, but inwardly thinking fast. There must be some way to appease them. ‘You have my purse, and my hat. You may have my coat and boots if that is your wish, but in return perhaps you could direct me back to the Bridge.’

Hector’s accent seemed to amuse his captors and they sniggered. The leader came unnervingly close to Hector and poked him in the chest.

‘I ain’t asking your permission, Nor’boy. If I want somefink, I take it.’

He snapped his fingers and instantly the group surged forwards, their eyes shining. Like wild animals they closed in. Hector swallowed hard. He could smell them now, they were so close. He could hear their breathing. His mouth was dry as

woodchips. He gritted his teeth, and held up his fists, preparing to fight.