Helping your children choose books they will love

I ♥ reading

Lovereading4kids.co.uk is a book website created for parents and children to make choosing books easy and fun

opening extract from

The Lunatics Curse

written by

F.E. Higgins

published by

Macmillan Children's Books

All Text is Copyright © of the Author and/or Illustrator

please print off and read at your leisure.

Lovereading4kids.co.uk



A NOTE FROM F. E. HIGGINS

It is late evening and I have finally laid down my pen. The curtains are drawn and I sit now by the fire in my study. Outside the snow has spread a blanket of white across the fields. And still more falls.

As some of you know, I have in my possession many objects of mysterious origin – too many now to mention. So tonight from the mantel I pick only two; the first, a polished disc of dark magnetite on a silver chain; the second, what we shall call for now an egg.

These simple objects are at the very heart of a dark tale of treachery and tragedy, deception and wickedness. I have looked back through time and uncovered a story that will cause your heart to beat faster and your breath to catch in your throat. Steel yourself, dear Reader, for at times you will be mystified and, I warn you now, at times you will be repelled.

But at all times you will want to know what lies ahead . . .

F. E. Higgins



PROLOGUE

An Eventful Supper

In nightshirt and robe, slippers and nightcap, Rex Grammaticus quietly entered the large dark-panelled dining room. On the far side of the room, lit in candle glow, he could see his stepmother Acantha, and his father Ambrose, at the table eating their evening meal. Rex had eaten earlier, at his stepmother's request, in the kitchen. One more change that she had made since marrying his father; one more way to push him out of the picture. It had only been eight weeks since the marriage but Acantha moved about the house as if she had lived there all her life. It was Rex who felt like the newcomer.

Silently Rex crossed the luxurious carpet towards the table. The two diners did not hear his soft-slippered approach. He stopped just beyond the reach of the candles' light to stand motionless by a shining suit of armour positioned against the wall. He watched for a few seconds as Acantha daintily dissected her fish into flakes and pushed it

about her plate. She held her knife like a pen and her right little finger stuck out at an angle. Ambrose, sitting opposite, was almost finished.

'Eat it up, my love,' said Acantha in that sickly sweet voice of hers that made Rex want to spit. 'It's bream, fresh today. I read recently in the *Hebdomadal* that fish is very good for the brain.'

'Always concerned for my health,' said Ambrose (and looked at her in that way of his that made Rex feel slightly sick), 'But I see you haven't finished your own,' he chided.

'I am not so hungry tonight,' said Acantha and she smiled, showing her little pointy teeth. Rex shuddered. Acantha was just so . . . false. How could his father not see through her? He opened his mouth to announce his presence but hesitated to speak. Was it his imagination or was his father beginning to look a little odd? He was shifting around restlessly in his chair, twitching and jerking, and he was squinting as if the light hurt his eyes. Rex moved slightly and Acantha saw his reflection in the armour. Rex thought he caught a glimmer of something deadly in her eye. 'Come to say goodnight?' she asked sweetly.

Ambrose looked up from his plate. 'Ah, Rex, my boy,' he said, beckoning him over. 'Your tutor tells me you worked well today. Even on your Latin!'

Rex smiled and came forward. Acantha stiffened.

'I am not so sure about that tutor,' she said. 'I still think a good boarding school would suit Rex so much better. He spends too much time in the house. A boy of twelve needs to be out with others of his own age.'

Rex looked immediately to his father, who shook his head. 'No,' he said firmly. 'Much as I hate to disagree with you, I think Rex should remain at home for the time being. Rex is a talented boy and he wants to follow me in my profession. I am happy to teach him all I know and for that I need him with me. The tutor can provide the rest.'

Acantha changed the subject. 'Did I tell you, dearest, that I am having dinner with Mr Chapelizod tomorrow night? It's about the beggars again. I've been asked to join the committee. There are just so many now, on every step and corner, people find them offensive. Mr Chapelizod thinks—'

'Now, now, my dear,' said Ambrose, a note of gravity entering his voice. 'I hope you haven't forgotten what I said about your friend, Mr Chapelizod, today.'

'You mean that rumour?' said Acantha coolly. 'The one you won't tell me.'

Ambrose inhaled deeply and drummed his fingers on the table.

'Acantha, please do not think that I am questioning your judgement, but I have recently heard some very strange things about that man. Until I can verify whether or not they are true I must be cautious. So, for all of our sakes, Cadmus Chapelizod is not welcome in this house.'

'I did not think you were the sort of man to listen to rumours,' said Acantha evenly. 'You have enjoyed his company over dinner many times, just as I have. Besides, you shall not tell me what to do. If I wish to see Mr Chapelizod I will. You cannot stop me.'

Rex's jaw dropped at Acantha's cool defiance and Ambrose looked quite distressed. After all, in this day and age a wife was still thought of as a husband's property. A husband's word was law. Rex shrank back behind his father's chair, sensing an acute change in the atmosphere.

Ambrose whitened further. Now his right eye was twitching furiously. 'Wife,' he said between gritted teeth. 'It has been suggested to me that Mr Chapelizod has undesirable habits, I cannot stress enough just how undesirable. Matters too delicate for a lady. But believe me, they are *very* offensive; practices that are quite against nature. You must cease your alliance with him immediately.'

Rex tried to imagine what habits the superintendent of the local lunatic asylum could have that would make him unacceptable in polite society. He resolved to ask his father in the morning.

'You have taken against him because of his position,' said Acantha. 'You think because Cadmus works with lunatics that he has no place in your sophisticated circles. But I enjoy his company. Besides, we have the same . . . how shall I put it . . . tastes.'

Ambrose stared at Acantha with a puzzled look. 'Tastes?' he repeated. Then his brow became smooth and his eyes widened as if he had just resolved something that had been troubling him. His face blanched completely and sweat poured down his forehead. Without warning, he leaped up, knocking his chair over in the process, thumped his fists on the table and shouted, 'No! No!'

Rex let out a little cry of alarm. What was happening

to his father? His broad shoulders were heaving, his face was contorted into a nightmarish mask. Then a terrible wailing sound, at first low but rising rapidly in pitch, came from somewhere and Rex realized that it was Ambrose. He watched in horror as his father put up his arms and started to wrestle with the air as if in combat with an invisible enemy.

'Oh Lord,' he cried and his voice sounded strangled. 'What have you done to me? It's coming for me!'

'Father!' cried Rex. 'What's wrong?'

Ambrose turned and stared down at his son. To Rex he suddenly seemed ten feet tall. His eyes were bloodshot, veins pulsated in his temple, perspiration poured down his face. His skin was blotchy and as Rex watched, great red pustules formed on his face and throat: huge lumps swelling up and distorting his features beyond recognition. Now Ambrose looked like nothing that existed on earth. He looked like a creature from hell.

In a panic Rex looked over at Acantha. 'What's happening? Can't you help him?'

But Acantha remained at the table stony-faced and cold-eyed. Waiting. Without warning Ambrose grabbed Rex by the arms, lifted him and threw him on to the table. Plates smashed and cutlery scattered. Ambrose held him down with a knee across his chest.

'Help,' yelled Rex. His father's face was within an inch of his own. Saliva spillt over his lip and ran down his chin to drip on to Rex's cheeks. And for years afterwards Rex would always recall vividly the overwhelming smell of his

fishy breath. Now the pressure on his chest was so great he felt as if his eyes were about to burst. Ambrose pulled Rex's arm up to his frothing mouth, clamped his jaw around his wrist and bit down so hard he actually reached the bone. Rex screamed in agony and Ambrose seemed to hear the scream and looked down at his son. For a split second there was a glimmer of recognition in his eyes. But as quickly as it appeared it was gone. Then the door was flung open and the housekeeper, the butler and the bootboy came running in. Acantha simultaneously leaped from her seat and put her hands to her face in horror.

'He has gone mad! Mr Grammaticus has gone completely mad! Call for the Constable! For Mr Stradigund! For Mr Chapelizod!'

Upon hearing Chapelizod's name Ambrose arched his back and howled like a wolf to the full moon. He dropped Rex's arm, and ran to the suit of armour and pulled the sword from the hollow knight's hand. He raised the weapon above his head and sliced through the air to bring the glittering blade down on the table, severing his own hand. There was the most dreadful sound, a sound that Rex would never forget, and blood spurted everywhere. Ambrose turned around and his eyes were on fire.

'Is this what you want, Acantha, is it?'

Rex couldn't bear to look any longer.

Fearlessly the butler and the bootboy wrestled Ambrose to the ground. He lay there clutching his maimed arm, panting heavily, his dark red blood spreading across the rug.

Acantha took hold of the water jug, stood over her husband of fifty-six days and smashed it over his head.

Ambrose lay motionless, for all appearances dead, his dented skull framed by the jagged pieces of the shattered jug. Rex, holding his own bloodied wrist, looked at Acantha in shock, incapable of speech. And he thought that she smiled.