



The Eyeball Collector

By F.E. Higgins

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Although Hector Fitzbaudly has always lived a plush life on the posh side of the River Foedus, he's yearned to slip away from his comfortable home and see the seedy side of Urbs Umida. Unfortunately, he gets his chance when a blackmail artist confronts his father with a terrible secret from his past, and Hector finds himself penniless and on the streets. He is determined to get his revenge against the man responsible, who has been a pauper, a gentleman, and an Eyeball Collector—stealing jewels from the wealthy to make false eyes to replace his missing one. He is a master of disguise, and a swindler who moves from place to place.

Hector trails the Eyeball Collector to the small village of Pagus Parvus and the foreboding Withypitts Hall, run by the eccentric Lady Mandible who has a strange taste for the macabre. He takes a job incubating butterflies for Lady Mandible, and places himself in the perfect position to take revenge. Hector is so close to the Eyeball Collector, but will he be able to go through with his plan?

Once again, F. E. Higgins takes readers into her world filled with grand balls and hairy-backed beasts, plotting nobility and clever orphans, and creates a spine-tingling story that is her most eerie yet.

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Editorial Review

Review

“Ultimately, this story is about not letting oneself sink to the level of one’s enemies, but readers will be most taken by the delightfully dense atmospherics fairly dripping off the pages. Readers need not be familiar with Higgins’ other books, but the hints dropped in to tie the world together will likely send them hunting for more while awaiting the next. A hyperquel, perhaps?”—*Booklist*

“Readers with a taste for lurid prose, macabre twists, riddles, exotic poisons, high-society caricatures, murderous schemes and scenes of stomach-churning degeneracy will find some or all of these in every chapter, and though the author trots in multiple characters and references from previous episodes, this one stands sturdily on its own.”—*Kirkus Reviews*

“It is a dark and diabolical story, set in an alternative universe that is distinctly Dickensian and peopled with Higgins’s creepiest cast yet. . . . Higgins’s clever and intricate plot moves along swiftly. Her dark atmosphere is well drawn, with stunning graphic images that are not for the faint of heart. Riddles are laced throughout the novel, with answers appended. . . . This ‘polyquel’ will appeal to mature readers who enjoy highly imagined dark stories.”—*School Library Journal*

“As in companion books *The Black Book of Secrets* (rev. 1/08) and *The Bone Magician*, oddities checker the plot; coincidences drive the narrative; threads from previous stories emerge and are rewoven into the fabric. Here the gothic tension is ratcheted even higher. . . . In the end, Hector must choose between his desire for revenge and his father’s advice not to become like those who wronged him—but his choice doesn’t prevent the climactic orgy of macabre circumstances that will leave readers shivering with pleasurable horror.”—*The Horn Book Review*

“Higgins has a marvelous flair for the macabre, and her deft pacing escalates to a satisfying crescendo of shivers. . . . Readers who appreciate the grotesqueries of Cirque du Freaks—but packaged with fine writing and a well-conceived plot—will want to add this to their collection.”—*BCCB*

About the Author

F.E. Higgins is the author of *The Black Book of Secrets* and *The Bone Magician*. As a child, she once saw a ghostly apparition, and ever since then, she has been fascinated by the macabre. Born in London, F.E. Higgins now lives in a haunted house that dates back to the fifteenth century, in a small village in rural Kent, England.

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CHAPTER ONE

“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 center 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 on a merry dance down the unlit, claustrophobic streets and lanes until he was completely lost.

"Wait till 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, in't 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 halfheartedly. 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 snickered. 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 wood chips. He gritted his teeth and held up his fists, preparing to fight.

Then he felt their hands all over him and he was overwhelmed, struggling uselessly against the onslaught. They patted and pulled his coat sleeves and tugged at his cuffs, jerking him near off his feet. Helplessly he allowed the coat to slip off his shoulders and into an assailant's possession. He watched the boy shrugging it on and dancing around, crowing loudly. Someone pulled hard at his bootlaces, unbalancing him, and he landed awkwardly on the ground where he surrendered his boots wordlessly. They took his watch and chain, his silk cravat, and finally his gloves.

"Anyfink else?" asked the leader.

"Only my handkerchief," said Hector sarcastically, getting back to his feet. He brushed himself down but knew he looked rather foolish. Inadvertently his hand went to his neck, and the sharp-eyed leader pounced. He reached under Hector's shirt and pulled at the concealed leather string. It snapped and he held it up. A small black object dangled from the end.

"Wossat?"

"It's a butterfly cocoon," said Hector slowly. He suddenly felt very angry. He didn't care about his other possessions, but the cocoon was different. A gift from his father, he couldn't let it go without a fight. Then he smiled. He had an idea.

"I'll challenge you for it."

The leader raised his eyebrow. The boys looked at each other and readied themselves.

"Not of fists, of wits," said Hector hastily. "A riddle. You can all try to answer it, ten of you against one of me. If you answer it correctly you may have the cocoon, otherwise you must allow me to keep it."

The boys exchanged grins and winks.

"It's awright wif me," said the leader. "Wot's the riddle?"

Hector had the sinking feeling that he was merely delaying the inevitable. Did rascals such as these honor deals? No matter. He had to try. It was just not in his nature to give up easily. He began:

"There was once a kingdom where it was a crime to tell a lie, the punishment being death."

His ragtag audience laughed at this. Was that good or bad? Hector didn't know. He went on.

"A young man traveled to the kingdom and heard about the crime of lying. 'That is nonsense,' he declared to the townspeople. 'If I tell a lie I will not be put to death.'

"One of the King's guards overheard his boast and asked him, 'Did you say you could evade punishment for lying?'

" 'No,' replied the young man brazenly.

" 'That is a lie!' shouted the crowd and he was arrested and thrown into prison.

"The next day he was brought before the King and a jury of twelve.

" 'You have been found guilty of lying,' said the King. 'You may say one last thing before you die, but be warned: if your statement is true, then you will be given a strong sleeping draught and you will die painlessly. But if your statement is a lie, then you will be burned alive and die screaming.'

"The young man spoke only one sentence in reply and the King had no choice but to release him."

The boys were still, listening hard, and Hector felt a brief shiver of something, almost pride. Yes, they held him captive by force, but he too had them gripped, with his words.

"So, what did he say?" asked a small boy at the front. He was sporting Hector's cravat.

"Exactly," said Hector with a hint of triumph. "That is the riddle."

There was a long pause. "It's a riddle all right," shrugged the leader, and suddenly they all ran off, guffawing loudly.

Hector stood alone and motionless in the gloom. It seemed he was right. Such street urchins did not honor deals. But he was free, and at the realization relief flooded his veins. "Sly devils," he murmured with more than a little admiration. "At least I have my life, if not my clothes."

Nonetheless, he was coatless, hatless and bootless on the wrong side of the City. He had to get back to the Bridge.

But which way to go?

"Well, Hector," he said ruefully to himself, "you wanted adventure and that's exactly what you got."

North of the river in the city of Urbs Umida, like so many others of his ilk, Hector lived a life of ease and sophistication with few cares. Unlike those others, however, he was not satisfied. He wanted something else. South of the river, as he was now, he thought he might have found it. The littered streets were narrower, the roads potholed, the gutters oozed slime. The buildings, sooty and run-down with broken shutters and windows, were packed so tightly together they created a maze of narrow alleys in between. People hurried through the shadowed streets, hugging their secrets to them and often up to no g...

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