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Opening extract from

Alistair Grim's Odditorium

Written by

Gregory Funaro

Illustrated by

Chris Mould

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Chapter One

GRUBB with a double B



THE ODD WAS THE ORDINARY at Alistair Grim's. The people who lived there were odd. The things they did there were odd. Even the there itself there was odd.

There, of course, was the Odditorium, which was located back then in London.

You needn't bother trying to find the Odditorium on any maps. It was only there a short time and has been gone many years now. But back then, even a stranger like you would have no trouble finding it. Just ask a fellow in the street and no doubt he'd point you in the right direction. For back then, there wasn't a soul in London who hadn't heard of Alistair Grim's Odditorium.

On the other hand, if you were too timid to ask for directions, you could just walk around until you came upon a black, roundish building that resembled a fat spider with its legs tucked up against its sides. Or if that didn't work, you could try looking for the Odditorium's four tall chimneys poking up above the rooftops – just keep an eye on them, mind your step, and you'd get there sooner or later.

Upon your arrival at the Odditorium, the first thing you'd notice was its balcony, on top of which stood an enormous organ – its pipes twisting and stretching all the way up the front of the building like dozens of hollow-steel tree roots. "That's an odd place for a pipe

organ," you might remark. But then again, such oddities were ordinary at Alistair Grim's. And what the Odditorium looked like on the outside was nothing compared to what it looked like on the *inside*.

You'll have to take my word on that for now.

And who am I that you should do so? Why, I'm Grubb, of course. That's right, no first or last name, just Grubb. Spelt like the worm but with a double b, in case you plan on writing it down someday. I was Mr Grim's apprentice – the boy who caused all the trouble.

You see, I was only twelve or thereabouts when I arrived at the Odditorium. I say "thereabouts" because I didn't know exactly how old I was back then. Mrs Pinch said I looked "twelve or thereabouts", and, her being Mrs Pinch, I wasn't about to quarrel with her.

Mrs Pinch was Mr Grim's housekeeper, and I'm afraid she didn't like me very much at first. Oftentimes I'd meet her in the halls and say, "Good day, Mrs Pinch," but the old woman would only stare down at me over her spectacles and say, "*Humph*," as she passed.

That said, I suppose I can't blame her for not liking me back then. After all, it was Mrs Pinch who found me in the trunk.

Good Heavens! There I go getting ahead of myself. I suppose if I'm going to tell you about all that trunk business, I should go back even further and begin my story with Mr Smears. Come to think of it, had it not been for Mr Smears taking me in all those years ago, I wouldn't have a story to tell you.

All right then: Mr Smears.

I don't remember my parents, or how I came to live with Mr Smears, only that at some point the hulking, grumbling man with the scar on his cheek entered my memories as if he'd always been there.

Mr Smears was a chimney sweep by trade, and oftentimes when he'd return to our small, North Country cottage, his face was so black with soot that only his eyeballs could be seen below his hat. The scar on his cheek ran from the corner of his mouth to the lobe of his left ear, but the soot never stuck to it. And when I was little I used to think his face looked like a big black egg with a crack in it.

His wife, on the other hand, was quite pleasant, and my memories of her consist mainly of smiles and kisses and stories told especially for me. All of Mrs Smears's stories were about Gwendolyn the Yellow Fairy, whom she said lived in the Black Forest on the outskirts of the town. The Yellow Fairy loved and protected children, but hated grown-ups, and her stories always involved some fellow or another who was trying to steal her magic flying dust. But the Yellow Fairy always tricked those fellows, and in the end would gobble them up – "*Chomp, chomp!*" as Mrs Smears would say.

Mrs Smears was a frail woman with skin the colour of goat's milk, but her cheeks would flush and her eyes would twinkle when she spoke of the Yellow Fairy. Then she would kiss me goodnight and whisper, "Thank you, Miss Gwendolyn."

You see, it was Mrs Smears who found me on the doorstep; and after she made such a fuss about the Yellow Fairy, her husband reluctantly agreed to take me in.

"He looks like a grub," said Mr Smears – or so his wife told me. "All swaddled up tight in his blanket like that. A little grub-worm is what he is."

"Well then, that's what we'll call him," Mrs Smears replied. "Grub, but with a double b."

"A double b?" asked Mr Smears. "Why a double b?"

"The extra b stands for blessing, for surely this boy is a blessing bestowed upon us by the Yellow Fairy."

"Watch your tongue, woman," Mr Smears whispered, frightened. "It's bad luck to speak of her, especially when the moon is full."

"It's even worse luck to refuse a gift from her," replied Mrs Smears. "So shut your trap and make room for him by the fire."

"Bah," said Mr Smears, but he did as his wife told him.

Mr and Mrs Smears had no children of their own – an unfortunate circumstance that Mr Smears often complained about at supper when I was old enough to understand such things.

"That grub ain't free, Grubb," Mr Smears would say, scratching his scar. "You best remember the only reason I agreed to take you in is because the wife said you'd make a good apprentice someday. And since we got no other grubs squirming about, I suggest you be quick about getting older or you'll find yourself picking oakum in the workhouse."

"Shut your trap," Mrs Smears would say. "He'll find himself doing no such thing." Upon which her husband would just shake his head and say:

"Bah!"

Mrs Smears was the only person I ever saw get away with talking to Mr Smears like that, but she died when I was six or thereabouts. I never had the courage to ask Mr Smears what from, but I remember how old I was because Mr Smears was very upset. After the funeral, he knocked me down on the cottage floor and growled:

"Six years of feeding and clothing you, and what have I got to show for it? A dead wife in the ground and a useless worm what ain't fit for nothing but the workhouse!"

The workhouse was a black, brooding building located near the coalmines on the south edge of the town. It had tall iron gates that were always locked and too many windows for me to count. Worst of all were the stories Mr Smears used to tell about the children who worked there – how they were often beaten, how they had no play time and very little to eat. Needless to say, I didn't have to be told much else to know that the workhouse was a place from which I wanted to stay as far away as possible.

"Oh please don't send me to the workhouse!" I cried. "I'll make you a good apprentice. I swear it, Mr Smears!"

"Bah!" was all he said, and knocked me down again. Then he threw himself on his bed and began sobbing into his shirtsleeves.

I picked myself up and, remembering how gentle he was around his wife, poured him a beer from the cupboard as I'd seen Mrs Smears do a thousand times.

"Don't cry, Mr Smears," I said, offering him the mug.

Mr Smears looked up at me sideways, his eyes red and narrow. And after a moment he sniffled, took the mug and gulped it down. He motioned for me to pour him another and then gulped that one down, too. And after he'd gulped down yet a third, he dragged his shirtsleeve across his mouth and said:

"All right then, Grubb. I suppose you're old enough now. But mind you carry your weight, or so help me it's off to the workhouse with you!"

And so I carried my weight for Mr Smears – up and down the chimneys, that is. Mr Smears called me his "chummy" and told everyone I was his apprentice, but all he was good for was sitting down below and barking up orders at me. Sometimes he'd sweep

the soot into bags, but most often he left that part of the job for me to do, too.

I have to admit that all that climbing in the dark was scary work at first. The flues were so narrow and everything was pitch-black – save for the little squares of light at the top and bottom. And sometimes the chimneys were so high and crooked that I lost sight of those lights altogether. It was difficult to breathe, and the climbing was very painful until my knees and elbows toughened up.

Eventually, however, I became quite the expert chummy. But sometimes when we arrived back at the cottage, Mr Smears would knock me down and say:

"Job well done, Grubb."

"Well done, you say? Then why'd you knock me down, Mr Smears?"

"So you'll remember what's what when a job *ain't* well done!"

There were lots of chimneys in our town for me to sweep back then, and I always did my best, but life with Mr Smears was hard, and many times I went to bed hungry because, according to Mr Smears, it wasn't sensible to feed me.

"After all," he'd say, "what good's a grub what's too fat to fit in his hole?"

Oftentimes I'd lie awake at night, praying for the Yellow Fairy to take me away. "Please, Miss Gwendolyn," I'd whisper in the dark. "If only you'd leave me a little dust, just enough to sprinkle on my head so I can fly away, I'd be forever grateful."

Mr Smears made me sleep in the back of the cart in the stable. I was too dirty to be let inside the cottage, he said, and what use was there washing me when I would only get dirty again tomorrow?

There was a small stove in the stable for Old Joe, Mr Smears's donkey, but on some of the chillier nights, when Mr Smears neglected to give us enough coal, Old Joe and I would sleep huddled together in his stall.

Of course, many times over the years I thought about running off, but if I did run, where would I run to? I'd only ever been as far as the country manors on jobs with Mr Smears, and since I knew no trade other than chimney-sweeping, what was left for me besides the workhouse?

I suppose things weren't all bad. Every third Saturday Mr Smears would allow me to wash at the public pump and sleep on the floor in the cottage. The following Sunday we'd dress in our proper clothes and attend service like proper folk. After that, we'd stop in the churchyard to pay our respects to Mrs Smears. Sometimes Mr Smears would sniffle a bit, but I would pretend not to notice so as not to catch a beating. Then we'd arrive back at the cottage, whereupon I'd pour him some beer and keep his mug full until he was pleasant enough to allow me outside to play.

For six years or so things went on that way, until one day I blundered into a stranger who changed my life for ever. Indeed, we chimney sweeps have a saying that goes, "A blunder in the gloom leads a lad to daylight or to doom."

I just never expected to find either inside a lamb.