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opening extract from

Smugglers

written by

Christopher Russell

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I

From the Sea

It was a long way down. The stones dislodged by Reuben's feet took several seconds to bounce into the sea far below. The sea swallowed them but wanted more – it wanted Reuben Hibberd. It threw itself at the crumbling, chalky cliff, roaring and stretching long fingers of hissing foam up towards him. The spray drenched Reuben's back and made the tarred rope from which he dangled slippery. He clung on, shutting out his dread of the sea and swinging himself towards the next ledge.

The stench of a thousand nesting seabirds made Reuben gasp and their screeching din battered his ears but when the mother razorbill scuttled forward with raised wings and gaping beak, he swung his stick unerringly. He killed the bird with a single blow and stuffed it in his bag, then grabbed the helpless grey-white chick and thrust that in as well. The bag was full now. Reuben would get his eightpence for the feathers and sixpence for the

dozen or so carcases. A shilling and twopence altogether. His family could afford to eat.

Reuben hauled himself back to the clifftop. He was always relieved to feel the turf beneath his feet again. Relieved that the iron spike to which he tied his rope had once again held firm, supported his weight. He was only twelve years old but growing fast. Still agile but getting too big and heavy to be a cliff boy. If ever the spike or the rope or the cliff edge gave way, he would be dead.

Reuben coiled the rope and headed for home. It had been a fine morning when he'd set out for the Cormorant Cliff. He'd dared to hope that summer was finally arriving. But the wind had freshened and now he could see another storm piling up on the horizon. Yet more rain coming, after a cold wet winter and an even wetter spring. Heavy rain was his family's biggest enemy: it led to rock falls and landslides. Dangerous enough up here on the high chalk cliff but more menacing still down in the bay, where he and the other beach-dwellers lived in their fragile cottages perched above the tideline. The cliff down there behind the cottages was low but it was even less sturdy than the high chalk. It was formed instead of layers of sand and mudstone through which streams oozed and trickled to the shore. In places, after prolonged rain had swollen the streams, it

looked more like a sloping bog than a wall of rock.

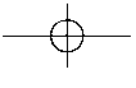
A track led to the shore from the nearby village but the most recent landslide had carried the end of the track into the sea. Reuben climbed down the rickety wooden ladder that had been built to replace it, and stood on the beach for a moment. Eventually, the two cottages, like the track above, would be swallowed by the sliding grey mud and Reuben and his family would have no choice but to move. But not this year, Reuben told himself. A warm dry summer would assure them of that. He tried to ignore the first spatter of rain on the wind.

A tall gangling figure was hobbling to meet him. Reuben's grandfather. He was hobbling because he had only one foot. The other had been smashed by a cannonball in a sea battle when he'd been a sailor.

'Best get them birds plucked sharpish,' he said. 'You could be busy later.'

Reuben saw that his grandfather had his telescope with him. He was off to the cliffs to watch for ships. Ships in trouble in the brewing storm. Reuben himself was keen to get indoors for some breakfast.

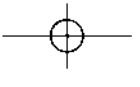
The Hibberds' cottage was cosy in its way. Crowded but cosy. And cottage was a rather grand name for a tar-covered timber shack. It had been built by Reuben's father when Reuben was a baby.



There was another baby now, called Francis, and Reuben was his uncle, which made Reuben feel grown-up and peculiar at the same time. Francis was only three months old but was cheerful and didn't cry a lot. This was lucky because the cottage was really one big room, with stairs to an open attic, so when he did cry there was no escape from the noise. Apart from Francis and Reuben, three other people lived in the cottage: Reuben's grandfather, who was called Grampy; Reuben's older brother Daniel; and Daniel's wife Molly.

Reuben's parents were both dead. His mother had died in childbirth many years ago, and Reuben barely remembered her. His father had drowned only last year. He'd been a fisherman, like Reuben's brother Daniel. His boat had been lost with him, and Daniel had only recently finished building a new one, so the winter had been even harder and hungrier than usual. The neighbours helped as much as they could: the Olivers were generous people. Everything about them was big: their hearts, their cottage, their family, and especially Bull Oliver himself. Bull was a fisherman too but that wasn't why his wife, Dinah, and their six children never went hungry. Fish, as Bull put it, were too slippery to depend on. So he used his fishing boat for other business as well. Secret business.

Dinah was at Reuben's shoulder now as he stood



at the rough table in the backyard, hurriedly plucking the dead razorbills and guillemots. He didn't like the ripping noise as the feathers came out. Molly usually did this job, she was much quicker at it, but Molly was feeding Francis.

'I'll take the lot,' said Dinah, meaning the plucked carcases.

Reuben looked at her.

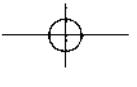
'Bull's putting down some extra pots,' she said, 'so he needs more bait.'

Reuben knew she was just being kind. The crab and lobster season was well past its peak despite the cold spring. No one was putting down extra pots.

Dinah thrust sixpence into Reuben's hand and swept the dumpy little carcases into her basket before he could argue. Rain was staining the wooden table now. Dinah raised her head to the sea and the weather, then squinted up towards Grampy, who could be seen tottering against the clifftop gale.

'And p'raps the storm'll bring you more than sixpence,' she said.

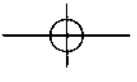
Grampy lay full length on the clifftop grass. He held the telescope steady, despite the wind and rain that whipped across him, and tried to focus. He could see the ship more clearly by the second. She'd been too slow to shorten sail and now those



sails were being torn away, while the ship itself was being turned slowly, inexorably, broadside towards the storm. Another half an hour and she'd be on the rock ledge at the mouth of Cormorant Bay. It was still hard to tell what she was exactly: merchantman or man-of-war. Grampy hoped fervently that she was a merchantman, because that meant a cargo, and cargo on the shore was what the beach-dwellers longed for.

Deep in the lower hold of the distant ship, a small boy sat huddled in the darkness. His name was Pin. He had thought it wouldn't take very long to get to India, not on a ship with so many sails.

He didn't actually know where India was but he'd liked the look of it in the pictures he'd seen. He'd particularly liked the look of the banquets the kings ate there, sitting on silk cushions. And the palm trees. And the elephants. Pin wanted so much to ride an elephant. And the big thing was, it was hot in India. He'd heard a soldier say that. Pin had lost a toe to frostbite in London last winter. No fear of frostbite in India. Or on this ship. He'd been full of confidence and excitement when he'd shinned up the dockside mooring rope. A boy who could do that without being spotted by the crew could surely find himself enough to eat once on board. And stay snug and hidden all the way. But

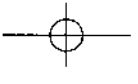


he wasn't feeling snug any more, he was feeling threatened. Threatened by the ship's cargo into which he'd so eagerly burrowed.

A short while ago, the ship had begun to shudder. Then the shuddering had changed to loud banging: a succession of plunging collisions that grew more frequent, so that the crates around Pin shifted and then began to tumble, tossed like giant dice in the creaking dark. Pin fearfully dodged the lethal crates, pressing himself against the wall of the hold but he knew it was only a matter of time before he was crushed. He must get out. He realized the ship had encountered rough seas. Surely the crew would be too busy with their ropes and sails to notice if he emerged on deck? There must be somewhere he could hide in the open until the hold became safe again.

He climbed towards the hatch and pushed it. Nothing happened. He heaved again without success, then heard the cargo sliding and falling in the upper hold, as it was in his own. A crate must have jammed across the hatch. He was trapped. Trapped like a rat. And like a rat, he scrabbled at the rough, unyielding barrier above his head, ignoring the splinters that drew blood beneath his fingernails.

Suddenly, the motion of the ship changed again, throwing him away from the hatch, and Pin sensed something unnatural in the way the vessel was now

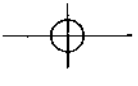


being shouldered by the sea, sideways on. Then he heard the shriek. An inhuman noise, filling the hold as the ship's keel scraped, agonized, across the jaws of a reef. The ship lurched briefly upright before the planking beneath Pin's feet ruptured and icy cold water washed in around him, hissing and gurgling as it rose swiftly towards the low rafters above him.

Pin fought his way through the now floating cargo and reached the hatch again at the same moment as the seawater. He was briefly submerged, but whatever had blocked the hatch earlier had shifted again and he burst into the upper hold as the water forced him through, like a cork from a bottle. The sea boiled up after Pin as he floundered onwards. If the main hatch had been battened on the outside against the storm, he was dead. But to his relief, it opened.

Thankfully, Pin climbed out into the world of air and light, only to be knocked instantly from his feet by a wave that swept the deck and crashed him hard against the ship's bulwark. He clung on, half drowned, half unconscious, as the sudden deafening nightmare of wind and sea, torn sails and helpless, terrified men revolved around him.

A sailor, trying desperately to secure himself to the nearest mast, stared a moment at Pin, then the keel shrieked again, the ship lurched, and the man slithered away past him, snatching vainly at



Pin's arm before disappearing over the side with a scream that Pin saw rather than heard.

A moment later the next wave to mount the deck engulfed Pin himself and dragged his fingers free, washing him overboard before surging on towards the surf-lined shore.

Reuben turned from tickling Francis as the back door of the cottage burst open and Grampy appeared.

'Merchantman grounded!' cried the rain-soaked old man. 'And she'll not escape!'

The rest of the Hibberds quickly followed him outside. There was a large crowd already on the beach. The entire Oliver family was there, but also farmhands, carpenters, ditch-diggers, almost the whole scattered village, drawn by word of mouth from those who, like Grampy, had first seen the possibility of a wreck.

Reuben could feel the tension around him as the crowd watched in silence, eager but anxious, willing the stricken ship towards them. Then a great cheer went up, a cheer for the wind and sea, and for the mighty wave that finally wrenched the ship from her lopsided perch on the ledge. Now she would be theirs. Now there was nothing to stop her being driven to them by the onshore wind.

Reuben glanced at Daniel and Molly close beside him. Daniel gave a rueful little shrug. He



was a father himself now. He understood the desperate need to clothe and feed a family.

'Come on, my girl!' bellowed Bull Oliver at the wallowing, sinking ship. 'Closer now! Closer! Don't be shy!'

And in response, another huge wave lifted the ship high and carried her broadside-on towards the beach, as if she were a gift.

Reuben closed his eyes as the wave crashed and the ship's hull scraped and rolled in the surf like a dead thing. The following wave righted the ship but drove her deeper into the sea-beach, where she stuck fast, and a roar of triumph around Reuben announced that the gift had been delivered. As he opened his eyes, the crowd was already jostling past: men, women and children, desperate for their share of what the ship's disintegrating holds might offer.

'Move yourself then, nipper!'

Grampy already had the end of Reuben's cliff rope fastened round his own waist. He thrust the rest of the coil at Reuben then sat down heavily.

'Hurry, or they land crabs'll take the lot!'

Reuben dashed into the sea, knotting the other end of the rope round him as he went. The line, with Grampy as anchor, gave him an advantage. He might be knocked over by the breaking surf but didn't fear being washed away. All around him, squeals of excitement were changing to sudden

frightened shouts as fellow plunderers were dragged from their feet by the undertow and reduced to clawing their way back to shore on all fours, like survivors of the wreck itself.

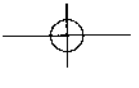
Survivors. Were there any? She was a good-sized ship: three masts, two of them broken as she'd rolled in the surf before coming to rest. She must have a crew of more than twenty, and none were to be seen.

Reuben was swallowed by a towering wave, and as he clung to his rope amid the swirling roar of water, something banged into him. The wave surged on up the beach and as Reuben staggered, choking, to his feet again, he saw through stinging eyes that he'd been hit by a body. It lay lifeless on its back beside him, its mouth and eyes gaping. Then the spent wave retreated, dragging at the lifeless body as it went, sucking it back into the deep.

'Grab him!' roared Grampy from the beach, the rope taut in his hands.

And Reuben dug his heels into the sliding shingle and clung to the corpse.

Pin lost his grip on the wooden crate as it was smashed against the rocks. It had been his friend since soon after he'd been washed from the ship but now it left him. All around, other crates and bales were being thrown up by the waves, then



carried off again. Pin kicked and threshed, trying to grab hold of something, anything, to help him keep afloat, but the nearest crate ducked and slid away from him. And the rocks, when he was close enough, were too slippery. His strength was failing fast now, and he was choking on seawater.

Then he saw people edging along the base of the cliff towards him, dodging the furious seas. They were coming for him. Risking their lives to rescue him! He tried to wave an arm and shout, but they ignored him and began dragging a wooden crate from the sea instead. They struggled back with it the way they'd come and others did the same: seeing and ignoring him, rescuing the crates. Then a boy of about his own age paused and looked straight at him.

Pin raised both arms and cried out, but could not prevent himself from disappearing, exhausted, beneath the next wave. The last thing he saw was the boy, still hesitating. He knew he was drowning now. He'd fought his hardest but could fight no more. Great fronds of seaweed furled gently round him. He was sorry he would never ride an elephant.

The sudden thump of the waves on the cliff came as a shock, as did the shower of spray. Pin coughed and retched as fingernails tore his shirt, scrabbling at him before gripping him by the armpit and hauling him on to the rocks, where



he lay gasping and staring, like a stranded fish.

The boy standing over him returned the stare for a moment. Then he seemed to panic, and ran away.

