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opening extract from

Charlie Small: The Mummy's Tomb

written by

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published by

Random House Children's Books

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Body Snatchers!

'Hey! What's going on?' I yelled.

Suddenly, my world was plunged into darkness. Raising my hands, I felt coarse, scratchy material surrounding me. Someone had thrust a sack over my head!

'Got him!' a man's voice growled. 'Let's take him down to the docks!'

'No!' I yelled in a real panic. 'I'm supposed to be going to Jakeman's.'

'Well, you're not,' said another man's voice. 'You're comin' with us, whether you like it or not.'

'Let me go, you goons!' I cried and, although I couldn't see a thing, I kicked out like a bad-tempered donkey.

'Ouch! Keep still, you little pest,' snarled the first voice again. 'Stop strugglin' or we'll bop you on the 'ead.'

I yelled in frustration. This was terrible! Just when everything had been going so well . . .

A few days earlier, I had managed to rescue the reindeer herder, Mamuk, from the bloodthirsty brigands of Frostbite Pass; he had taken me zooming across a wintery sky on a magical sleigh ride and dropped me off on a grassy hilltop overlooking a wide river valley.

Below me was a town, its narrow streets busy with people whose shouts and laughter carried up to me through the clear, still air. Further along, at the river mouth, stood some decrepit docks where a tangle of masts and rigging poked above sagging warehouses.

Then, peering across the valley through my powerful telescope, I had spied my pal Jakeman's fabulous factory. AT LAST! I'd been trying to find this place for ages: Jakeman's incredible inventions and miraculous machines had helped me out of countless sticky situations on my travels. All I needed to do was cross the valley, climb the headland to the factory and he would surely invent something to send me home.

But everything went wrong! As soon as I set out on the winding track that led across the valley, these boneheads bunged a sack over my head. Now they were manhandling

me along the stony path, pushing and shoving and growling at me to keep quiet. I tried to fire up my new jet-powered rucksack but the thugs had my arms clamped to my side and I couldn't reach the buttons. I kicked out again.

'Right, that's it, I've had enough!' said one of the men.

'You've been warned,' muttered the other, and they lifted me up and carried me between them like a sack of potatoes. I continued to struggle but it was no good; the brutes were much too strong.

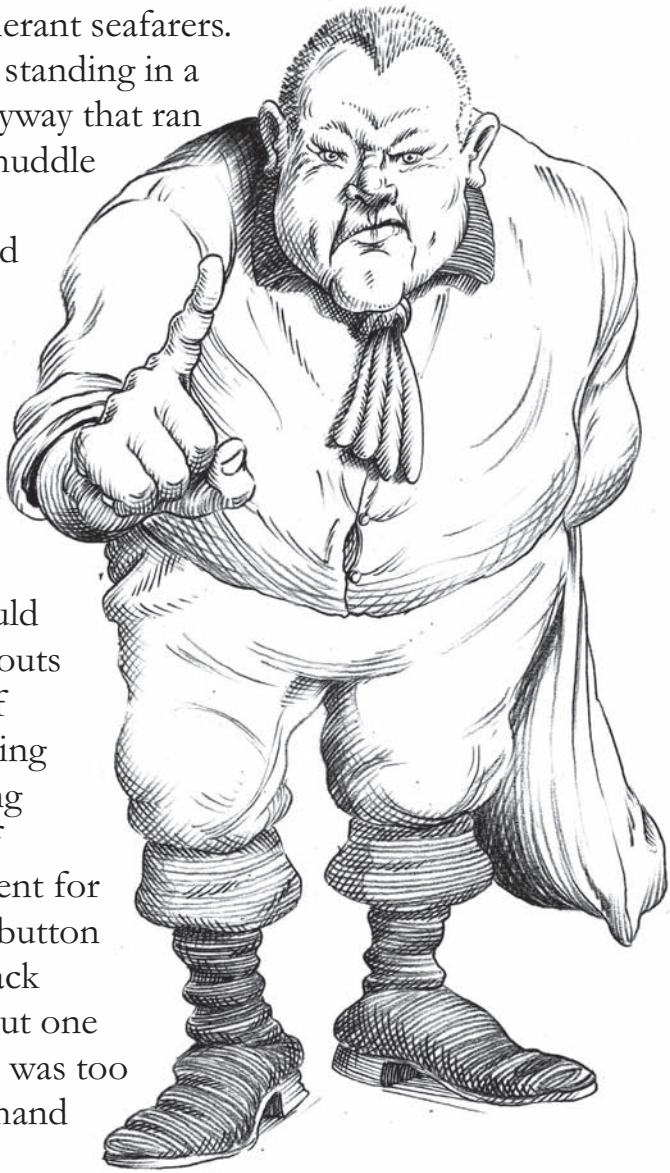
Before long I sensed we were nearing the docks. The tweeting of thrushes and blackbirds gave way to the harsh cry of seagulls, and the smell of grass was replaced with the salty tang of sea air. What did these mysterious body-snatchers want with me?

A Den of Thieves

All of a sudden the sack was yanked from my head and I found myself staring at two of the roughest, toughest-looking men I had ever seen. They were broad-shouldered, thick-necked,

shaven-headed brutes dressed in the garb of itinerant seafarers.

We were standing in a narrow alleyway that ran between a huddle of tall, sea-battered and decaying buildings. Ahead, the alley opened onto the dockside where I could hear the shouts and cries of sailors loading ships. Seeing a chance of escape, I went for the launch button of my jetpack rucksack, but one of the men was too quick. His hand



closed around my wrist, pulling it away from the switch.

'Now, now,' he said, yanking the pack from my back, 'I'll look after this for a while if you don't mind.'

'What do you want with me?' I cried. 'Give me back my explorer's kit!'

'Calm down, boy! You can have it back later. Just do as we say and everything'll be fine,' he said, wagging a short, fat finger in my face. 'Ain't that right, Perce?'

'That's right, Syd,' said the other man. 'We ain't gonna hurt you, boy – unless you make it necessary. Now, we've gotta go through the Black Swan, but we can't take you in a busy pub with this sack over yer 'ead.'

'Why not, are you worried someone might try to rescue me, you great bullies?' I said, kicking out at their ankles again.

Syd laughed and shook me by the shoulder. 'The beer-swillin' buccaneers of the Black Swan, rescue you? You must be jokin'! They're the biggest bunch of low-down dogs you'll ever meet. No, they won't try and rescue you, but they might try and slit yer gizzard. They *hate* strangers. They *loathe* outsiders. Pretend

you're pals with us, Charlie, and you just might survive!'

With a hoarse chuckle, he pushed me into the low, dark entrance of the Black Swan Inn. I stepped into a cacophony of roaring and laughing and singing.

My captors pushed me through the crowds of people. There was an overwhelming smell of stale beer and old sweaty clothes, and a thousand hostile eyes were directed towards me.

'Stranger in our midst!' shouted a toothless old man, thrusting his leering face into mine. *Phwoar!* His breath stank of strong, spicy rum and I reeled back in shock.

'Leave the boy be,' said Syd. 'He's with us.'

'And what do you want wiv a sprat like that? Maybe he's got a purse worth slicin' open,' sneered the

rum-soaked reprobate, and he slid out a small dagger from the folds of his filthy coat. Perce grabbed his skinny wrist, twisting it until the blade clattered to the floor.

'We said, leave him be,' said Perce menacingly.

'Don't be like that, Perce,' squealed the old soak, rubbing his wrist. 'I was only havin' a bit o' fun; why don't you stay and 'ave a drop of the 'ard stuff?'

'We 'aven't got time to waste drinkin' with the likes o' you, Jimmy Jones,' said Perce. The old man cursed as Syd and Perce shoved past him and propelled me deeper into the crowd. Weaving through the throng was an enormously fat man carrying a tray piled with tankards and goblets, pies and sizzling chops.

'*He's* been askin' for yer,' the man said to Syd with a nod of his head towards the rear of the room. 'Who's your young friend?'

'Just someone Mr Twitch has been expectin',' said Syd with a grin. 'And I suppose his lordship will be wantin' his meal soon. Is it ready?'

'Ready and waitin',' said the enormous landlord. 'He can have it whenever he wants.'

Who on earth is this Twitch fellow they're on about? I wondered. He must be their

boss – and it was clear he was expecting me. I pictured the thugs' boss as a huge, powerfully-built man, bulging with muscles and covered in scars, and I went weak at the knees. *Yikes!*

How wrong could I be!

Bony elbows cracked against my face and my feet were stamped on by a multitude of hobnail boots as I pressed through the rollicking horde, but no one else took any notice of me. Then, above the din, I heard some voices singing a familiar song:

We were poor little wives of black-hearted pirates,
Who left us at home, playing at mum,
But now we've become the scourge of the oceans,
So watch your backs and pass me the rum.

Rum, rum (fresh, slimy gizzards)
Rum, rum (saltwater scum)
Rum, rum (don't spit in the wind, girls)
Rum, rum, just pass me the rum.

How strange! It was the song Captain Cut-throat and her crew used to sing aboard the *Betty Mae* when I was the most wanted pirate on the wide Pangaean ocean! Did that mean my old shipmates were in port? I was just about to cry for help when I remembered the last time I had seen the Perfumed Pirates of Perfidy. They had been firing round after round of musket shot at me as I escaped in my homemade

(See my Journal Pirate Galleon)

barrel-boat. They called me a sneaking traitor and a dirty deserter and said they would skin me alive if they ever saw me again – maybe they weren't the right people to help!

But before I could decide whether to call out or not, Perce unlatched a worm-eaten door at the back of the pub and I was shoved outside into a courtyard. We crossed the yard to a long, tall building on the opposite side. The ground floor was lined with a row of barred windows and wide sliding doors, all heavily padlocked.

'What *is* this place?' I asked, but my two captors didn't reply. They led me to the nearest corner of the building where there was another smaller door, which Syd unlocked with a large key and then pushed open to reveal a steep flight of steps.

'Follow me,' he growled, and with Perce taking up the rear, I nervously followed him up the dark staircase into a room that stretched the entire length of the building. I had no idea what to expect, but in my mind's eye and with knees trembling, I pictured this vicious, mean and dastardly gang leader.

Shafts of sunlight, swirling with dust, streamed through a line of grubby windows as

I was marched forward; casks and boxes were piled high against the walls; ropes hanging from block and tackle sets snaked down from the ceiling above and disappeared through hatches in the floor. The air was filled with the pungent smells of strange spices, tobaccos and tar. Then, in the gloom, I spied Syd and Percy's feared leader.

Lounging on an ornate sofa, was a skinny man dressed in a scarlet coat, a fancy, frilled shirt and knee-length breeches.