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Opening extract from

Freaks

Written by

Kieran Larwood

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FREAKS

From the Chicken House

I love the way this book smells! You can practically inhale the strange aromas of stinky streets, rotting rivers and slimy villains. You'll find your nose twitching as the story of the most amazing set of misfit crime fighters unfurls in your hands.

FREAKS is the worthy winner of this year's Times/Chicken House new writers' competition. Kieran Larwood has created one of the best new stories of the year!

Barry Cunningham
Publisher



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For my grandfather, James Larwood



Chapter One

IN WHICH WE MEET OUR HEROINE.
AND A POLYCEPHALIC SHEEP.

LITTLE PILCHTON-ON-SEA, AUGUST 1851

Sheba gazed through her tiny window to the seaside view beyond. It was a beautiful summer morning. The sounds of the beach drifted in and she closed her eyes to hear them better. Children splashing and laughing. The cries of gulls. She could smell the tang of fresh seaweed. Her mind drifted down to the sand and pebbles below. She could almost feel the waves lapping around her toes and the sun on her face, almost taste the salt on her lips.

But such things were not meant for her, and dreaming about them only made it worse. Sheba gave a deep sigh and ran her ivory comb through her chestnut-brown curls, taking out the tangles. She always took great care of her locks, brushing and combing to keep them shining. Everyone said she had a lovely head of hair.

And face of hair. And hands of hair.

In fact, she was covered from head to foot.

It wasn't all the same, of course. Her face and body had a fine, fair coating that might be mistaken for tanned skin, from a distance. She could even pass for normal in a crowd, if it wasn't for her other peculiarities.

Her eyes were a deep amber colour; in a certain light they even seemed to have an orange glow. She had a pink, hairless nose – like a puppy – and small, sharp, white teeth. Her hands were tipped with nails that looked more than a little like claws. But when she was frightened or angry or excited, her nose puckered into a snout, her eyes flashed, her skin bristled, and she had even been known to growl. 'Sheba the Wolfgirl' was what everyone called her then, and she hated it beyond all hatred.

The hair and teeth were the first things people noticed, but they weren't the most interesting. She was actually an exceptional girl. Her sense of smell was prodigious; she could follow a trail like a bloodhound and read scents like the pages of a book. She had learnt the mechanics of a range of locks, and was able to open almost anything with a couple of old hairpins she had scavenged on the pier. And by the age of five she had taught herself to read from

scraps of newspaper and chalk billboards. She would have read much more, but it was quite difficult to pop into the local library when you were covered in thick fur and worked as an exhibit in a seaside freak show. And that was where she had spent every waking moment of every long day for as long as she could remember.

Grunchgirdle's World of Curiosities perched at the end of the rickety Little Pilchton pier, like a jackdaw on a branch. Mr Grunchgirdle, the owner, was a rheumy, skinny old man with the aroma of a long-dead trout. Besides Sheba, the other attractions were a stuffed squirrel with a carp's tail sewn where its legs should be ('the world's only true mermaid!') and a two-headed lamb called Flossy. They were all crammed into a one-roomed shack no bigger than a large cupboard and made even smaller by their cages, where they slept, ate and (very rarely) washed.

It was a poor place to call home, and Sheba spent many hours wondering how she had ended up here. There had been a workhouse before, where Grunchgirdle had bought her, but of the time beyond that . . . Her mind was empty of conscious memories, except for the merest hints that sometimes fluttered by like a thread on the wind. She sometimes thought she remembered running through a white house, the air hot around her yet cool marble beneath her bare feet, but there were no real answers.

If only there was someone who could tell her something about her past. For all she knew, she could be the Crown Princess of Mongolia, the daughter of a rich and

magnificent king. Or maybe a hair-covered parent just like her. Perhaps then she wouldn't feel so desperately different.

Just to be somebody's daughter would be nice.

When Sheba had finished grooming, she carefully put her comb inside the ebony box that held all her belongings: hairpins, some crumpled pamphlets, and a sea-worn limpet shell someone had once dropped on the shack floor. As for the box itself, Sheba had no idea where it had come from, only that it had always been hers. She was sure Grunchgirdle wouldn't have given it to her – the only things she got from him were insults and the occasional slap – which meant it must have been from her previous life. Was it something that belonged to her mother perhaps? Or a gift from a loving relative? Many nights she lay awake, tracing the carved flowers on its lid with her fingers and wondering. Delicate flowers, with five narrow petals, like stars.

Flossy raised one of his heads from the sorry pile of straw he lay on and gave a weak bleat. He didn't appear to be in the best of health, but that was hardly surprising. Lambs were meant to be out frolicking and gambolling, not waiting in a dim shack for customers that never appeared. If the poor creature didn't get some fresh air soon, he wouldn't be long for this world.

Grunchgirdle had spent the last of his money on Flossy a year ago in an attempt to turn around his dire fortunes. But no one visited Little Pilchton any more. People wanted to travel to places that had railways or fast coach

routes. The tiny town barely had a road, only a collection of massive potholes linked together by smaller potholes. He could have bought a seven-headed purple tiger and been no better off.

Sheba offered Flossy a handful of oats, but he just sniffed at them and gave her a dismal look. She patted one of his heads. She would be very sorry if he died. He was the closest thing she had to company. The stuffed mermaid wasn't very inspiring, Grunchgirdle treated Sheba little better than an animal, and of course the members of the public – whenever they turned up – just stood and gawked at her. Or ran out of the room screaming.

What would become of them when Grunchgirdle finally gave up? Poor Flossy would probably end up as a plate of lamb chops, and the squirrel-mermaid would get flung back in the sea, but who would want anything to do with a hairy little wolfgirl?

Leaving the oats in a corner of his cage in case Flossy changed one – or both – of his minds, Sheba rummaged in the straw until she found her latest treasure: a five-week-old copy of *The London Examiner*, scavenged from a bin. Hiding it in Flossy's straw was a gamble, but worth risking a splash of lamb wee. If Grunchgirdle found it he would be livid; firstly to find out she could actually read, and secondly to discover she had been outside, ferreting through rubbish, when he was asleep. But she never strayed far from the shack on her nocturnal expeditions. Any further and she might not have been able to get back inside in time if she heard

Grunchgirdle stirring in his sleep. Feeling the splinters of the pier under her feet, the salty wind all around her and the endless swell of the sea beneath the planks was enough. *What he doesn't know won't hurt him*, thought Sheba. Although she wouldn't have minded too much if something else had hurt him instead.

She flicked to the last thing she had been reading, an article about the Great Exhibition of the Works of Industry of All Nations. As far as she could make out between the old coffee stains, it was a magical collection of the most implausible and incredible creations of man, gathered together in London, in a fairytale palace made of crystal. There were giant diamonds, stuffed elephants, machines that tipped you out of bed, pictures made of hair (she found that particularly intriguing), knives with thousands of blades, some revolutionary new engine for creating 'electrical impulses' (whatever they were), and machines that did everything from making envelopes to harvesting crops. If it hadn't been written in a newspaper, she wouldn't have believed it.

She wasn't sure she actually *did* believe it. With a snort she flipped the page, and was about to start on an article about Prince Albert's favourite breakfast when she caught an overpowering whiff of meat pie, whisky and sweat. It was a few hundred metres away, but getting steadily stronger. Someone was walking up the pier. Surely not a customer? On the miraculous off chance that it might be, she hid the paper, climbed into her cramped cage and quickly locked the door with one of her hairpins. She sat

on her stool and arranged her threadbare dress as neatly as possible, ready to be gawped at.

This was the bit she was good at: sitting as still as a living statue, muscles locked in place, eyes hardly blinking. She slowed her breathing and let her vision glaze over. Usually she tried to empty her mind as well, but this time she couldn't help wondering what was going on outside.

The meaty, sweaty smell of the stranger was getting stronger. And now there were heavy footprints on the warped planks of the pier. She could smell Grunchgirdle, too. The bony old goat would be sitting on his milking stool by the pier railing, his fishing line cast out, waiting for supper – or a customer – to come by. He had the patience of a brick wall, as the World of Curiosities hadn't had a visitor for four months, two weeks and three days, by Sheba's count.

Sure enough, there came the squeak of his stool as the measly old miser sat bolt upright. *He's seen his prey*, Sheba thought. She could imagine his scrawny heart thudding away in his chest. Maybe a bead of sweat forming on his pasty brow, or even a drop of dribble escaping from his thin lips as he thought about what the penny admission fee would get him for dinner. A carrot, or perhaps even a potato to go with the usual fishy broth.

The poor stranger probably only wanted a bit of fresh air and a stroll down the pier. But he'd soon end up staring at a hairy girl, a wilted lamb and a bad example of fish-based taxidermy.

What Sheba didn't realise was that the stranger knew exactly where he was going. And that Grunchgirdle had finally had enough of eking out a living at the end of the pier.

The footsteps came to a sudden halt. There was a clatter as Grunchgirdle leapt to his feet, knocking his rod and bucket over.

'Good morning, fine sir,' came his reedy voice. 'And how may I help you this lovely summer's day?'

When the stranger spoke, his voice was deep and gloopy – as if it had fought its way up through several layers of semi-digested pastry – but the words were important ones. They would change Sheba's life for ever.

'I've come about the freaks for sale,' he said.

The two men stood in the tiny shack, taking up almost every last centimetre of space. The combination of their unique scents was like some kind of seaweed wine that had been swirled around in a barrel of soiled underpants. It was all Sheba could do not to retch. She concentrated on breathing through her mouth only and keeping her features as wolfish as possible. It was hard work. But she'd do anything for the chance of escaping from Grunchgirdle and Little Pilchton. And this was a chance.

The stranger was a fat man. It was as if an avalanche of pie-crust and gravy had run through a haberdasher's and come out in a dodgy frock coat and a pair of size nine boots. Grunchgirdle would have fitted inside him seven times with room to spare. He was also deeply unattractive.

His nose was bulbous and scarlet, a wild tangle of orange hair stuck out all around the edges of his stovepipe hat, and he was wearing a scowl that could have curdled milk.

Sheba found it difficult to pretend that two very ugly men were not staring at her. She focused on a spot on the floor and kept her ears open.

'Well, she's not bad, I s'pose, but I've seen hairier,' said the fat man. 'That squirrel fish is a load of tosh, though, and the sheep's nearly dead.'

'Mr Plumpscuttle! I assure you the lamb is merely resting. He tires so easily, what with all the extra thinking he has to do. When he's refreshed he hops and jumps about like a March hare, so he does!'

'You can't fool me, Grunchgirdle. I've been in the freak business since afore I could walk, and I know a sick two-headed sheep when I see one. That thing's got a month left at best before it's mint-sauce time.'

Grunchgirdle fawned and whined at the big man for a few minutes more, but Sheba could see from the corner of her eye that his face was set like stone. He appeared to be bargaining. Was she finally leaving Little Pilchton pier?

The very thought made her heart skip a beat. What kind of a man was this Plumpscuttle? She presumed he must run a sideshow of his own – nobody else would want to purchase a pair of bargain-rate freaks – and judging by his impressive belly it must be much more successful than Grunchgirdle's. Beneath the whiff of stale gravy and sweat, she could pick up a hint of gas, grime and coal dust. *London*, she thought. *Maybe Birmingham or*

Manchester. What would his show be like? Her head raced with a thousand questions, hopes and fears. She began to feel quite faint, although that could have been because of the rapidly building stenches in the cramped little shack.

'Twelve pounds for the girl and the sheep, and that's my final offer,' said Plumpscuttle. 'As for the *mermaid*, you can stick that where the sun don't shine.'

He pulled a cloth purse from his waistcoat and dangled it before Grunchgirdle's eyes. The scrawny man stared at it, his face torn with indecision. Finally, with a great sigh, he dropped his head and reached out a bony hand for the money.

Minutes later, Sheba was walking down the pier beside the tub of dumpling stew that was Mr Plumpscuttle. She clutched her ebony box with two hands. It held everything she owned in the world besides the clothes on her back. From within a basket carried by Plumpscuttle came a weak bleat. She was glad Flossy was coming too.

She could hardly believe she was out in the open air, in full daylight, for the first time since she came here. Her little furry head was reeling, and she peeped out from the deep hood of her riding cloak with wide eyes. It was all she could do not to leap about screaming with joy, but she got the impression her new owner wouldn't approve.

She felt as if she were walking into a dream. The sunlight seemed impossibly bright. It gleamed off the waves, the sand, the hundreds of flapping pennants that hung along the pier. Everything was so vivid it hurt her

eyes just to look. As they approached the town there were such *smells* too. Baking bread and ice cream. Sugared sweets and fresh fish. Ale from the pubs. And hundreds of people: old and young, sick, perfumed, unwashed. She'd never imagined there could be such variety. In between all these were scents she had no name for. Endless new odours rushed up her nose, making her dizzy with the desire to run and chase them to their source.

As they came to the end of the pier, Sheba realised that when she stepped from the last salt-streaked plank she would actually be setting foot on solid land again. She wanted to pause and savour the moment, but Plumpscuttle was already striding ahead. She scuttled to keep up, enjoying the satisfying thump her little feet made on the stone cobbles. *No more creaking and swaying with every breath,* she thought.

She had imagined Little Pilchton as some kind of exotic world. She had pictured shop fronts overflowing with silks and spices, great boulevards where grand ladies and gentlemen strolled in their finery, mansions and hotels in elegantly carved stone. Instead it was a dingy little place with a couple of ramshackle pubs and far too many fishmongers. Sheba couldn't help feeling slightly cheated.

They soon left the town and crested the brow of a hill. A whole tapestry of fields and woods opened up before them, as wide as the sea and every shade of green. Sheba paused to gasp at the sheer amount of space, and then they were over and down the other side. A narrow dirt track wandered along between hedges and tumbledown

stone walls, and they headed down it, kicking up a cloud of dust behind them.

They walked and walked and walked. It seemed as if they were never going to stop. At last, when Sheba's legs throbbed from top to bottom, her cape was coated in grit from the road and the sun had painted the sky pink, they stumbled to the top of yet another rise.

'We're here,' said Plumpscuttle, the first words he had spoken to her, and he stomped through an open five-bar gate into a field. Sheba trotted after him.

There were signs of recent festivities. Faded bunting was draped along the dry stone wall, the grass was churned by hordes of booted feet, and there were paper wrappers, apple cores and pie crusts everywhere. Carnies were packing up stalls and rides, and hitching them to horses, before rolling out onto the road and off to the next village fair. Sheba saw a coconut shy, a group of fortune-telling gypsies and a rickety old merry-go-round.

Plumpscuttle waddled on, nodding here and there to an acquaintance, until they reached the corner of the field. There stood a canary-yellow gypsy caravan, with a vicious-looking grey Shire horse between the shafts. Written on the side in peeling paint were the words: 'PLUMPSCUTTLE'S PECULIARS – TERRIFYING FREAKS OF EVERY SIZE AND DESCRIPTION'.

'Get in,' said Plumpscuttle as he chucked Flossy's basket up onto the driver's seat and, with considerable effort, began the laborious process of heaving himself up beside it.

Sheba tiptoed to the back of the caravan, where she found a little door set above some steps. She reached up to unlatch it, then jumped back as it swung open. The interior was dark and musty, and packed with shadows. She could smell people inside – at least five or six. She heard a match struck. A lantern was lit.

In the light a cluster of faces appeared, all staring at her intently. They were misshapen, hulking, wizened, alien and like nothing she had seen before. It was as if a nightmare had come to life in front of her.

Sheba started to scream.