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# CARNIVAL of the LOST



ILLUSTRATED BY Sam Usher

KIERAN LARWOOD

CARNIVAL  
*of the*  
**LOST**

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**KIERAN LARWOOD** is the award-winning and bestselling author of the Five Realms series that started with *The Legend of Podkin One-Ear*. He was a teacher but now writes full-time although, if anybody was watching, they might think he just daydreams a lot.

**SAM USHER** is a multi-award-winning illustrator. His books include the Seasons series, *The Birthday Duck*, *The Most-Loved Bear* and *The Umbrella Mouse*. Also a talented pianist, when he's not scribbling you'll find him perfecting a fiendishly difficult Chopin piece.

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Uki and the Swamp Spirit

Uki and the Ghostburrow

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**KIERAN LARWOOD**

Illustrated by Sam Usher

**faber**



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# PROLOGUE

LONDON, AUGUST 1851

**M**idnight. The heart-of-summer sky was black; filled with stars, the cloudy sweep of the Milky Way. A waxing moon slowly rolled across, showing off her pockmarks and craters, looking down at a smaller, man-made galaxy: the gas and oil lamps, candles and lanterns of old London town, twinkling their brightest and – through a haze of smog – bravely trying to outdo the heavens themselves.

Each window seemed to be ablaze, every church steeple and cobblestone bathed in light. The centre of the city was wide awake, even at this late hour.

Horses clopped up and down Oxford Street and

around Covent Garden. Crowds of well-dressed gentlefolk strolled from inn to opera house, filling the air with the sound of chatter and laughter. Diamond necklaces glinted, gilded walking canes tapped. Baronets and ladies bowed and curtsied.

This was the London that history books remembered. These were the scenes painters hung on the walls of museums and art galleries.

But there was another side to the city entirely. A true side. A dark side.

It didn't have all the lights and glamour. It didn't sparkle and shine like midnight constellations. Grubby and cruel, it hid down fog-choked alleys and inside crumbling houses. Soot-smeared and spiteful, it hoarded its secrets under a blanket of smoke and cinders.

It didn't want to be seen, but you couldn't avoid the smell. The stink. The unholy, nose-melting *stench*.

The River Thames gave it away. As it ran through the heart of crowded London – threading together palaces, towers, factories, docks and slums alike – it slowly filled with the most awful soup of ingredients.

Rotting things. Dead things. Cast-away, spewed-up, flushed-out . . . stuff.

It had an aroma like nothing on earth, tenderly brewed in its waters and wafted, with loving care, up among the narrow streets, where it was trapped by the thick shroud of dust and mist that covered the city.

The place boiled with bad air. It seethed with stink, pulsed with pong.

And down by the river itself it was worst of all. You could almost carve slices out of the air with a bread knife.

It was the ripest, most putrid place in the whole of London. Nobody with a working nose went near it, unless they had a really good reason, which made it perfect for meetings of the shady, secret kind.

One of which was happening right now.

\*

Three figures stood on the shoreline, boots crunching on the thin strip of pebbles and broken glass that ran along the edge of the bank, like a dirty mark around a bathtub.<sup>i</sup>

Broken, weed-covered ribs of wrecked boats jutted up from the mud around them. On the banks above, warehouses loomed, locked up and silent. The occasional watchman wandered between them, bullseye lantern gleaming in the dark.

'Is it finished?' one of the figures asked. He was smaller than the other two, stooped, with frizzy hair that poked from either side of a bald head.

'Yes, it is,' said another. The shadowy outline of her flowing skirts and corset caught the moonlight as she reached out to pat a covered mound next to her on the bank. A soft clang sounded and was quickly swallowed by the mist. 'Did you bring the . . . specimens?'

'We did,' said the stooped man. He motioned to the third figure, who lifted up a hefty sack, dropping it to the ground between them. As it landed, something pale and spidery flopped from the opening. A small hand with thin, bony fingers. Bloodless. Dead.

The second speaker jumped in shock, then laughed at herself. She bent to inspect the sack's contents, rummaging around in the dark. 'For a second,' she said, her voice muffled by the hessian, 'I

thought that was a dead person. Looks very similar, does it not?’

‘I have a theory about that . . .’ the stooped man began, but the third figure silenced him with a growl.

‘Will they suffice?’ he asked. ‘That’s all I need to know.’ His voice was deep, stern. Someone you would think twice about disobeying.

The silhouette of the woman stood. Nodded. ‘They’ve been dead quite a while, but they’ll do.’

‘Then our business is done,’ said the third figure. ‘As long as it works.’

‘Oh, it does,’ said the woman. ‘You can test it if you like . . .’

A curtain of mist billowed past, hiding the three shadows from sight. Strange, unearthly sounds began to echo along the riverbank. Hisses, clicks, crunches. A muffled, metallic roar and then, with a wet slithering and the ripple of filthy water, something alien slid down into the mud and vanished beneath the surface . . .

# CHAPTER ONE

*In which our heroine's life takes a dramatic turn.*

LITTLE PILCHTON-ON-SEA,  
THE SOUTH COAST OF ENGLAND

**S**heba gazed through her tiny window at the pier's end, 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 smelled the tang of fresh seaweed, tasted salt on the breeze. Her mind drifted, down to the sand and pebbles below. She could almost feel the waves lapping around her toes and the sun toasting her face. Almost thought she could turn and race along

the beach, leaving a trail of footprints behind her.

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

And face of hair. And hands of hair.

In fact, Sheba was covered in it, from head to foot.

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

Her eyes were a deep amber colour; in a certain light they seemed to have an orange glow. She had small, sharp white teeth and her hands were tipped with nails that looked more than a little like claws. But – far stranger than that – there was a wild wolf sharing her body and when she lost control (or if she let it) more and more of it would slip free.

Her nose stretched into a snout, bristling with fangs and fur. Her eyes gleamed with an ancient,

deadly hunger. She was then filled with the urge to run on all fours, howling, snapping and growling.

Anyone who saw it – especially if they were on the snarling end – soon started calling her ‘Sheba the Wolfgirl’. A name she hated beyond all hatred.

And worse, they began to avoid her, as if she were some kind of wild animal. The whispers spread, the stares became filled with fear. It made her feel like a monster. A creature from a penny horror book. It was all so unfair.

If they had just bothered to get to know her, they would have discovered that, although the hair and teeth were the *first* things they noticed, they weren’t the most interesting. Sheba was actually an exceptional eight-year-old girl. Her sense of smell was amazing: she could follow a trail like a bloodhound and read scents like the pages of a book. She had a sixth sense: mechanical things seemed to speak to her . . . Any locks she came across popped themselves open with just a few wiggles of her hairpins. And, by the age of five, she had taught herself to read from scraps of newspaper and chalk billboards. She would have liked to read a novel or two, but it was quite difficult

to wander into the local library when you were locked in a cage at a seaside curiosity show. And that was where she had spent every minute of every long day for as long as she could remember.

Grunchgirdle's World of Wonders perched at the end of the rickety Little Pilchton pier, like a jackdaw on a branch. Mr Grunchgirdle, the owner, was a skinny old man who smelled of rotten kippers. 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!'<sup>ii</sup>) and a two-headed lamb called Flossy. They all lived crammed into a one-roomed shack no bigger than a large cupboard and were forbidden to ever leave.

It was a poor place to call home, and Sheba spent many hours wondering how she had ended up in it. There had been an orphanage before. A dark, miserable place that Grunchgirdle had bought her from. But earlier than that . . . surely there must have been a mother? A father? Sometimes, when he was feeling particularly cruel, her owner told her that her parents had died of shock when Sheba was born.

Sometimes, she believed him.

But there were hints of memories; wispy threads that came to her in the secret moments before waking. *A large house. Cool marble floor beneath her bare feet. Scorched blue skies outside.*

These things always faded as her eyes opened, crumbling into fragments of dreams and wishes.

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 sideshow floor. As for the box itself, Sheba had no idea where it had come from, only that it had always been hers. She remembered clutching it with terrified claws, the day she was dragged from the orphanage. Which meant it must have been from her previous life. Had it belonged to her mother, perhaps? Or was it 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. Sheba didn't think he appeared 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 he 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 make his tatty sideshow famous. But no one visited Little Pilchton any more. People travelled to places that had railway stations or fast coach routes. The tiny town barely had a road, only a collection of massive potholes linked together by smaller potholes. Grunchgirdle 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, thinking how sorry she would be if he died. He was the closest thing she had to company. Grunchgirdle treated Sheba no better than an animal. Customers – whenever they turned up – just stood and gawked at her as she sat in her gloomy cage. Unless she summoned up her wolfish side. *Then* they ran out of the shack screaming, while Sheba snapped

her teeth at the bars and howled.

What would become of them if Grunchgirdle finally sold 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 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. If Grunchgirdle found it he would be furious; firstly, to find out Sheba could actually read, and secondly, to discover she had been outside, ferreting through rubbish, when he was asleep. But she never strayed more than five or six yards from the shack on her nocturnal expeditions.<sup>iii</sup> Any further and she might not have been able to get back inside in time if she heard Grunchgirdle stirring in his sleep, and then she would be in for a beating and a half.

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. Those same

waves broke on shores far away from Little Pilchton. Places she might be lucky enough to see for herself one day . . .

Sheba flicked to the last thing she had been reading, an article about the Great Exhibition of the Industry of All Nations.<sup>iv</sup> As far as she could make out between the old coffee stains, it was a magical collection of the most original 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 trousers, when she caught an overpowering whiff of stale smoke and sweat. It was a few hundred yards away, but getting

steadily stronger. Someone was walking up the pier. Surely not a customer? On the off-chance that it might be, she hid the paper, climbed into her cage and quickly locked it shut with one of her hairpins. She sat on her stool and arranged her threadbare dress as neatly as possible, ready to be gawped at.

Then she went to that door in her head: the secret room, the place where the wolf lived. Inching it open, she let part of the beast out. Just a sliver, an inkling. Enough to show the hint of a muzzle, the tips of fangs and curve of claws. But always, always keeping the snarls, howls and bites in check.

Usually she tried to empty her mind as well – so she didn't have to bear the stares, screams and insults – but this time she couldn't help wondering what was going on outside.

The smoky, sweaty scent 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.

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 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.

The footsteps came to a sudden halt. There was a clatter as Grunchgirdle leaped 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 bitter – as if it had been pickled for many years in a brine of misery and spite – but the words were important ones. They would change Sheba's life for ever.

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

\*

The stranger was a big man, tall and wide. His nose was bulbous and scarlet, and a wild tangle of hair stuck out all around the edges of his stovepipe hat. He was wearing a scowl that could have curdled milk.

Sheba found it difficult not to stare back at him. She focused on her feet instead and kept her ears open – at the same time trying to keep her features as wolfish as possible.

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

'Sheba is a real find, Mr Plumpscuttle! And 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 carnival 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 lying on a dish, smothered in mint sauce.'

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. It looked like a bargain was about to be struck. 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 and, judging by the cut of his frock coat, it must be *much* more successful than Grunchgirdle's.

Beneath the whiff of stale gravy and sweat, she could pick up hints 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.

'Twelve pounds for the girl and the sheep, and that's my final offer,'<sup>v</sup> 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 for the money.

\*

Minutes later, Sheba was walking down the pier beside Mr Plumpscuttle, clutching her ebony box tightly. It held everything she owned in the world besides the clothes on her back. A weak bleat came from the basket Plumpscuttle carried – Sheba was glad Flossy was coming too.

She could hardly believe it: out in the open air, in full daylight, for the first time in years. Her little furry head was reeling. Wide eyes peeped out from the deep hood of her riding cloak. The urge to leap about screaming with joy nearly overtook her, but she got the impression her new owner wouldn't approve.

It felt as if she were walking inside 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. And there were such smells. Baking bread and ice cream. Sugared sweets and fresh fish. Ale from the pubs. 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 jogged to keep up, enjoying the satisfying thump her feet made on the stone cobbles.

She had imagined Little Pilchton as some kind of exotic world, picturing 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 old place with a couple of ramshackle pubs and far too many fishmongers. The fantasy world

she had yearned to walk in for so long was, like most daydreams, more than a little disappointing.

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 wonder 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 mossy 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 marched through an open five-bar gate into a field. Sheba followed after him, wide eyes taking in everything around her.

There were signs of recent festivities. Colourful bunting was draped along the drystone wall, the grass had been churned by hordes of booted feet, and

there were paper wrappers, apple cores and pie crusts everywhere. Show-folk 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-tellers and a rickety old merry-go-round. The place was a hive of activity, even though the festivities were now over.

Plumpscuttle strode on, nodding to an acquaintance here and there, until they reached the corner of the field. Here stood a canary-yellow caravan, with a towering grey shire horse dozing between the shafts. Painted on the side were dramatic pictures: a giant lifting an elephant above his head; the black silhouette of a long-haired girl, her insides dotted with stars and a crescent moon; a hideous imp stirring a cauldron that spewed purple smoke. And dancing between their legs were little rats, all wearing human clothes.

Sheba's heart began to pound. This was much more exciting than Grunchgirdle's dreary little display: this was a *proper* carnival show.

Plumpscuttle interrupted her thoughts. 'Get in,' he said as he chucked Flossy's basket up onto the

driver's seat and heaved himself up beside it. Behind him was a door into the caravan. He kicked it open with a hobnail boot and then, when Sheba had climbed close enough, shoved her through. The door slammed shut after her.

The inside was dark and musty. She could smell people – at least three or four. A match was struck, a lantern lit.

In the candlelight, a cluster of faces appeared, all staring at her intently. They were odd forms, hulking and mismatched. Like nothing she had seen before.

Sheba started to scream.



