

GOOSEBERRY
or
Octavius Guy
and the Case of the Thieving Maharajah

by Michael Gallagher

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CHAPTER ONE

London. Monday, January 19th, 1852.

GEORGE AND GEORGE, THE other two office boys at Mr Bruff's law firm, sat snoring beside me on the bench, the victims of over-indulging on a plate of chops for their dinner. I gave the closer George a hefty nudge with my hip to try to claim back my fair share of the space. He came to for just a moment, blinked his eyes wearily, and then adjusted his hulking frame so that I had even less room than before.

Mr Bruff's office door swung open. Mr Bruff came out and stood there contemplating the three of us. The look on his face suggested that he didn't much care for what he saw.

'Gooseberry, with me,' he said and, closing the door behind him, made directly for the stairs. I leapt up and padded along after him.

'The local chophouse again?' he enquired, as we exited the building together into a cold and foggy Gray's Inn Square.

I nodded.

'Gooseberry, kindly inform George and George that from now on their favourite chophouse is officially off-limits.'

I don't object to Mr Bruff calling me Gooseberry, though I would have you know that it is not my real name. It's a

name that's been given to me by one of Mr Bruff's clerks on account of my eyes. They bulge. At least, that's what this clerk delights in telling me almost every single day. Naturally I can't help them bulging any more than I can help being blessed with brains, and blessed with brains I am—to a far greater degree than either of the Georges, or that fool of a clerk, come to that.

I hasten to add, lest I later appear anything but entirely truthful on the subject, that having brains is not the only talent of which I am possessed, nor is Gooseberry my only nickname, which I'm sure will become clear in good time.

Mr Bruff spotted a passing cab and put his hand out to hail it. As it pulled to a halt beside us, he directed the driver to an address in Montagu Square. I recognized the address as that of his close friend and client, Mr Franklin Blake—Member of Parliament—a man to whom I have had the privilege of being useful in the past. I gripped the handrail to haul myself up to my usual seat beside the driver, but Mr Bruff clasped me by the wrist and informed me that today he required my presence in the carriage. 'There is a matter,' he said, 'that I wish to discuss.'

Despite the ominous words, Mr Bruff remained silent as the cab pulled away from the curb. It wasn't until after we'd traded High Holborn for that long stretch of road that is Oxford Street that he finally opened his mouth to speak.

'Octavius,' he said, using my proper name for a change—a name which translates from Latin as "*the eighth child*"; not that I am the eighth, you understand, I'm actually the first—'do you recall how we met?'

‘I do, sir, I do,’ I replied, ‘although it’s a good six years ago now.’

‘It was a day not unlike today,’ he reminisced, ‘thoroughly miserable and wet. I was in Regent Street attending to a small matter of business when I observed a young lad loitering on a corner—a barefoot urchin trembling in the rain, his toes turning blue from the cold.’

Mr Bruff does like to over-sentimentalize our meeting. I imagine it helps him justify the choice he made that day. But don’t be fooled by his sweeping sentimentality. This image he was painting hadn’t prevented him from grabbing me by the scruff of the neck, just as I was about to remove my hand from a gentleman’s pocket—with the gentleman’s wallet attached. When I tactfully pointed this out to him in the cab, he immediately began to bluster:

‘I had every right to march you straight in front of a magistrate, Gooseberry! Instead I chose to take pity on a young, shivering ragamuffin and offer him a position as my office boy! Can’t you be grateful for that?’

I *was* grateful to him for getting me out of the Life and I told him so—before he decided to clip me round the ear. But there was more to this story than he was aware of, for I’d never got around to sharing it with him. He had always assumed I was barefoot because I was poor, but that just wasn’t so. I was barefoot because one of my trusty colleagues had stolen the boots off my feet while I slept. They say there’s no honour amongst thieves, and they’re right. It was only because of this temporary state of bootlessness that the old man had been able to nab me that

day, for I guarantee you, at the age of eight—with my boots on—there was no swifter, slipperier pickpocket in all of London than yours truly, Octavius Guy.

It's what Mr Bruff might term "*an irony*" (a word which he assures me has everything to do with the jesting of Fate and nothing to do with scrap metal), for my lack of boots was not just my downfall. When the lawyer took pity on my poor freezing feet, it also became my salvation.

'Gooseberry, over the years you have proved yourself trustworthy, resourceful and loyal,' Mr Bruff went on, his wistful smile returning, 'and in return I have kept your former profession a secret from employees and clients alike. But today, Octavius, for the greater good, it may become necessary to divulge its nature.'

'To Mr Blake?'

Mr Bruff grunted.

'Sir, have I done something wrong?'

'No, not at all. It's quite the opposite, in fact. Mr Blake's summons was uncharacteristically vague, but the few details it gave made me think that your specialist knowledge might come in handy.'

'How so?' I asked, but Mr Bruff would say no more, preferring not to speculate until he had all the facts at his disposal. I gazed out the window. We were passing by Hyde Park and the rain was billowing about us in sheets. I tried peering into the distance to see if anything remained of the Crystal Palace, where the Great Exhibition had been held the previous year. I couldn't make out so much as a dickey-bird. Perhaps they'd already dismantled it. It set me

thinking: what had they done with all those millions of panes of glass?

It was Samuel, the footman, who answered the door to us at Montagu Square. I'd met Samuel before on several occasions, just as I'd met most of Mr Blake's household. He took charge of Mr Bruff's cane and hat (though he pointedly ignored mine, obliging me to keep hold of it myself), and ushered us into the library where the family had gathered.

What a mournful sight! In the middle of the room sat a small, elderly lady, unknown to me, who was working on a piece of embroidery—or rather *not* working on it, for each time she inserted the needle, her fingers would shake and she'd burst into tears. Young Mrs Blake was on her knees at her side, her arms around her, trying in vain to comfort her as best she could.

Mrs Blake's maid, Miss Penelope, stood in the background, miserably wringing her hands in distress. It shocked me to see the complete disarray that both her locks and her clothing were in, for she was a young woman who normally took such pride in her appearance. Wisps of red hair hung loose about her face, as if she'd just been in a cat fight, and her blouse, which had been wrenched loose from her skirts, was ripped in at least three separate places.

Miss Penelope's father, the ancient Mr Betteredge—the family's faithful steward—lay slumped in a chair by the flickering fire with a tattered old book clutched to his chest. I couldn't be certain whether he was awake or asleep, for, ranked as I was as being little better than a

tradesman, I was obliged to keep my distance when Mr Bruff stepped forward to greet the family.

Mr Blake, who'd been pacing listlessly about the room, grasped my employer's hand and shook it. But it was his wife—and not he—who quickly took charge of the interview.

'Mr Bruff, thank you for coming on such short notice,' she said, as she rose to her feet. 'You will remember my aunt, Mrs Merridew?'

'A pleasure as always, madam.' My employer smiled and gave a stately little bow.

The woman acknowledged it with a nod of her head. 'I had hoped to quieten my mind by occupying myself with something trivial and mundane,' she said, staring down at the embroidery in her hand, 'but it doesn't seem to be working.'

With this she broke into a fit of sobs.

'My aunt has had a rather nasty shock,' Mrs Blake explained. 'Actually, apart from my husband—who did not accompany us this morning—we *all* have.' She glanced meaningfully over her shoulder at Miss Penelope, who blinked, bit her lip, and wrung her hands again.

'My dear, as your trusted friend and your lawyer, I suggest that you start at the beginning and tell me everything that's happened.'

'Then perhaps we should sit down.'

Mr Blake drew up chairs for them both and then resumed his pacing.

'Mr Bruff, do you consider me an imaginative woman?'

My employer gave the question some careful thought before he hazarded a reply. ‘Miss Rachel, I have known you your entire life. If you ask whether I believe you possess an active imagination, then I would say, yes, you display a healthy and inquisitive one; a match for any man’s. But if you ask whether I think you *imagine* things, then, no. Lawyer that I am, I would still take your word over others, were all the evidence on God’s good earth to speak against you.’

Mrs Blake seemed pleased with this answer and rewarded him with a faint smile.

‘Then I shall begin where I believe this mystery begins,’ she said, ‘even though I have no proof that it does. Last week we happened to receive an unusual number of nuisance callers. When Samuel, our footman, answered the door he would find an old beggar woman on the doorstep, with sprigs of winter heather for sale—or one of those preposterous suppliers of religious tracts—or a man who grinds knives for a living. It became ridiculous, quite ridiculous, and really rather tiresome. Occasionally he would even respond to the bell to find nobody there at all!’

‘Oh, my!’ exclaimed Mrs Merridew. ‘How very odd! We had the same trouble at Portland Place...just before my footman gave his notice. I wondered if the bothersome callers had anything to do with his leaving, for I have no doubt they played havoc as much on his nerves as they did mine, so I asked him straight out, but he said not; rather that he was obliged to attend to his sick brother.’

‘You had nuisance callers too? But, Aunt Merridew, why

didn't you mention this earlier?'

'I didn't think it important, dear.'

'Surely it cannot be a coincidence! Aunt, has anything else out of the ordinary happened to you recently? For instance, have any of your windows been broken?'

'Oh, my...not that I can think of. Why do you ask?'

'Because last Friday morning Penelope discovered a broken pane of glass in the servants' quarters.'

Mr Bruff sat forward with a look of concern. 'You experienced a burglary?'

Mrs Blake shook her head. 'Apparently not, Mr Bruff, for when I had Betteredge check the inventory nothing appeared to be missing.'

'An accident, then?'

'Perhaps.' She sounded doubtful. 'Though if so, I'm surprised that no one has come forward to own up to it. It was never in my mother's nature to dock the servants' wages for breakages, nor is it in mine.'

'How very curious.'

'Curious indeed. Which brings us to the events of today. I had plans to attend an early luncheon with my aunt at her house in Portland Place and I decided to take Julia, my baby daughter, along with me. I asked Penelope to accompany us, to look after her on the way there. Then Betteredge insisted on coming, with umbrellas for us all in case it rained.'

On hearing his name, the old servant sat bolt upright in his chair.

'And rain it might have, madam,' he spluttered, 'and rain

it finally did. But, in truth, that is *not* the reason I requested to come.’

‘No?’

‘No!’ With trembling hands he held out the book he’d been clutching. His forehead was fevered with sweat. ‘Just this morning I opened my copy of *Robinson Crusoe*—the one your dear late mother presented me with on the occasion of what was to be her final birthday—and what should I find there?’

He riffled through its dog-eared pages, located the passage he was looking for, and in a loud, solemn voice began to read: “*It was the howling and yelling of those hellish creatures; and, on a sudden, we perceived two or three troops of wolves on our left, one behind us, and one on our front, so that we seemed to be surrounded with them!*”

‘You see? You see?’ he cried. ‘As I live by bread, madam, I knew in my heart that these self-same perils I had been directed to in this book were fated to befall you today! It was my sworn duty to come with you; no more, no less. My duty!’

An uncomfortable silence descended on the company, during which even Mr Blake stopped his pacing.

‘*Robinson Crusoe*? What has *Robinson Crusoe* to do with this?’ my employer demanded.

A shorter silence ensued, broken this time by Mr Blake. ‘The good Betteredge firmly places his trust in Defoe to steer him safely through life,’ he explained.

‘I do, sir, I do!’ Mr Betteredge came back, and with such

passion in his voice that I wondered whether he had been drinking. ‘And you would be wise to, too, Mr Bruff, lawyer though you may be!’

Lawyer that he is, my employer is not easily lost for words, but in this case he was rendered speechless. He finally responded with a shake of his head and turned his attention back to Mrs Blake.

‘Mrs Blake, will you please continue?’

She nodded and took a deep breath. ‘It was a perfectly pleasant meal, Mr Bruff, but then I noticed that the weather was taking a turn for the worse. I rose to leave. My aunt had pledged to come with us, as she wished to consult my husband over the hiring of a replacement footman. I suggested that she, Julia, and I take a cab home, but Aunt Merridew refused to hear of it, saying she would prefer to walk while the rain held off. We strolled back along Wigmore Street and were just passing Portman Square when my aunt spied a woman selling flowers at the side of the road.

“‘Let me stop and buy a nosegay,” she begged, and opened up her handbag to retrieve her purse. Suddenly a shriek rent the air, and then another and another, as we found ourselves surrounded by a pack of howling children, lunging and pecking at us from every side.

‘I don’t know what would have become of us were it not for Penelope’s quick thinking. She pushed me and Aunt Merridew back against the railings, thrust the baby into my arms, snatched one of her father’s umbrellas and began to beat those monsters off, even as she shielded us with her

body. It was so frightening! Their hands went darting everywhere—everywhere, all over us—though it was Penelope who bore the brunt of their attack. Their wailing, animal screeches finally brought people running, but the children saw them coming and swiftly scattered. By the time our rescuers got there, not one of them remained.

‘We were all understandably shaken, though no one was actually hurt except Penelope here. The men who had come to our aid kindly saw us home. I had Cook clean and bathe Penelope’s wounds, and asked Betteredge to make us all a restorative drink.’

Everyone looked towards the fireplace. Exhausted by his earlier outburst, the steward had fallen fast asleep.

‘It was only while we were recovering,’ Mrs Blake continued, ‘that I realized the attack might have been purposely staged, perhaps to try to rob us, so we all checked our capes and belongings to see if anything had been taken.’

‘And?’

‘Well, this is the most perplexing part of all, Mr Bruff. *Nothing* had been taken.’

The lawyer’s eyes narrowed. ‘But Mr Blake’s summons...I was led to believe—’

‘I repeat, nothing had been taken. *But something had most definitely been left.*’

Praise for *Gooseberry*:

“Sometimes you see a book and just know you’re going to love it... An absolute treat for fans of Collins’ novel and a successful novel in its own right.”

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“...the mystery unfolded at a great pace. You can’t help but like Octavius/Gooseberry/Octopus and his brother Julius and friend Bertha...Very well done.”

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