

BIG BONA OGLES, BOY!
or
Octavius Guy
and the Case of the Mendacious Medium

by Michael Gallagher

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CHAPTER ONE

London. December, 1852.

IN THE GREAT METROPOLIS of London, nothing heralds the advent of Christmas so much as the shortening of the days, the honking of plump, doomed geese, and the powdery promise of snow on the breeze that's as bracing as a short, sharp slap. Nothing, that is, unless you happen to be accountable to a certain Mr Crabbit, chief clerk to one Mr Mathew Bruff, solicitor of Gray's Inn Square. For us poor souls, nothing heralds the advent of Christmas so much as the shortening of Mr Crabbit's temper, the honking of his voice, and his frequent and oft-fulfilled promises to deliver—well—a *short, sharp slap*.

So, in the lead up to the Yuletide, it was with some trepidation that I presented myself at his office, clutching in my hand something he was bound to find objectionable. In my capacity as Mr Bruff's Investigator-in-Chief, I had just wound up a highly sensitive case involving the theft of some indelicate items—Lady Spenlowe's smalls, to be exact, which had been disappearing with some regularity from her Ladyship's washing line—and, though no one was to be charged with the offence (for it turned out the perpetrator was known to her), I still needed to present my last few receipts to account for the day's expenses. Steeling myself for the onslaught, I cautiously knocked at Mr Crabbit's door.

‘Enter!’

I turned the handle and stepped into the tiny office, glancing at the sign that hung behind him on the wall. I didn’t need to read it. I could recite the list by heart.

No illegible receipts
No indecipherable receipts
No torn receipts
No crumpled receipts
No defaced receipts
No stained or water-damaged receipts
No receipts with additions or alterations
No receipts requiring further explanation
No duplicate receipts

There was a time when I had coveted this tiny space for myself, in spite of its one small, grubby window and its yellowing walls. I could have turned it into a veritable palace—an office, to wit, with my name on the door—where clients could come and unburden themselves of their woes. I had it all planned out, too. With just a little reshuffling of certain members of staff, I could free him up a room more befitting of a chief clerk’s status.

Alas! It was not to be; he refused to take the bait. *The best-laid schemes o’ mice an’ men gang aft aghley*, as I believe some poet once put it (though rather drunkenly, going by how quickly the words descend into intoxicated gargling). For whatever reason, Mr Crabbit seemed content to remain in this squalid little hole I’d set my heart on. If only I could be as content with my own lot...one third of

the hard wooden bench in the draughty upstairs corridor, reserved for the use of errand boys (a stinging reminder that, not so very long ago, I was once an errand boy myself). Such are the indignities that an Investigator-in-Chief has to suffer, for all his loyalty, resourcefulness, and diligence!

Sensing my apprehension as a dog might scent fear, Mr Crabbit glanced up from his desk.

‘Well, boy? What is it?’ he asked.

‘I’ve brought you my receipts, sir.’ *And one, God help me, is water-stained.* A tiny speck of sleet had blotted the ink before I’d managed to stash it in my jacket.

‘Hand them over, then,’ he muttered, ‘I haven’t got all day.’

There were three all told, and I’d spent quite some few minutes deciding on the best order to present them in. Obviously the water-stained one could not go on top; he would have noticed it immediately. The question was therefore: *should it go in the middle or on the bottom?* In the event I put it on the bottom, in the forlorn hope that the first two might somehow lull him into giving the third no greater scrutiny than a passing glance. It was a receipt for a mere tuppence, but if it failed to meet Mr Crabbit’s exacting criteria, that tuppence would be coming out of my own insubstantial pocket.

The chief clerk pulled on his spectacles and studied the topmost receipt. After a few moments, he placed it to his left and began to examine the next. Finding nothing amiss, he placed this to his right, and turned his attention to the

last one.

‘Well?’ he said, removing his glasses and glaring at me as if I were a worm he had just caught crawling out of a freshly-bitten apple. Mr Crabbit may be a man of limited stature, but he can put you in your place with just one look.

‘I’m sorry, sir! It was madness, I know! I should have realized I couldn’t slip such a thing past you—’

‘What are you wittering on about, boy? Where is the threepence you owe me?’

‘The threepence I *what*, sir?’

‘The threepence you owe me!’ Mr Crabbit breathed a sigh of impatience when I failed to respond. ‘This receipt is for fourpence-ha’penny,’ he was forced to explain, ‘and this one, for tuppence-ha’penny. This last one here is for an even tuppence, is it not? Well? Am I right or am I wrong?’ He pulled a tight, stern face, challenging me to suggest that he could ever be wrong—and not just in matters of addition.

‘Of course you’re right, sir.’ I’m not sure why, but, as I was saying this, I found myself shaking my head.

‘By my reckoning that comes to ninepence, and yet only this morning I handed you a bright silver shilling. So I repeat: *where* is the threepence you owe me?’

I rifled through my pockets and produced the necessary coins.

‘They act,’ he grumbled to himself as he reached into his drawer for his cash tin, ‘as if money grows on trees. On trees!’

‘Sir?’ I said, blinking in amazement, and torn between

getting out of there while I was tuppence better off yet wishing to explore the matter further.

Mr Crabbit looked up. ‘Are you still here? Well? What is it, boy?’

‘Sir, are you feeling...quite yourself?’

‘*What?*’

‘Are you sure you’re not feeling unwell, sir?’

‘I’m fine!’ he snapped, and, with a wave of his wrist, he banished me from the room.

In the seven years I’d been with Mr Bruff’s firm, Mr Crabbit had never been known to overlook a single disallowed receipt. The idea that he might was quite unthinkable. As I mounted the stairs to the first floor corridor, I tried to summon up a one-word description of this unique and perplexing occurrence. By the time I took my seat on the bench next to George, the word “*apocalyptic*” had come to mind.

‘Don’t tell me,’ said George, misreading my expression, ‘he gave you a right telling off.’

‘Something apocalyptic just happened, George; something I thought I’d never live to see.’

George blinked. ‘The end of days has come upon us?’

There was a time not so very long ago when I would have baulked at the notion that the older George—who, together with the younger George, ran errands for our boss, Mr Bruff—might be familiar with the term *apocalypse*, especially when used in its adjectival form. During the four-month period in which I’d been training him up to be my investigative apprentice—unofficially and off the

clock, of course—I had learned not to be surprised at anything where George Crump was concerned.

The truth is, he and I were nothing alike. He was a big lad, tall and muscular. I was much shorter, with a small, wiry frame. He had a prominent, square jaw and a broad, fleshy face. I have prominent—some might go so far as to say *bulging*—eyes (hence my nickname Gooseberry, which is what they call me at work). He was dark-haired; I was fair. He was eighteen; I myself had just turned fifteen only the previous week. He lived with his parents; I lived with my younger brother Julius, whom I’ve taken care of since he was a baby.

‘It might as well have,’ I said, responding to his query about the end of days. ‘Mr Crabbit signally failed to notice the stain.’

‘He didn’t!’

‘I tell you, George, he did! It might have been small, but it wasn’t *that* small.’

‘What do you reckon’s the matter with him?’

‘That, my dear George, is the question!’ George noticed my playful smile and rapidly read my intentions.

‘You mean we’re going to find out?’

‘It’s as good an opportunity as any to flex our mental muscles, don’t you think?’ It certainly promised to be more intriguing than the sordid matter of Lady Spenlowe’s smalls.

‘So what’s the plan?’ he asked, taking out the green leather-bound notebook I’d bought him as an incentive to learn note-taking.

‘I think we can rule out any problems here at work.’ Realistically we could. I was able to read our employer, Mr Bruff, like a book, and the man had been in fine spirits of late. Business was clearly on the up, so Mr Crabbit could not be worried about the state of the firm. ‘No,’ I hazarded, ‘I think whatever is bothering him must be happening at home.’

‘At home?’

‘Trust me, George, if there is something out of kilter, that is where we shall find it.’

This did not sit well with my trainee. The notebook landed with a slap on the bench, where it was likely to remain, given George’s propensity for leaving it behind him wherever he went.

‘So we’re going to spy on him?’ he asked in a whine. ‘We’re going to follow the man to where he lives and then grub about in his private life like pigs in the dirt?’

He did not seem as delighted with this prospect as I might have hoped.

‘We’re not spying on him, George; we’re *helping* him,’ I tried to point out.

‘Helping?’ George’s eyes narrowed.

‘Mr Crabbit has a problem, and it’s our duty to come to his aid. It’s what friends do.’

‘So we’re his “*friends*” now?’

Even I thought I’d overstepped the mark with that one.

‘Mr Crabbit has no friends, but we’re his colleagues, George. That’s almost the same as being friends. And, as detectives, we have a professional obligation to help him.’

‘Hmmm...’

‘What did you just say?’ Had my trainee detective just *hmmm*-ed at me?

‘Nothing. I didn’t say nothing.’ George stared at me obstinately.

Hmmm.

I knew Mr Crabbit to be a man of regular habits. He arrived exactly half an hour early for work each morning in order to open up, and was always the last to leave, five minutes to the dot after everyone else had departed. So, as George and I—wrapped up in our scarves—kept vigil outside in the square, I figured we should not have long to wait.

‘Pretend to talk to me, George,’ I encouraged him. ‘It looks more natural if people see us having a casual conversation. Think of us as two friends who’ve met by chance in the street—’

‘I’d happily talk to you if I thought I could ever get a word in edgeways,’ grumbled George, just as the chief clerk stepped out on to the pavement. He locked the door with his key, and then, turning up his collar up to the wind, he made his way rapidly out of the square.

‘Quickly, now, George. We don’t want to lose him.’

Darkness had all but fallen as we set off northwards along the Gray’s Inn Road. The air was bracingly cold, and laced with the first tentative snowflakes of the evening. They swirled about us as we walked, so fine, so light, that they never quite touched the ground.

‘The important thing when trailing someone,’ I

whispered, ‘is not just to keep them in sight; you have to make sure you keep your distance, too, see? ’

George regarded me with disdain, which I probably deserved. The truth was he was already adept at the art of trailing people. This presented me with a rather sticky problem: what to train him in next? *The art of picking pockets, at which I was once unequalled?* Something told me he would take none too kindly to being offered lessons in that!

At the junction they now call Kings Cross, Mr Crabbit turned left, bearing west this time. He hardly glanced at the glow from the two arched windows in the facade of the brand-new railway station—*the burning eyes of Hell*, as I like to think of them—preferring instead to keep his eyes on the ground, lest he slip and take a tumble on the ice. A boy with a broom tipped his cap to him, then set about sweeping the snow away with a flourish, not that it brought him any recompense. Mr Crabbit forged past him without so much as a nod.

It was somewhere between Church Row and Cook’s Row that we lost him, up by the old burial ground.

‘Don’t worry,’ I told my apprentice. ‘We can always try again tomorrow night.’

‘Why do we need to?’ asked George. ‘He’s probably just gone home.’

‘Well, of course he’s gone home, George; where else would he go? The trouble is we don’t know where that home is, now, do we?’

‘Well, you might not, but I do. Mr Crabbit lives round

the corner from me...well, from my parents' place, that is.'

'In Camden Town?'

George nodded.

'Why didn't you say so, George?'

'Because you said this was the perfect opportunity to show me how to trail people.' He scowled and then he pointedly added, 'Again.'

Ho hum.

Twenty minutes later we were standing in the churchyard on Pratt Street, gazing up at a first-storey window in the row of houses opposite, in which we could see—thanks to the light of a strong paraffin lamp—what was undoubtedly the back of the chief clerk's head. I applied my practised eye to each of the trees that the churchyard had to offer. If we were to climb one, we would no doubt get a better view. When I say "we", I really mean "me", for the topmost branches in every single case were unlikely to support George's weight.

'George, give me a hand up, will you?'

'Don't tell me you're going to climb that tree!'

'That's the general idea, George. How else are we going to find out what's going on?'

'What if he sees you?'

'He won't, George, he won't. A good detective can make himself invisible when he needs to. Besides, it's dark now.'

George frowned, but helped me up into the bottom branches all the same. Swiftly, silently, I climbed the rest of the way, until I could see directly into the room.

'What's happening?' George called to me from the

shadows below.

'Soft voice, George; soft voice.'

'What's happening?' he asked again, this time in a barely-audible whisper.

'I can see Mr Crabbit. He's sitting at a table. I think he's got somebody with him.'

I could see a tantalizing shadow moving back and forth across the wall. Suddenly a pair of hands hove into view, placing a plate of food on the table. *Women's hands*, I was sure of it!

'George, George! He's got a woman in there with him!'

'What happened to *soft voice, soft voice*?' grumbled George, as the woman in question appeared at the window and promptly tugged the curtains shut. Not before an image of her had burned itself into my memory, I might add. She was tall, rather imperious, in her late forties or early fifties, with long, grey hair that hung down loose, framing a surprisingly narrow, horse-like face.

I scrambled down from one branch to the next, then dropped to my feet on the ground.

'He had a woman in there, George,' I repeated in a far more tempered voice, albeit with a slightly scandalized tone. 'A woman, I tell you!'

'Tall, big-boned, in her early fifties, with an honest sort of face?'

Of course. When she'd gone to draw the curtains, George had seen her too.

'You saw her,' I said, feeling a wave of disappointment. I'd wanted to be the one to tell him what I'd seen.

‘Nah,’ said George, to my amazement. ‘I wasn’t looking.’

‘Wasn’t looking?’

‘Well, I didn’t need to, did I?’

‘Why not?’

‘Well...it stands to reason, don’t it?’

‘What stands to reason, George?’

‘Who she was.’

This required some careful mulling over, not that any solution seemed quick to present itself.

‘And just who was she, George?’

‘Octavius,’ he said, using my real name rather than my nickname—a feat which had taken me no few weeks to achieve, ‘it’s Mrs Crabbit.’

‘*Mrs* Crabbit?’

‘It’s his wife, Octavius. Mrs Crabbit is his wife.’

Mr Crabbit had a wife? Well, blow me down!

Praise for *Big Bona Ogles, Boy!*:

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“The two detectives embark on an adventure that uncovers a larger mystery that only the Great Octavius Guy can solve.”

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