

CHAPTER FIVE

THAT SAME MORNING AT eleven, Mr Bruff received a visit from Mr Willoughby and Mr Peacock. They made him an extraordinary offer: they proposed to pay for his entire staff to take the Monday afternoon off so they might attend Miss Prynne's memorial service. Mr Bruff was initially scathing of the idea but, luckily for me, Mr Peacock managed to win him round by appealing to his finer feelings. I had to hand it to him; I couldn't have done a better job of it myself.

Come the afternoon in question, I went to meet Bertha by his pitch at the back of the church as we'd arranged. Though Monday isn't a market day at Covent Garden, the piazza was heaving. Sensing an opportunity to make money from the memorial service, the flower women had turned out in force, transforming the square into a riot of colour. The place looked like a cottage garden in the springtime. I arrived early to find Florrie rushed off her feet, making up bouquet after bouquet for the scores of customers who'd flocked to the stall, attracted in no small part by the long canvas banner hanging from the railings behind her:

Bertha's Bona Big Bloomers
Dolly, dolly flowers by personal appointment to Her
Majesty The Queen

As lies went, it was a mere exaggeration; as a line of patter, it was definitely one of his better efforts.

For quite some few months now Bertha had left the stall's day-to-day running in the capable hands of his pretty young *protégée*, Florrie, preferring, as he did these days, to think of himself as a lady of leisure. Florrie and I had history. We'd stepped out together—romantically, that is—a couple of times back in February. As I hadn't seen much of her since then, I rather wondered what kind of reception I was in for.

Not an especially good one, as it turned out. She shot me a look of panicked desperation and snarled, 'Don't just stand there like a useless lug, get yourself down here and help me!'

Let me just say in my defence, it wasn't my fault if our moonlight strolls didn't live up to her expectations. A frozen, icy tow path on a bleak midwinter's night is enough to dampen the most ardent young man's spirits!

I hurried round to her side of the basket, crouched down and tried to imitate what she was doing—namely, bunching together a few white calla lilies, then sticking in the odd dark-blue flower or two.

'Go easy on the larkspur!' snapped Florrie, wrestling my masterpiece away from me. '*I'll* do the bouquets; *you* take the money. And don't go getting the change wrong!'

'How much are we charging for these things, anyway?' I whispered, as I eased myself back up to my feet.

'One and nine,' she replied, without so much as a blush.

'*What!*' I gasped. '*One shilling and ninepence for this*

tiny bunch?'

No wonder Bertha no longer felt the need to attend to business personally. I was surprised he hadn't added the proviso, "*They ain't cheap, 'cos they're royal!*" to his banner. By the time he and my brother arrived some ten minutes later, I'd taken in excess of fourteen shillings. Clearly I was in the wrong line of work.

St Paul's is not a big church. In fact, legend would have it that two hundred years ago when the fourth Earl of Bedford commissioned Inigo Jones to design it for him, he asked for something not much bigger than a barn. Mr Jones seems to have taken the earl at his word, for he built it to look just like a barn, too. It's small, squat, and spire-less—and arse-about-face—but, as any Covent Gardener will tell you (or any Londoner, for that matter), Covent Garden would not be Covent Garden without it.

As Julius, Bertha, and I joined the flocking crowds headed for the churchyard, I began to notice how the mourners fell into three distinct groups: Bella's colleagues from the theatrical profession, who wore their black with flair; Bella's rich, well-heeled admirers, who wore theirs as straightforward mourning; and Bella's friends from back in the day—at least those who'd been tipped off by Bertha—who, like us, wore whatever odd bits of black they possessed.

The little churchyard was strewn with floral tributes. Bertha cast his eye over them and grinned; Florrie's blue and white bunches were everywhere. Braving the heady scent of all those flowers, the three of us fell in at the back

of the queue that was inching its way towards the church.

‘Mr Carney didn’t give you any grief for wanting the afternoon off?’ I asked Julius.

‘Nah, nah, ’e was sweet,’ my brother replied.

‘’Ere, Octopus,’ grunted Bertha, pointing his finger, ‘ain’t that your guvnor up there?’

So it was. He and his party, which included Mr Willoughby, Mr Peacock, and Mr Crabbit, were about to make their way in through the doors. Julius caught sight of him and immediately began quaking in his boots, an unfortunate side effect of my trying to impress upon him just how important my employer was.

‘Don’t worry,’ I tried to reassure him. ‘We don’t have to sit where he does.’ In all likelihood, by the time we got in the church, there wouldn’t be any seats left anyway.

I wondered if anyone else from the office had bothered to turn up. I glanced over my shoulder and spied the older George, sporting a black armband on his sleeve, some distance behind me in the queue. He saw me looking and gave a tentative wave. I lifted my arm and waved back.

‘Look, you two,’ I said. ‘It’s Mr Kilburn, the photographer.’ Not far behind George stood the man who, a few months earlier, had made photographic portraits of the three of us. Thinking I’d been waving at him, he started waving too.

‘Don’t know ’ow ’e got it into ’is ’ead that I was some blinkin’ famous actress,’ muttered Bertha.

‘I can’t possibly imagine,’ I agreed.

‘Still, it got us some free duggairiotypes,’ he chuckled, as

he deigned to smile and raise his hand.

I'd been right about the seating. All three of us were obliged to stand, squashed in at the back like sardines packed into a barrel. Julius wriggled and squirmed throughout the entire service, even though the readings and eulogies were delivered with great aplomb by Mr Tuttle's company of actors. But then my brother would probably have wriggled and squirmed anyway, even if we had found seats; patience is perhaps not one of his greatest virtues.

After a touching address by the third speaker, I began to realize that everyone who spoke was directing their remarks to one person in particular: a woman seated in the front row. I couldn't get a decent look at her, though, for her face was hidden by a veil. *Note to self: find out if she's some kind of relation.*

'How much longer?' whispered Julius, who, like many in the hot, overcrowded church, was now perspiring freely.

'Not long now,' I whispered back, as the rector intoned a final, "*Let us pray*".

It was a relief to get out into the fresh air again. Julius loosened his shirt buttons and let out a sigh. Bertha, unfortunately, could not follow suit. He was obliged to keep his shawl drawn across his face in order to hide his stubbly jawline. By tacit consent, they both made themselves scarce when my employer emerged from the church. As I made my way over to join him, I noticed his eyes were scanning the churchyard.

'So where, pray tell, are my hordes of clerks who were given time off to attend this service?' He nodded at George,

who was lingering by the gates, and then turned to Mr Willoughby. ‘They can hardly expect to be paid for it if they choose not to attend. This may well prove cheaper on your purse than you’d intended, sir!’

Hearing this, something that might pass for a smile on a moonless night snaked across Mr Crabbit’s thin lips. Mr Willoughby looked understandably relieved at the prospect, but Mr Peacock seemed almost disgruntled. I’d barely had time to register this, though, when I heard a voice calling my employer’s name.

‘Mr Bruff, sir! Mr Bruff! I need a minute of your time!’

We all turned. Hovering in the doorway of the church with a conservatively-dressed young woman on his arm stood the perpetually bewildered-looking Mr Bone. It transpired that Miss Langham, the young woman in question, was his fiancée, and that the two were engaged to be married. This came as a bit of a shock. What, I had to wonder, did she see in the man?

Once the proper introductions had been observed, Mr Bone came straight to the point. ‘I have a proposition I’ve been wanting to put to you,’ he said. ‘You know I was a great admirer of the late Miss Prynne, and her death still weighs heavily on my mind. She and I may have met only briefly, but in that short time I felt the two of us forged a special bond.’

Miss Langham shot him a look.

‘I’m told there was a police investigation,’ he went on, ‘but, if so, it can only have been perfunctory at best.’

Perfunctory? Could it possibly mean the same as

“*cursory*”? If so, it might just have become my favourite word!

‘I’m a man of quite humble means,’ Mr Bone continued, ‘but I’d like to retain the services of your investigator, here.’

He glanced at my face, my extremely *disappointed face*, and quickly reconsidered my title.

‘Your *chief* investigator, perhaps I should say, seeing as that’s how he likes to label himself. I want him to make the fullest enquiries possible...well, the fullest enquiries given my limited means, that is.’ He fingered the scars on his cheek.

Thank you, Mr Bone, despite the callous, unnecessary slight! At least now I’d be able to work on the case officially. However, there was still the problem of my expenses: I’d be stuck at my regular rate, and I knew from bitter experience just how far a shilling can get you when you’re hot on a suspect’s trail. *Not far enough.*

Then his fiancée spoke up, temporarily raising my hopes.

‘Now, Clarence, you know that I will happily meet any and all of Mr Bruff’s expenses. My father left me quite well provided for, and I realize how important this is to you. I mean, it’s not as if I need to feel jealous of the poor woman, now, is it?’ She let out a peal of false-sounding laughter.

‘We ought to contribute too,’ said Mr Peacock, nudging Mr Willoughby in the ribs.

‘Oh. Yes. Contribute,’ his partner-to-be agreed, though with a great deal less enthusiasm, or so it seemed to me.

Mr Bone looked even more bewildered than he normally did; he also looked resentful. ‘No, no; this was my idea,’ he bleated peevishly, ‘and I should be the one to bear the cost! You keep your money, Hortensia, and you, too, Mr Peacock! I’ve no need of your charity!’

Miss Langham beamed at him. Mr Willoughby’s jaw relaxed a fraction. Mr Peacock contrived to look snubbed.

All this time our little group had been wending its way towards the gate. As George fell in behind us, I turned to Mr Bruff and said, ‘Sir, with your permission, I should like to make a start on my investigation.’

‘Right now?’ he replied.

I thought about quoting *Guy’s First Rule of Detection* at him, but, after some perfunctory consideration, I decided it was probably best not to. I’d been keeping my eye on the church doors as we’d been walking, and had just spotted Mr Tuttle emerging with the mystery woman in tow.

‘Right now, sir,’ I said earnestly.

It would have been impossible to squeeze my way back along the path through the stream of exiting mourners. My only option was to take to the grass, crushing the floral tributes as I went. This attracted some disapproving looks, not least from Mr Tuttle himself, who was watching my progress with a curious blend of distaste and resignation.

‘Go now, Elizabeth,’ I heard him say as I got a little closer. ‘I can deal with this young whipper-snapper.’

The woman in the veil turned to leave, but before she could manage to merge into the crowd, I cried out:

‘Wait, miss! Wait! My name is Octavius Guy. I work for

a highly respected lawyer. I have been retained to look into the circumstances surrounding your sister's death...I should mention that I used to know your sister years ago.'

My guess—for that's all it was, a guess—had been a shrewd one; it stopped her in her tracks. She paused, turned back, and regarded me at length from beneath her veil. She was dressed from head to toe in black, so all I could see of her actual person were some oddly colourless strands of hair that had come loose from her bonnet.

'You knew my sister? How?' she asked.

It was an awkward question, for I had no way of telling whether this woman was aware of Bella's former profession.

'I am an orphan, miss. I have been so since the tender age of six. Your sister was kind to me when my mother died. She gave me food when I was hungry and shelter when I needed it. I am for ever in her debt.'

That was putting it mildly. She'd also helped me look after my infant brother, Julius, and kept his existence secret from those in our fraternity who would have seen him initiated into the Life.

'You speak most eloquently,' said the woman, her soft, low-pitched voice carrying as clear as a bell over the general hubbub that was going on around her. 'So what is it you want of me?'

'I just wanted to assure you that I shall not rest until I find her killer, miss.'

She turned her head to face Mr Tuttle, who had now been joined by the rest of his company—including the

absconding actor, Mr Jacobs.

‘Killer?’ she queried, causing him to wince. ‘I thought you said it was an accident, sir?’

‘The boy is naught but a fantasist, ma’am. He lets his imagination run away with him.’

I saw red. ‘You and your company may have managed to withhold pertinent facts from that bullying, bungling policeman, Mr Tuttle, but don’t imagine for one moment that you’ll fool a coroner as easily! Even if all of your actors *are* willing to perjure themselves before God and the Law, I cannot believe that the doctor who attended Miss Prynne will aid you in your cause!’

‘*Coroner?*’ the ageing manager croaked, his face turning decidedly ashen. ‘But the scandal would be the ruin of us! People are already scared of being attacked when venturing to my theatre.’

Now it was my turn to wince, for in a sense I was responsible for this—simply by allowing Thickset and his companion to operate in its vicinity. Despite the newspaper report that Bella had been strangled before “*a capacity crowd*”, the theatre had barely been half full on the night she was murdered.

‘What is the boy talking about, Mr Tuttle?’ the woman in the veil demanded to know. ‘What pertinent facts did you withhold?’

‘It is possible—though I would stress it’s highly unlikely—that your poor sister’s death...was not an accident.’

‘*Not* an accident?’

‘As I said, it’s highly unlikely...why, even the

investigating officer went away perfectly satisfied...’

‘Mr Tuttle! What pertinent facts did you withhold?’

Mr Tuttle tugged at his shirt collar. ‘There is some... slight...*very slight*...evidence to suggest that a stranger infiltrated the backstage area, donned a costume, and insinuated himself among the duchess’s executioners.’

‘I’d hardly call the evidence slight,’ I piped up. ‘Even your own actors agree that there was an impostor on stage that evening.’

‘But just whispering such a thing in the wrong person’s ear would be enough to trigger an inquest! Do you not understand? It would be the end of us...the final nail in the coffin for all we have strived to achieve!’

‘Do you want Bella’s murderer to be caught or not?’ I came back at him, and watched as he struggled to frame his answer.

‘Calm yourselves, both of you!’ the woman beseeched us. ‘If my sister was killed as you suggest, as much as I would have whoever’s responsible caught and brought to book, I know in my heart of hearts that Isabella would not wish your company ill by it, Mr Tuttle. My sister thought too highly of you all for that.’ As the assembled troupe muttered their approval at these finely-expressed sentiments, she turned and addressed herself to me. ‘Can you not find a way to investigate, lad, without bringing this matter to the attention of anyone official?’

‘I can try, miss,’ I replied, ‘but it may not be up to me. The client I represent may have other ideas.’

‘*Client?* What client?’

‘I cannot give you his name, miss. You’ll appreciate that it’s confidential. Though, suffice it to say, he is as anxious as you are to see justice prevail for your sister.’

I sensed movement beneath the veil as she considered this. She gave a series of almost imperceptible nods, as if trying to reason something through in her head.

‘You claim to have known my sister,’ she said at last.

‘I did, miss. I knew her well.’

‘Then I beg of you, respect her memory, and do what your heart tells you is right.’ She touched my wrist for the briefest second, and then turned and walked away.

Many of Mr Tuttle’s company took her departure as a sign that they might leave too. Mr Jacobs, whom I was keen to learn more about, linked arms with a young lady and began escorting her towards the gate. I recognized her as the actress who’d been sent backstage to fetch the mirror. Signalling to Julius and Bertha to wait for me there, I set off in pursuit...an excruciatingly *slow* pursuit, let me tell you now. Why can’t romantically-involved couples—and these two were obviously romantically involved—walk at a normal, steady pace?

Up Bedford Street they strolled, lingering by the corner of King Street while the young woman pointed one way and then another, as if choosing in which direction she wanted to go. After an eternity of indecision, the pair of them crossed the road, then headed north through the maze of yards and alleyways towards that thoroughfare known as Long Acre.

On their left stood the Lamb and Flag—or the Bucket of

Blood as it's known locally—a public house that I'd had dealings with in the past. As they stared up at a boarded-up window in the floor above, the woman shuddered and shook her head. Mr Jacobs murmured something in her ear and coaxed her to venture closer. They peered in through one of the open ground-floor windows, then turned to each other with questioning looks. In silent agreement, they proceeded inside.

Octopus

or

Octavius Guy and the Case of the Throttled Tragedienne

A Revenge Tragedy (of sorts)

in (roughly—very roughly) Three Acts

by Michael Gallagher

Copyright © 2016

released March 1st 2016
available to pre-order now

Find the author online
at his website michaelgallagherwrites.com
at [Goodreads](#)
and on [Facebook](#)