

The Doorkeepers

By Graham Masterton

When they published The Doorkeepers, Severn House insisted that they needed to cut at least 10 pages so that the book would be a suitable length for library publication. I was busy moving to Ireland at the time, so I allowed them to go ahead. In retrospect, I realize that they have cut out one of the most important sections in the whole book. Whether they did it for other reasons (political correctness?) I leave you to judge for yourselves.

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They hurried through the dark, dripping passageway between the buildings. Pigeons fluttered from the windowsills high above their heads. From time to time, Josh glanced back worriedly back, but it seemed as if the Hooded Men had chosen not to follow them. Not today, anyhow. But he had no illusions that they wouldn't go on hunting him down until they found him.

'Slow down,' he panted. His teeth were aching so much that he could hardly think, and every wound that had been inflicted by the Holy Harp was prickling with pain. Petty slowed down, and leaned against the wall, trying to catch her breath.

'They're not coming after us, are they?'

Josh shook his head. 'Maybe later. Maybe tomorrow. But right now we're home free.'

They turned the next corner in the passageway. Petty said, in bewilderment, 'We're back where we started from.'

'That's right. That's the way the doors work. You're not going from one *place* to another. You're going from one reality into another.'

They stepped out into Star Yard. A fine rain was falling, so soft that they could barely feel it. In the distance they could hear music and people calling out. There was a strange fragrance in the air, like spices.

Petty glanced back at the niche. 'I can't believe that. We jumped in there, and walked all the way along that passage, and now we're back here again.'

Josh said nothing, but took her hand and led her cautiously down toward Carey Street. The roadway and the pavements were crowded with scores of people, all of them wearing colourful saris and scarves - crimsons and greens and yellows and blues. There was hardly a single white face in sight - only a group of men talking to each other outside the back entrance to the Law Courts - and they were all dressed in collarless Indian jackets and tight white Indian trousers. One of them even wore a turban.

'Blimey,' said Petty. 'I never saw so many wogs in my whole bleeding life.'

Several beggars were sitting on the sidewalk at the entrance to Star Yard, holding out bowls and empty baked-bean cans. One of them, his eyes as blind as boiled cod's, lifted his wrinkled face toward Josh and said, 'Blessings, master. Welcome to the world.'

'I'm sorry, I don't have anything to give you right now.'

'Give me your hand, master. That will be enough for now.'

Josh hesitated, and then he held out his hand. The blind beggar traced the lines on his palm with his blackened fingernail.

'I was right, master. You have nothing to give us now, but one day soon, you will give us everything that we have been praying for.'

He was still holding Josh's hand when a smartly-dressed man came elbowing his way through the crowds. He was short, 5ft 3ins at the most, but he was handsome in a plumpish, well-fed way, and his ivory-colored silk jacket was obviously hand-tailored.

'Is this fellow bothering you?' he wanted to know, in a clipped British accent with only the slightest of Indian inflections.

'No, he's fine. He's just telling my fortune.'

'You look more as if you have suffered a great *misfortune*.'

Josh dusted down the front of his shirt, 'We've, er ... well, we've been in kind of an accident, that's all.'

The man held out his hand in greeting. 'My name is Gotam Das. I think that you will be relieved to know that I am quite aware of the exact nature of your accident.'

'Josh Winward. This is Petty.'

'I am charmed to make your acquaintance,' said Gotam Das, kissing Petty's hand. Petty looked at Josh and pulled a face.

Gotam Das took two or three coins out of the ticket pocket of his jacket and dropped them into the blind beggar's bowl. 'May the all-seeing guide your footsteps,' said the beggar. 'May your union be blessed with many boys.'

Gotam Das took hold of Josh's arm. 'Come with me now. I will take you to a place where you can wash and rest and perhaps eat something if you're hungry. It isn't far.'

'Whoa, wait up a moment,' said Josh. 'I mean, don't get me wrong. There's nothing we'd like better. But I think we need to know who you are and why you're being so helpful.'

'My dear sir, you have every right to be suspicious. But you can absolutely take my word for it that I am just as suspicious of you as you are of me. I, equally, wish to discover who you are and what you are doing here.'

'You don't think we're spies, or subversives?'

'No, I don't. Spies and subversives would make it their business to fit in. You and your ladyfriend - well, you stick Out like the proverbial sore toes, so to speak. Nonetheless we have to be sure.'

'So what are you? Some kind of cop? Policeman, I mean?'

'I suppose you could say so, in a manner of speaking. I work for the immigration department.'

'We're not exactly *immigrants*,' Josh said, guardedly.

'All the same, your arrival here is part of my official responsibility. Technically, you have arrived from a foreign shore.'

'How come you were right here when we arrived? You couldn't have known we were coming.'

'There is almost always somebody here. It has to be a discreet presence, of course. We wouldn't want the population at large to discover what you two have discovered.'

Josh said, 'You know about the Hooded Men?'

Gotam Das winced, and blinked rapidly, but said nothing.

'Do they ever come through here?' Josh persisted. 'What I need to know is, how safe are we going to be?'

'I think it would be wise for you to come with me,' said Gotam Das. 'That is, unless you wish to go back the way you came.'

'I can't do that. That'll take me even further away from where I started.'

'In that case, my dear sir, you will just have to trust me.'

Josh nodded. He took Petty's hand and together they followed Gotam Das through the milling, chattering crowds.

'These people are all here to present petitions to the courts,' Gotam Das explained, over his shoulder. 'The legal system here is very ponderous, you see, and requires every petition to be put before the bench in person. Sometimes you have to wait for days for your name to be called.'

On the other side of the street, a young man in a similar jacket was standing by the railings. Gotam Das went up to him and spoke quickly in his ear.

'I am telling him that I am taking you back with me, and that he should continue to watch this place by himself.'

What if the Hooded Men *do* come through? How's he going to stop them on his own?'

'Be patient, please. We have many different things to discuss.'

He led them down Chancery Lane. On both sides of the street, the sidewalks were congested with market stalls, all of them covered in different-coloured canvas. Josh saw stalls selling exotic fruit and vegetables, with huge melons and papayas and mangoes; stalls selling bronze and silver bracelets; stalls selling wooden sculptures and ivory effigies; stalls selling silk scarves and pashminas. There were stands where bearded men were serving tandoori chicken and spiced pomfret. There was a barrow heaped with whole cardamoms and cumin seeds and asafoetida. There was even a makeshift pen crowded with bleating goats.

The noise was deafening, especially since every stall seemed to have a tinny little radio playing ragas. The middle of the street was teeming with so many people that every

automobile had to drive at a snail's pace, tooting its horn as it went. Most of the cars were enormous, built like traveling palaces, with huge headlights and real leather trunks fastened to the back and pleated curtains at the passenger windows.

More than anything else, it was the smell that invaded Josh's senses. The smell of coriander and black pepper. The smell of marinated chicken frying in yogurt and fenugreek. The sickly, almondy fragrance of Indian sweetmeats. The overwhelming perfumes of the women who jostled past them in their loosely-wrapped saris, patchouli and musk.

Fleet Street had fewer stalls, only a few fortune-tellers and sweetmeat-sellers, but many more cars and hundreds of black old-fashioned bicycles, as thick as flies. Every bicycle had a bell, and every cyclist insisted on ringing it constantly, so that the mass jingling was deafening.

'Not far now!' Gotam Das shouted. 'Just across the street and down this passageway!'

At last they arrived in a wide, stone-flagged square, surrounded on each side by dark flat-fronted Victorian buildings. This is the Middle Temple, Gotam Das explained. Most of these offices are barristers' chambers. But ... there are one or two exceptions, like my office.

He led them across the square, in through a large bottle-green door, and up an echoing whitewashed staircase. On the second floor, he opened another door, and took them into a large, airy apartment. Come through, he said.

They found themselves in an office which looked as if it had last been decorated in 1880. A huge mahogany desk dominated the room, with silver inkstands and cut-glass lamps. Behind the desk, two flags were draped across the oak-paneled wall, the red-white-and-blue of the Union Flag, and another flag in red-white-and-green. In the center of these flags hung a colour photograph of a serious-looking high-caste Indian and his finely-featured wife, both wearing jeweled crowns.

Please, sit down, said Gotam Das, offering them two huge leather-covered armchairs. You must be very tired and disoriented. Would you care for something to drink?

I could murder a cuppa, said Petty.

'Assam? Darjeeling?'

Not fussed. Plenty of milk and three sugars, please.

Gotam Das' lips pursed. Of course. Anything you wish. How about you, Mr Winward?

Just a large glass of water, if you don't mind. I've got enough dust in my mouth to spit out a whole new brick.

Gotam Das picked up the the telephone on his desk and spoke rapidly in Hindi. Almost immediately, a man and a woman appeared. The man was short and portly, with white side-whiskers and half-glasses. He wore a traditional Indian tunic and trousers, in a silky beige color, but a navy-blue blazer on top of them, with brass buttons. The woman was 28 or 29, smooth-skinned, almond-eyed, wearing a scarlet silk sari.

These are two of my intelligence officers, Mr Vikram Aggarwala and Miss Anjali Sharma. I hope you don't object if they ask you some questions.

I'd rather cut the crap, if you don't mind, said Josh. 'I came here because I was trying to escape from the Hooded Men, that's all. I'm not a rebel or a subversive or anything like that. All I'm asking for is sanctuary, just for forty-eight hours, until I get back where I came from.

Mr Aggarwala said, What proof can you give us of who you are?

I have a US passport. Here.

Miss Sharma took the passport with immaculately polished nails and examined it closely. This seems to be authentic, she said, at last, handing it to Mr Aggarwala.

Mr Aggarwala lowered his glasses on his nose so that he could inspect it more closely. Even if it is, who's to say that he hasn't been bribed, or blackmailed, or even worse?

Josh unbuttoned his shirt and tugged it open, so that they could all see his scabs and his bruises. Even worse? They wired me up to their Holy Harp, and I can't think of anything worse than that. He pulled down his lower jaw with his fingers and showed them his teeth. Look at this! They drilled my teeth down to the nerves! Do you seriously think that I would ever do anything for them?

Pain can be very persuasive, said Miss Sharma.

Not the Holy Harp, believe me. After they've wired you up to the Holy Harp, all you want to do is get your revenge.

So what about this girl?

Petty? We met by accident. I was trying to get back to the London where the Hooded Men live, but I went through the door too early.

Disjointedly, he explained about Julia, and Frank Mordant; and his escape from Master Thomas Edridge. Mr Aggarwala listened patiently, while Miss Sharma took notes in a shorthand pad. Gotam Das sat in his revolving chair with his fingers steepled, staring at the ceiling and swinging dreamily from side to side.

In the end, Gotam Das said, Anjali, what do you think? Is he trouble?

I don't think that he's a terrorist, if that's what you're asking me.

Vikram, you believe his story?

I'm inclined to. My department has quite a dossier on Frank Mordant. Sometimes he called himself George Graves, or Philip Stone. I don't have the files in front of me, but I'm sure that his name was connected with the disappearance of two seventeen-year-old girls, about three years ago. He came here offering some kind of trading arrangement. Electrical components, I believe, in exchange for a quantity of opium.

Opium? said Josh.

I understand your surprise, said Mr Aggarwala, lifting his hand. Opium is not legal in your society. But used wisely it has many spiritual and therapeutic benefits, and in this London, it is quite commonplace.

This London looks like - I don't know, Bombay or someplace like that.

Of course, smiled Gotam Das. Every conquering nation brings its own culture with it.

Excuse me? Are you saying that India conquered Britain?

Gotam Das nodded, and smiled. It was our manifest destiny, my dear sir. In India, we had religion, philosophy, art and music. But what we always lacked was a bureaucratic structure. So it was logical to invade the country which possessed that structure in its highest form, and take it for ourselves.

What the British possessed had a price far above rubies. They had organization. They had the greatest legal system in the civilized world. They had the stiff upper lip! There was terrible conflict, of course. The Battle of Lowfield Heath. But, in the end, it has turned out to be a very happy marriage. Long live the King!

What about the Hooded Men? asked Josh.

Gotam Das looked away. We have many topics to discuss when you have bathed and changed.

I'm asking you about the Hooded Men now.

Later, my dear sir. We will talk about the Hooded Men later.

Then you admit they exist, at least?

It was you who mentioned them, not I.

Josh was about to argue some more, but Petty took hold of his arm and said, Please, Josh. I couldn't half do with a bath.

All right, said Josh. Give us a couple of hours to straighten ourselves out. But then I want to talk about the Hooded Men, you got me?

Gotam Das said, We will talk of many things, my dear sir. Of saffron and ships and scaling-wax, if that's what you want. Of coriander, and kings.

I see that you've adopted the British sense of humor, as well as their bureaucracy.

Two hours later, they sat in a large crimson-wallpapered dining-room, with dark oil-paintings on the walls, eating chicken baked in yogurt and cumin, and pulao rice. The last of the sun lay diagonally across the heavy white tablecloth, and illuminated the jug of water so that it reflected rainbow patterns on all their faces.

Petty said, Bit bloody hot, this dinner. Surprised you Indians end up having so many kids. I'll bet you can't stand each other's breath.

Josh gave her a sharp glance, but Gotam Das smiled and lifted his hand. This is a world of freedom, where people may say what they like.

You're not offended? You don't think that's a little *incorrect*?

'My dear sir, we are the ruling class here. When you are the ruling class, you don't care what anybody says about you. It is water off a duck's back.

Miss Sharma had been watching Josh acutely throughout the meal. He and Petty were both dressed in fresh white cotton robes, with white hoods, and they were scrubbed and washed, with their wet hair combed back, so that they looked like religious novitiates.

You asked about the Hooded Men? said Miss Sharma.

'The Doorkeepers, yes.'

Well, as you have plainly discovered, there are six doors between one London and the next, for ever and ever.

I've visited two of them now. I didn't realize that there was an infinite number.

There are more Londons than you could ever imagine; and more New Yorks; and more Los Angeles. Some of them are so similar that you could never tell them apart, except for the colour of their taxis and certain inflections in their speech. One London is flooded, and has gondoliers, like Venice. Another London is like a garden, with nothing but pagodas and summerhouses, and firework displays almost every night.

'The Hooded Men guard the doors between these different Londons and patrol them and control any traffic between them. They keep them secret, of course, from the general populace. In their own London, if anybody tries to say that they have come through the doors, the Hooded Men simply say that they must be dead people, returned from Purgatory, rejected by God and rejected by Satan. Nobody questions them. After all, they learned it all at school.

A Child's Book of Simple Truth, said Josh, and Miss Sharma bowed her head in acknowledgement.

Some of our people in *this* London have discovered the existence of the doors and tried to trade with the Hooded Men. After all, the doors are ideal for all kinds of illegal trafficking: whatever one London lacks, another London can supply. Drugs, women, antibiotics, luxury goods. But we do everything we can to discourage such trade. It breaks down the principle of law. Not only that, the Hooded Men are very murderous and will come through the doors to find anybody who crosses them or tries to cheat them. That is why we always keep watch on the doors - to see who comes in, and who goes out.

Can't you physically stop the Hooded Men from coming through them? I mean, why don't you post an armed guard? They only have *swords*, for God's sake. He didn't like to tell them that he had killed one of the Hooded Men himself.

We do not know where all of the doors are, my dear sir. Once we tried to prevent the Hooded Men from coming through, and they entered by another door and exacted a terrible revenge by killing thirty women and children at one of our schools. We have learned to accommodate them, so to speak.

'But if they're undermining your society - '

The answer is to close the doors, and to close them forever.

Josh took another forkful of aromatic rice. Can that be done?

'We believe so, put in Gotam Das. Over the years, our office has sent many agents to the London where the Hooded Men live, and also to the London that *you* came from. They have researched the history of the doors, and how they work, and we are confident now that they can be deactivated, as it were.'

Mr Aggarwala said, The doors are not a physical phenomenon. They are a *psychic* phenomenon. It is only because we have similar phenomena in Indian mysticism that we were able to understand how the doors were created, and how they have been kept open.

'All through the centuries, certain yogis have been able to produce physical manifestations of people and creatures. Not ghosts, you understand, but real perceptible beings. In northern India and Tibet they call these creatures *tulpa*. Sometimes they produce secondary manifestations known as *yang-tul* and *ning-tul*.

It used to be thought that these *tulpa* were created by the yogis' powers of concentration and visualization - and that they were people or animals that the yogis were seeing in their mind's eye. But a French traveler who studied the *tulpa* discovered that they were real people from another existence. The yogis weren't creating people, they were opening doors between one reality and another through which people and animals occasionally strayed.

We are convinced that the six doors in London were created by somebody with exceptional psychic powers, and that they have been kept open for all of these centuries by a succession of people of equal psychic ability - each one, perhaps, trained by the one before.

So if you find the person who's keeping them open - ?

'Exactly, said Gotam Das. You kill that person, and the doors vanish.

Miss Sharma said, 'We believe that the doors were first opened in AD 61, in London, by Queen Boudicca.'

'Queen who?'

Boudicca. She was better known as Boadicea. She was the wife of King Prasutagas who ruled over the Iceni people in East Anglia, during the time of the Roman invasion of Britain. When Prasutagas died, he made their daughters joint heirs to his property, along with the Roman emperor Nero. He probably had the mistaken idea that this would save them at least some of his possessions.

But the imperial agent seized everything. Boudicca was flogged and her daughters were raped. Because of this insult, and because of Roman oppression, the Iceni rebelled against the Romans and Boudicca led an armed uprising against Suetonius Paulinus and his legions. The Iceni slaughtered the Roman garrisons in St Albans and Colchester, and then they attacked London and razed it to the ground.

Boudicca had six or seven Druid advisers - one of them a very mystical senior Druid whose name nobody knows. In AD 61 the Romans were hunting down and killing the last of the Druids and these Druids had come to Boudicea looking for protection. They were very educated, the Druids. They had a written language and they believed in the immortal soul.

Boudicca's Druid advisers predicted by the entrails of their victims and by the flight of ravens that she and her army would be annihilated. So the senior Druid taught Boudicca how to open up doors to other existences.'

How do we know this? asked Josh.

Because one of the Druids wrote it down. He wrote something like, "Boudicca lit three tapers. She consumed henbane and passed into another world."

That sounds more like suicide to me.

That's what historians have always assumed. After all, henbane is even more poisonous than opium. But the Druidic word for "consumed" is almost the same as the word "burned". And we know that the Druids used to burn henbane and breathe in the fumes to put them into a hallucinatory trance. In the Middle Ages, dentists used to bum henbane to dull their patients' toothache.

I could use some of that, Josh put in.

I wouldn't recommend it. It's very dangerous indeed. But it seems to have worked for Boudicca. It put her into a trance and she opened the six doors, so that she and the Druids and some of the Iceni could escape into the next reality.

Josh said, I have to tell you, this is a pretty hard story to swallow.

Why? You've been through the doors yourself. They don't obey any of the laws of space and time. They're not a place, they're a sustained state of mind, and for that state of mind to be perceptible, somebody somewhere has to be experiencing it.'

Josh put down his fork and wiped his mouth. What about the Hooded Men? Where did they come into it?

They were the elite of the Puritan army which defeated the royalists. Over the centuries - in *their* particular London - they developed into something very much more than religious enforcers. They became what they are today. In your reality, I suppose you would describe them as a kind of Gestapo.

So what are you going to do now?

We believe that we have located the building in the City of London where the person who is keeping the doors open is hidden. It is only a deduction, of course, that they are there, but our people have been watching the comings and goings of the Hooded Men, and they are fairly confident that they have found the right place.

Somebody will have to enter that building and make sure that the doors are closed forever.

Like an assassin, you mean?

Exactly. Perhaps it is morally wrong, but we cannot think of any other way.'

That's all very well, but your assassin is going to be trapped in that reality for ever, isn't he? Once the doors are closed, he can never come back.

We will find volunteers, don't worry. Whoever achieves this thing, wherever they are, they will be honoured for all time.

Petty looked up from her plate. Well, don't all bloody well look at *me*!

Gotam Das walked up to Star Yard with them, and knelt down in front of the niche in the wall to light the candles himself. It was a slate-coloured London day, with a fine rain falling, but Gotham Das was wearing a coat of bright yellow silk, as if he had decided to brighten up the day by electing himself honorary sun.

I hope you are successful in finding your lady friend, he said, grasping Josh by both hands. There is no greater anxiety than losing the person whom you love the most.

Thanks, said Josh. I won't forget what you've done for us. Maybe I'll be able to come back some day and show you how much I appreciate it.

Well, I hope not, said Gotam Das. The sooner we close the doors forever, the happier I shall be. Let us simply remember each other, now and again, and remember the greatest religious precept of all, that all men are brothers.

He took hold of Petty's hands, too, and kissed her, once on each cheek. I pray that your path through life is strewn with rose petals, he told her.

Petty's eyes unexpectedly filled with tears. Better than dogshit, aye? she said, trying to make a joke of it.

Josh recited the rhyme, and they stepped over the candles into the niche. Petty went ahead without looking back, but Gotam Das called out, Mr Winward! and Josh stopped and turned around.

I cannot ask anything of you, said Gotam Das, his voice blurry and distorted. But if you can find a way to close the doors, my dear sir, then you will change the destiny of this and every other world for ever. Only a handful will ever understand what you have done, but you will be the greatest hero that the world has ever known.

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