The Thief Taker

Janet Gleeson

June 1815

Morton had all but finished dressing, and was basking in the glow of warmth and well-being, albeit moderated by a few stinging bruises, that followed his remarkable evening at Jackson's.

"Mr. Morton ... sir?" a voice said breathlessly.

Morton looked up to find a boy, gasping in the doorway as though in the throes of an asthmatical convulsion.

"Henry Morton, yes."

"I've run all the way, sir..." the child managed. "'Tis Mrs. Malibrant.... Asks that you come directly." A few desperate breaths were needed. "I'm to say 'tis most urgent, sir. Most terrible urgent."

Morton tossed aside a towel. "Nothing has befallen Mrs. Malibrant, I hope?"

"Oh, no, Mr. Morton. 'Tis the gentleman, sir. The young gentleman who just arrived at Lord Arthur's." The boy straightened a little and shook his head. "He appears to be dead, sir. Most thoroughly dead."

It was but a short walk from Jackson's in Bond Street to their destination in Portman Square, but even so, Morton's long, purposeful stride soon had the boy out of breath again, precluding conversation. Following along the dimly lit street came the hollow echo of a tired horse and tradesman's cart, the owner shuffling numbly beside. A pile of cobbles and rubble forced Morton and the boy outside the line of iron posts that protected unwary pedestrians from street traffic. Here they found their footing with care in the foul street.

At this hour, near to ten Morton guessed, Bond Street was quiet but not empty, the shop windows dark, the signs over doors unreadable in the gloom.

He was trying to remember in what manner Arabella had said she was engaged that night. Was she not onstage this evening? He was sure she'd said she was, and Morton had a near-infallible memory. Very odd.

The gateman who protected the privacy of the occupants of the Square took notice of Morton's gilt-topped baton and let them through. "Ev'ning, Constable," he said, tipping his cap. "The disturbance be down there to the right, nigh on Portman House."

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Along the line of elegant Greek Revival town houses, Morton could see one with its doors open, light and guests spilling out into the street, where carriages clustered in a throng. Rather too early for a dinner party to end, Morton thought, and as he drew closer saw that there was little gaiety in the faces.

The boy whisked him past the butler, who had barely an instant to cast a disapproving glare in Morton's direction. He was let into a small sitting-room, and there two gentlemen stood over a third who lay very still on a divan. A pleasantly greying man looked up, his face grim and pale.

"Henry Morton. Bow Street. Mrs. Malibrant sent for me."

The man nodded. "Arthur Darley."

Hadn't Arabella mentioned a Lord Arthur a few times? She had so many admirers it was difficult to keep them straight, and Morton usually didn't try, finding them an ineffectual lot. Though Lord Arthur was imposing enough. No fool, Morton surmised, and taking a man's measure was part of Morton's trade.

"Doctor?" Lord Arthur asked the second man, who glanced sourly over his shoulder.

"Well, I'm sorry to say it, sir," the other replied, "but this young man is beyond my powers to help. Beyond anyone's, in fact. He smells powerfully of strong drink and has aspirated his own vomitus."

Morton peered past the doctor. The dead man, who could only have attained this state very recently, still had some colour in his face. "His lips are not terribly blue for a man who has suffocated," Morton offered.

The doctor turned on him, eying him rather viciously. "And you are a medical man, sir?"

Morton held his preferred response in check. "No, I am a Bow Street man," he said, "but I've seen a few corpses in the course of my duties. His windpipe is blocked?"

"I have seen 'a few corpses' in my time, as well, sir," the little man said, his tone mocking and indignant. "I served with Wellesley in Spain."

"Army surgeon? Well, that would make you an authority on men drinking themselves to death. You don't mind if I have a look, do you?" Wellesley, indeed! As though this small man were a familiar of the Duke of Wellington's.

The doctor stood his ground a moment more, then gave Darley a stiff bow. "I have given my opinion," he said haughtily. "I bid you gentlemen good evening."

"Thank you for your assistance, sir," Darley said, and accompanied him to the door.

Morton could see the dead man clearly for the first time: young, perhaps twenty-six or -seven, not strongly formed but hardly effete. He guessed him to be of good

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height, perhaps three inches shorter than Morton himself. His hair was straw-coloured. His eyes had been closed but they were likely blue. The rather square mouth was now rapidly turning to greyish-purple. His elegant evening clothes, fashionably dark, were covered in vomit. It even matted his hair.

Morton breathed in the familiar smell of death, but there was something more as well. Sickly sweet. He bent over, braced himself, and pressed on the man's chest, breathing in through his nose as he did so. He gagged and pulled a handkerchief from his pocket, covering his mouth. His eyes watered, but the contents of his own stomach stayed where they belonged.

Covering his fingers with his handkerchief, he distended the man's lips, then pulled on the teeth to open the jaw. As he thought. He wiped his hands energetically. There were no signs that the young man had been assaulted. His clothes, though soiled, were not torn or even appreciably askew. Morton gently turned the man's head, which rolled heavily to one side. No marks or signs of a blow. His hands and forearms bore no bruises or contusions. He had not defended himself.

A real doctor would have to make an examination, but Morton had seen enough to convince him. Quickly he went through the man's outer pockets and fob. A watch, some coins, a small ring of keys. He opened the jacket.

"What are you finding, Mr. Morton?" Darley had returned from seeing the doctor out, and now eyed the thief-taker rather suspiciously.

Morton's fingers encountered a small sheet of folded paper in an inner pocket. He stood up, turning to Darley.

"Nothing unexpected. To be honest, Lord Arthur, I am not sure why Mrs. Malibrant sent for me. I do not know how this unfortunate gentleman met his end but there are no signs of foul play. He doesn't appear to have been robbed. Though, at the risk of offending your friend the surgeon, I do not think he suffocated. Can you tell me who he is and the circumstances in which he was found?"

Arabella let herself in at that moment, and both men bowed to her. She was dressed in a gown of green silk that seemed to reflect the colour of her eyes, which were, Arabella liked to say, the hue of jade. Porcelain-pale skin and, about her lovely face, a cloud of cumulous red hair. Arabella Malibrant did not go unnoticed in a crowd.

"Mr. Morton," she said, nodding. "This is the man I spoke of, Arthur."

Arthur?

"So I assumed." Lord Arthur clasped her hands. "And how are you, my dear? Are you sure you wish to be in here? Shall I come out?"

Arabella's eye strayed to the dead man. "No, I'm well. I have just sent Miss Hamilton home with her brother. She did not want to leave but her friends prevailed. Poor thing," she said, her eyes glistening.

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"Yes, poor Louisa," Darley agreed.

Morton felt his head shake involuntarily. Arabella Malibrant was no more a shrinking violet than Morton himself. He was sure she could step over a corpse in the street and not interrupt her conversation. It was not for his benefit, this little display of feeling.

Silence for a moment, and then Morton cleared his throat. "You were about to tell me, Lord Arthur, who this unfortunate man was and how he was found...."

Darley seemed to refocus. "Oh, yes. His name is Halbert Glendinning. He arrived here, oh, some thirty minutes ago in a hackney-coach. I was not there, of course. But he ... well, Mrs. Malibrant, you were there."

Arabella nodded, her mane of red hair swaying.

"I had arrived just the moment before and was on the stair when I heard a fuss. Several servants were looking into a coach where they had discovered this young man, sprawled. There was a bit of a scene, as you might imagine. Arthur was sent for and arrived a moment later. And then poor Miss Hamilton..." Arabella shook her head. "I thought my heart would break when she called out his name. No actress in England could have put such feeling into it, and yet it was restrained." She glanced at Morton, who must have looked impatient, for she drew herself up a little, green eyes glaring. "All of this was horrible enough, but I should not have sent for Hen - Mr. Morton but for one thing. The jarvey was frightened nigh unto death. I have never seen a man look so ill so suddenly. And the moment poor Mr. Glendinning was lifted from his carriage, the man was gone. Not so much as a by-your-leave. Just vanished. Without his fare! Can you imagine that? 'Now, that, Arabella,' I said to myself, 'is as suspicious as anything I have ever seen. Mr. Morton will want to talk to him.' And I sent for you straightaway."

Darley looked oddly at Morton, and Morton knew what the man was thinking. And who, sir, are you to Mrs. Malibrant?

A knock at the door drew Lord Arthur, who excused himself and went quietly out. Arabella stayed, as any lady certainly would not. She glanced again at the dead body, then at a painting on the wall. A number of things Morton might say ran through his mind, none of them appropriate to sharing a room with a gentleman who had so recently departed the pleasures of this earth. "Arthur?" he said at last.

"It's not what you think," she said quickly, but for an actress Arabella was a surprisingly poor liar. It was precisely what he thought. But, then, what could Morton say? They had an "understanding," of sorts, and gentlemen like Lord Arthur Darley were part of it. Gentlemen of quality. Likely married. A man who did not find his money chasing criminals through the streets of London.

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Arabella raised her head and stared at him rather defiantly. Morton looked down at the scrap of paper he still held in his hand. Unfolding it, he held it up to the light and read aloud.

"It will find you soon enough,
The empty night after the day.
Brief and filled with sorrow,
Love will rise and slip away."

"What is that?" Arabella asked.

"I found it in his pocket."

"Well, he was no Byron."

Morton glanced down at the unmoving form of the young man. No, he was no Byron.

Arthur Darley returned at that moment, and his soft eyes came to rest on Glendinning. For a moment he stood very still, and Morton thought the feelings he saw in the man's face were not feigned.

"It is so tragic," Darley said quietly. "So many men lost in the recent wars, Mr. Morton, and more to come across the Channel, I fear. But one comes to think that we at home are safe."

Safe? Morton thought. Here was someone who did not see the side of London frequented by the men of Bow Street.

"Lord Arthur?" Morton said, interrupting the man's contemplation. "Have you any reason to believe this death is anything but natural?"

Darley looked up at the Bow Street Runner enquiringly. "You're really quite certain the doctor was wrong? That he didn't choke to death on his own gorge?"

"The doctor's examination was less than thorough, I think. You see this poor unfortunate? If he had asphyxiated, and I have seen many a man who has, hanged and murdered both, his airway would have been blocked or there would be signs of an assault upon his throat. And if you push upon his chest, as I did a moment ago, air passes freely out of his lungs. The passage is not blocked, nor is there vomit in his mouth. I have looked. Did the doctor open Glendinning's mouth and examine his airway?"

"I don't believe he did."

"I don't believe he did, either. Forgive me for asking again: Is there any reason to believe Mrs. Malibrant's fears are founded? Might Mr. Glendinning have expired of something unnatural?"

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Darley glanced at Arabella, the question unspoken.

"Mr. Morton is entirely reliable," she told him.

"I'm glad to hear it," Darley said dryly. He stood for a moment, lost in thought, then he shook his head and sat down rather heavily in a chair. "I ... I cannot quite catch up with what has happened. You see, Mr. Morton, someone tried to kill poor Glendinning earlier this day."

Morton and Arabella both stared at Lord Arthur, but Darley hesitated.

"What is it, Arthur?" Arabella said softly.

"Well, I don't suppose he can be charged with it now.... You see, Glendinning was involved in an affair of honour this morning. Your own people interrupted it, Mr. Morton. I don't think shots were fired."

"A duel with whom, Lord Arthur?" Morton asked.

"I don't know," Darley replied. "I can find out, perhaps."

"I don't much care to prosecute a duel, Lord Arthur, if that is your concern. And it seems no one was arrested."

"Peter Hamilton will likely know the story. He was Glendinning's friend." Darley stared down blankly at the corpse that lay upon his divan. "He was the kindest young man. A bit quiet, but liked by everyone - or so I thought. Poor Louisa."

"Who is Louisa, exactly?"

"Louisa Hamilton," Arabella said. "Peter Hamilton's sister."

"Louisa and Glendinning had come to an understanding recently, or so I believed. I had thought they might announce their engagement tonight." Darley shook his head again.

"If Mr. Glendinning really was involved in a duel," Morton said, "it casts Mrs. Malibrant's observation into a different light."

"You don't really think it's possible that...?" Darley eyed Morton, perhaps hoping he would tell him that such things could not happen in his world.

"It happens daily, Lord Arthur. Daily, and sometimes in homes as fine as this."

Morton saw Arabella home, happy to find that she was going home. He was not overly prone to jealousy - far less than the next man. No one would ever catch Morton murdering a man over a woman, as perhaps had happened this night. It was often the reason duels were fought. He had seen it before.

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The coach bounced through a pothole and the driver cursed. Morton gazed thoughtfully out the window.

Arabella sighed, signaling that he was not paying attention to her as he should. Morton turned back to her.

"Is it not the saddest thing?" she asked. "If you had heard poor Miss Hamilton cry out, Henry, you would have done anything to ease her pain. I tell you, it was wrenching. I could never duplicate it." She pitched her voice low and tried anyway. "'Oh, Richard. Richard...'"

"Very touching, I'm sure," Morton said. "There is only one problem...."

Arabella raised one perfect eyebrow.

"His name was not Richard."

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