

Cairo Malachi and the Adventure of the Silver Whistle

By Samantha SoRelle

(Super-Secret Sneak Peek for Newsletter Subscribers)

Prologue

The first time I met the love of my life, he died in my arms.

Of course, I didn't know he was the love of my life then, nor that it was only the first of many meetings, but still, one can only imagine how distressing I found the event at the time. Finding oneself covered in blood and holding a dead copper would vex a more self-possessed man than I.

But I have had my ear flicked more than once for sneaking a glance at the end of a book before going back to read only the interesting bits and I fear I may be recounting this the same way, all out of order and without the necessary context, so I shall begin at the beginning.

An introduction:

I go by the name of Cairo Malachi. My mother was the consummate banker's wife, a pillar of her community. But my father was a banker second and a Yorkshireman first. I once witnessed him pull his own tooth rather than pay for a dentist. After all, he had the same tools in the garden shed, why waste money on a medical man when he could do the job himself?

As one could easily surmise, ours was a cold and miserable household. Having received a copy of *A Christmas Carol* from a relative, I spent much of my childhood praying my father would receive the same ghostly visitations and mend his ways, but no life-changing apparitions ever appeared.

They do say to be careful what you wish for, and the irony of my prayers has not been lost on me.

Because of my father's parsimony, as a young lad I became adept at palming what coins and bills I could, without which my mother would have been unable to pay what few staff we had or afford meat from any animal that didn't meow, bark, or squeak. Few visitors to our home left without their coat pockets or purses somewhat lighter, even if my hands appeared to remain in

view at all times. My skills only developed further once my father had me sent to the finest boarding schools that the least amount of money could buy. There my ability to swipe an extra roll at dinner or the keys to a particularly hateful teacher's personal quarters made me quite popular amongst my fellows.

So popular in fact, that I was expelled from several institutions for only vaguely specified reasons. It was on one of these periods home between educations that my father caught me with one of his clerks in the shed, surrounded by garden tools but very little clothing, and tossed me out without a penny to my name.

By spinning tales of lost wallets, unrepentant thieves, and other calamities to earn myself a hot meal or explain my lack of train ticket, I made my way to London. There I learned the meaning of true misery. I assumed a bigger city would offer plenty of opportunities to a mostly educated yet penniless lad with no references or letters of introduction. How wrong I was.

I soon found myself falling back on my old habits, as while the city had little to offer a hardworking man, opportunities abounded for a light-fingered one. While my petty thefts sustained me, they also left me with ample time to think up grander plans and more complicated schemes. Within a year or two, I counted myself the most brilliant swindler walking the streets of London.

So of course it was only a matter of time before I was hauled before a magistrate.

I was lucky. Perhaps it was because of my clear breeding and good manners, or because of my weeping like a child as the full immensity of the tatters of my life struck me, but the magistrate was lenient and sentenced me to only three years.

My time in Newgate was unpleasant and I will not speak of it here. Suffice to say, I emerged as rangy as an alley cat and twice as skittish.

Perversely, my skills only increased while incarcerated, surrounded as I was by experts in the field. When I finally breathed free air, I could have stolen a parson's Bible in the middle of a sermon with his congregation none the wiser.

However, I'd lost my taste for criminal enterprise. Truth be told, the idea of being caught and sent back to that stinking, dark place filled with a thousand forms of human suffering was enough to have me waking in the middle of the night, heart pounding and feet rushing to make it to the nearest basin to be sick in. In addition, my time in Newgate finally made clear to me that throughout my criminal career, I'd operated at a grave disadvantage and the fact it took the bobbies so long to catch me was more a testament to my luck than to my skill.

The key to remaining un-caught is to be as forgettable as possible and I am anything but forgettable.

True, my appearance is for the most part unremarkable: dark hair, average height, nothing to distinguish me from thousands of other Englishmen, though I certainly count myself amongst the fairest of that breed. I have always been graced with a clear complexion and a lissome figure any tailor would be happy to display his wares upon. Even though I'm now approaching my thirtieth year, I've been told I still possess a boyish charm. Indeed, I can hardly go for a stroll on a Sunday afternoon without getting appreciative glances from dowagers and debutantes alike and secretive, heated looks from their male escorts.

It is little wonder why I feared returning to Newgate.

But aside from my admitted comeliness, the generally common nature of my appearance is shattered by a single feature impossible to hide: my eyes are of two strikingly different colors. My left is as brown as a solicitor's coat, but the right is a vivid shade of hazel more often seen in the eyes of wild animals than those of men. My "golden crown" my mother had called it when she was feeling particularly sentimental, which wasn't often.

The end result of my appearance is that upon closer inspection, those appreciative glances frequently turn to wards against evil or spitted curses in my direction. While a mark may not remember every man he brushed by before finding his pocketbook missing, a man with a hyena's eye he remembers. And the police who arrest the golden-eyed thief are on the lookout for him after his release should he step out of line again.

Leaving Newgate with this in mind but no other skills, I thought perhaps I could adapt my light fingers to conjuring. With a bit of patter and a great deal of practice, I was able to secure myself a position at a fourth-rate musical hall. Again my accursed eye was to be my downfall. The calibre of audience the hall attracted took one look at it and needed no further convincing that my abilities were from the devil. They were quick to chase me off the stage. Or at least the bottles and trash they aimed at me were.

As I sat in an alley behind the hall after one such failed performance, penniless and with my sole hope for survival dashed, a young woman approached me. She'd been in the audience and asked if I could really do magic. Seeing no way the night could get worse, I told her I could. She then asked where my abilities came from.

It might have been that I was longing to drown myself in gin, or because I was contemplating my own mortality, or perhaps thinking about my prayers as a child, or I simply wanted one person to not think I was evil, but I answered her.

"From the spirits."

Her eyes lit up and showing no fear of a strange man in a darkened alley, she began pulling at my coat and imploring me to help her poor mother who'd been inconsolable since the girl's grandmother died. I refused until she offered to pay me, just a few pence and the promise of some bread and cheese, but it was enough.

I had no idea what I was doing, but as I followed her to the rooms she shared with her husband and own many children as well as her mother, she spilled so much of the tragedy that by the time I arrived, it was easy enough to pretend to speak with the dead grandmother and give answers only the family could know. A quick sleight of hand to make a half-knitted sock disappear and reappear in the arms of her infant great-grandson was enough to secure their belief. I felt an absolute cad as the sobbing daughter thanked me and pressed coins into my hand, but I had a full belly and money enough to find somewhere warm to sleep. One's morals, I have found, are entirely predicated by one's circumstances. At the time, I literally could not afford to have scruples.

And so, Cairo Malachi, Conduit to the Spirits was born.

After that encounter, word spread. First from commoner to commoner, but finally maids began to whisper my name to their mistresses, and the mistresses to all their friends. I adapted, affecting a persona that was mystic enough to please, but not so foreign as to be unwelcome in a drawing room. I practiced my tricks and kept my ears open for gossip. It is remarkable how common knowledge suddenly becomes profound when spoken by the dead.

Within a few years, I was a minor hit. Not fashionable enough for the patronage of the types of titled names that would attract undue attention, but amongst a certain strata of the merchant class I became known as a reliable intermediary between the living and the dead. All without even once speaking to a real ghost.

Which brings me back to a remarkably fine autumn day, and the handsome constable bleeding to death in my arms.

I hope you enjoyed this super-secret first look at [Cairo Malachi and the Adventure of the Silver Whistle!](#) If this whet your appetite, you can [pre-order the book here](#) and be the very first to read the rest when it comes out on July 22!