

The Blessing Witch

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Three urchins huddled in a group a few feet closer to the body than most of the rest the crowd cared to be. It did stink most dreadfully—worse than the stench from the tanning pits.

Joan Browne wished she had been allowed to remain in her grandmother's cottage, a good quarter of a mile distant from the scene, but when Old Mother Malyn gave an order to her granddaughter, who had also been her apprentice for this last month and more, Joan had no choice but to obey.

"Who's that old crone, then?" one boy asked in what he doubtless supposed was a whisper.

"She's the local herb woman," his friend replied. "She tells the future, too. Reads it in the palm of your hand."

The third lad, who appeared to be a trifle older than the other two, shot them a superior look. "That's no mere figure-flinger. She's a blessing witch. You get spellled and she knows how to break the curse."

Impressed, the first boy looked at Malyn with new respect. But when she glanced over her shoulder to fix him with a hard stare, he turned tail and fled. The younger of his companions followed hard on his heels.

Joan hid her smile. In the fifty or so years that Malyn had lived in Bermondsey, across the Thames from the Tower and just downriver from London Bridge, her reputation had grown to legendary proportions. She was renowned for her ability to heal the sick with

her herbal remedies, but she was also skilled at finding things that were lost or had been stolen. Her charms were much in demand, three in particular—those that ensured safe voyages, those that rekindled love between husband and wife, and those that prevented a person, or his cattle, from being bewitched.

Joan's gaze shifted back to the poor sad corpse of Susan Lambert. In addition to the other means by which Mother Malyn earned her living, she was the village searcher, called in when someone died. It was her job to determine the cause of death. She was paid twopence each time she performed this service. So it was that she'd been sent for when a body was found floating in the Neckinger at low tide.

"Joan, come hither," Old Mother Malyn called.

Steps dragging, the younger woman obeyed.

"What do you see?" Malyn asked.

"A dead body."

"Dead from what cause?"

"Drowning."

"Are you certain?"

"She was found in the water."

The Neckinger was a narrow stream that flowed from the Thames all the way to the precincts of a former abbey now known as Bermondsey House. It filled with fresh water from the river twice a day, making it an ideal location for a tannery, and there had been tanners in Bermondsey for as long as anyone could remember. In the old days before the queen's father dissolved all the religious houses, they'd most often made vellum for the pages in books.

"She was found in the water," Malyn agreed, "but see here." She pointed to one wound on the woman's arm, then a second near her neck. "There is another on the back of her head. How did she come by these?"

"The current must have pushed her into rocks or pilings. Or something else was in the stream and struck her."

Joan had difficulty keeping her eyes off Susan Lambert's face. It was a horrible sight, all color leached away and battered and bitten besides. Fish had nibbled at her. Joan shuddered. If Susan had been in the water much longer, her eyes would have been gone.

Glancing up from the pitiful remains, Malyn caught sight of the oldest of the three boys. After his friends had fled, he'd crept closer.

She pointed a gnarled finger at him. "You. Peter Finchley. Fetch the coroner and the constable."

"The coroner will be here soon," Malyn said to her granddaughter. "He is a local landowner, Lawrence Dunlegh by name. He lives nearby in the house they call The Rosary. The office of coroner has been thrust upon him for a year's duration for, as you know, any upstanding gentlemen in any county may be called upon by the queen to hold this post for that length of time."

"I do know," Joan muttered, trying not to resent Malyn's tendency to treat her like a backward child. There was still much she could learn from the older woman.

"Master Dunlegh accepted that it was his turn, but he has little taste for his duties."

"Nor would I," Joan said.

The lecture continued. "In any case of sudden or unexplained death, after the searcher pronounces her verdict, the coroner is required to view the body and hold an inquest to determine officially how that person died. Master Dunlegh will doubtless recruit some of these men loitering nearby to serve as his jury, but he will rely upon my medical knowledge, having none himself. Now, the petty constable is Fulke Iden—"

"And, like the coroner, a petty constable serves for a year," Joan cut in.

Malyn sent her granddaughter a reproving look.

Joan hid a smile. "Constables spend most of their time collecting taxes, apprehending felons, and executing minor punishments ordered by the magistrates—whippings and sessions in the stocks and the like."

"Apprehending felons *if* they are pointed out to him," Malyn amended, but Joan thought she heard a hint of approval in the old woman's voice.

The two men arrived together, closely followed by the rector of the parish church of St. Olave. Dunlegh blanched when he got his first good look at the corpse.

"Who is she?"

"Susan Lambert." The constable answered before Malyn could. "Wife to one of the local tanners. That's him over there."

Iden jerked his head toward a man who stood a little apart, cap

in hand, staring down at his feet. What little Joan could see of his face showed not a flicker of emotion. It was as if he'd been turned to stone by the shock of his wife's death.

The coroner averted his eyes from the body. "Did she fall in by accident or did she kill herself? That is all I need to know."

"Yes, yes," interrupted the rector. "It is important to be sure. A suicide cannot be buried in holy ground." He, too, studiously ignored the dead parishioner lying at his feet. He held a pomander ball tight against his nose to counteract the smell.

"This is not a case of self murder." Malyn's firm pronouncement left no one in any doubt of her certainty.

"Well, then. An accident. A pity, but God works in—"

"Not so fast." Malyn broke in on the rector without a qualm. His tendency to give long-winded, quote-laced orations at the drop of a hat was well known in the parish. "There is a third possibility. She may have been pushed or thrown into the water. One of the wounds is on the back of her head. It could have killed her. At the least, such a blow would render a person unconscious, making it more likely she would drown."

Constable Iden looked worried. "Murder? Should we send for the justice of the peace?"

Master Dunlegh held up a hand to silence the constable. "A moment, if you please."

Observing, Joan surmised that he had recalled that he was supposed to be in charge. And no doubt he had also remembered that, in a case of murder, the Crown laid claim to the property of the murderer and paid the coroner thirteen shillings and fourpence out of the estate. Coroners received nothing for their pains if they ruled a death an accident or a suicide.

"Mother Malyn," Dunlegh asked, "can you determine whether or not this woman was dead before she went into the water?"

"That I cannot do, but I can tell you three other things." She flourished the stout stick she used to steady her steps when she walked—she suffered from the bone-ache—and proceeded to enumerate them one by one. "First there is this." She opened the dead woman's fingers to reveal that Susan Lambert had died clutching a button.

Iden gasped. "She fought her killer?"

“She may have.” Malyn tucked the button into the pouch she wore suspended from her waist. Then, with Joan’s help, she rolled the body over, displaying the damage to Mistress Lambert’s skull. “She was struck down by vicious blows. Look here at the shape of this wound to the head. Does it put you in mind of anything?”

The coroner and the constable stared at the ugly sight with identical expressions of confusion on their faces.

“Joan?” Malyn prompted.

She swallowed hard, looked closely, and reported what she observed. “The weapon appears to have had two parts, perhaps a handle and a blade?”

Malyn nodded her approval. “You there,” she called to one of the onlookers, a tanner who had been hard at work at his trade before the hue and cry was raised. He still held the tool he had been using at the time. “John Carden. Bring me your unhairing knife.”

The long, curved blade was flanked by two wooden handles. Tanners scraped the sharp edge over a hide to remove the animal’s hair from the surface. Malyn shifted her hold on her staff to take the unhairing knife John Carden held out to her. One end fitted neatly into the gash on Susan Lambert’s head.

“Arrest that man,” Master Dunlegh ordered, pointing at John Carden.

When the constable laid hands on him, the fellow squealed like a stuck pig. “I never killed anyone! It was not my blade that did this!”

“Leave him be.” Malyn barked the order and was instantly obeyed, even before she pounded the ground with her walking stick for emphasis. “John Carden is not the only tanner hereabout, nor is he the only man who possesses a tool like this one.”

And Malyn, Joan thought in reluctant admiration, likely knew every one of them by name.

“Who do you accuse, then?” Dunlegh sounded impatient.

The constable’s jowly face lit up as an idea struck him. “Shall I look for blood on the unhairing knives? There would be stains on the murder weapon.”

“They will have been cleaned off,” Malyn said, not unkindly. She passed Carden’s tool to Joan, who returned it to its owner and was glad to be rid of it.

Carden nodded in mute acknowledgement but his eyes never left

Malyn. Everyone was watching her, anxiously waiting to hear what she would say next.

“There is a third thing I promised to tell you.” Malyn paused just long enough to let expectation build. “It is this: Susan Lambert’s husband is known for his foul temper. He—”

Rough hands shoved Joan aside as Lambert pushed past her. So enraged as to have lost all common sense, he ran at Malyn, bent on stopping her before she could name him as his wife’s killer.

Malyn did not even bother to turn around. Her stout walking stick flew backward, connecting with Lambert’s throat. He fell to the ground, gagging and gasping for breath. Before he had time to recover he was seized by two of the bystanders and hauled to his feet.

“Look!” shouted the lad Malyn had sent for the coroner.

The front of Lambert’s leather jerkin gaped, showing plain as day where a button was missing.

“Arrest that man,” Master Dunlegh ordered, this time choosing the correct culprit. “Send for the justices to arraign him and bind him over for trial.”

The constable was pleased to obey. Commandeering the services of the two men grasping Lambert firmly by his arms, he led the way toward the small building Bermondsey used as a gaol.

Malyn continued her explanation as if she’d never been interrupted by a man intent on silencing her. “He has struck his wife in anger afore now, at least once when he had something in his hands. This time he went too far. She was either dead or dying when he threw her body into the water, thereby hoping to cover up his crime by making it appear that she had drowned.”

Joan waited until they were walking home, out of earshot of anyone else, before she asked her grandmother to explain herself further. “Is there some trick to ferreting out a murderer?” she asked, thinking of the little signs she’d already been taught to look for when telling fortunes.

“None but knowing the people of Bermondsey well, including Susan Lambert and her husband. I have observed them for many years.”

Joan frowned. “Surely the constable knew of Lambert’s temper, too. He should have come to the same conclusion you did. If he had arrested Lambert in a timely manner, the fellow would not have had

the opportunity to strike out at you. Had you not acted so quickly, you could have been badly hurt, or even killed.”

“Fulke Iden is a good lad, but he’s never been known as a deep thinker. He needs to have things pointed out to him.”

The “lad,” Joan thought with a grim smile, had seen at least forty summers. “Still, you could not have seen Lambert coming, even if you suspected he might attack you just as you were about to accuse him. How did you know he was there behind you?”

“I may be old, but my hearing is as sharp as ever it was. I heard the sound of heavy footsteps rushing toward me. Who else but Lambert could it have been?”

“You landed a lucky blow.”

She snorted. “Luck had naught to do with it. I have made it a habit to take notice of how much any man towers over me. I knew the exact place I must aim for.”

Dumbfounded, Joan stopped in the middle of the path. “*Every* man you meet?”

Malyn kept walking. Her voice drifted back, as serene as if she were speaking of what she’d prepare for supper, or the weather, or the price of a bolt of cloth. “It is a sensible precaution, child. One of many such that a woman on her own must learn to take.”

Kathy Lynn Emerson is the author of the Face Down series, set in sixteenth-century England, the Diana Spaulding 1888 Quartet, the Liss MacCrimmon series (w/a Kaitlyn Dunnett), the forthcoming Mistress Jaffrey Mysteries, and *How to Write Killer Historical Mysteries*, winner of the Agatha Award for nonfiction. She lives in Maine with her husband and assorted cats.