

DEATH OF A DANCING MASTER

By M. E. Kemp

Boston, 1693

The young man knocked but no one opened the door to him. Thinking that perhaps his knock was too timid, he balled up his fist and banged. Still there was no response. Evidently the gentleman was too occupied to hear. Perkney said he had an appointment, but the young man assumed Perkney said it in an effort to get rid of him. No matter – the young man felt it his duty to tender an apology for his intemperate words, and apologize he would. He thrust open the door and walked in the long room.

Seeing no one he called out: “Perkney, are you there?” And repeated: “Perkney?” He took two steps forward.

Although the room was one long space, it was divided into three sections, the first space being a small antechamber where Perkney greeted guests. There was a round table to the right, with paper, a quill, an inkpot and a silver tray for calling cards upon it. A narrow chair set next to the table. To his left the wall held hooks for coats and cloaks. Beneath the hooks a small rug covered the floor, with a bootjack for removing muddy footwear. Perkney was quite particular about his guests removing their muddy clogs or boots.

The next section of the room flickered with candles in wall sconces. The candles illuminated wall hangings of bewigged ladies and gentlemen lounging in country gardens. Two gilded armchairs were placed against the wall. Across the room a wooden stool served as a seat for the fiddler, who doubled as Perkney’s servant.

The last section was left in gloom; a bare pine floor where the dancing master gave lessons in sword-play. The young man remembered a pile of foils against the wall but he could not quite make out the stack from his position across the room. Nor could he see the door that led to Perkney’s private rooms. Perhaps Perkney was asleep in there.

The young man called out across the space: “It’s me, Perkney... Jacob Joyliffe! I’ve come back to apologize to you.” His words hung unanswered in the late afternoon air. Joyliffe felt a sense of oppression. Where was the man? He’d left the dancing master for on more than twenty minutes, if that. Perkney hadn’t appeared to be going out; he’d said he had an appointment. Joyliffe assumed the appointment was a lesson of some sort. The man taught fencing as well as ungodly dance.

“Perkney?” Really, this was too much. The man must be avoiding him. Here he’d rushed back because conscience scolded him for his rash words to the dancing master and the man hid from him like a naughty child. He’d hurried back on purpose, in

painful shortness of breath, so that he would not interrupt the man's lessons, even if he could not approve of the man's lesson in lascivious and wanton dance. Court dances! Just because the wicked Louis of France did them, there was no reason for Godly Protestants in New England to mimic the papist king's example.

There was nothing for it but to cross the room and make himself known at the door to Perkney's private rooms. The thought that Perkney might not be asleep there – he might be engaged in wanton behavior – made him wince, but his conscience would not allow him to hesitate. It was his duty to apologize to the dancing master. Joyliffe straightened his shoulders and strode across the space.

“Perkney – Mr. Perkney – it's me, Jacob Joyliffe!” He called out a warning. Frustrated at the lack of response he pounded upon the door. “Perkney, I know you're in there! Wake up, man! I have come to apologize to you!” He waited. Frustrated by the lack of response Joyliffe turned. The dancing master was arrogant, as he had cause to know, but he hadn't thought the man a coward until now. So be it. Joyliffe shook his head. He spotted the stack of fencing foils leaning against a wall by the far corner. There seemed to be a limb sticking out behind the foils. Could Perkney be hiding there? Foolish man – hide from his sins he could not. Hide from the eye of God? Yea, even unto the belly of the whale did not the Lord spy out the sins of Jonah? And he, Jacob Joyliffe, servant of the Lord, was only come to offer Redemption to this sinner. He felt a moment's pang that he had failed to make clear his mission; that was a sorry fault of his own. He'd been swept away by the spate of angry words from the dancing master; he'd answered in kind. Yet his mission was to reason with the man, not to argue with him.

Joyliffe tiptoed over to the corner. A trifle near-sighted, he peered at the stack of foils. Yes, that was a slippered stocking on a well-formed leg sticking out behind the stack.

“Ah, Perkney, no need to be afraid. I've come to apologize for my hasty words. It was very wrong of me to lose my temper and I hope that you will forgive me.” He twisted his upper body around the foils, thin brows in a questioning lift. The man appeared to be sitting in the corner. Peculiar place to hide, Joyliffe thought. Nor did the dancing master scramble to his feet upon his discovery. Joyliffe stepped around the foils.

“Perkney?” Joyliffe screwed up his eyes in an attempt to penetrate the gloom. He leaned forward. A sudden buzzing filled his head. His heart thudded like the pounding of a galloping horse. Francis Perkeny lay slumped against the corner wall, eyes wide and unseeing, jaw dropped in a silent scream, hands clutching at the foil sticking out of his abdomen. Perkney was pinned to the wall like a butterfly in an insect collection.

Joyliffe grabbed the pommel of the slender sword and pulled. The foil slid out like a knife in melted butter; Joyliffe fell back a step in surprise. A great gob of black oozed out of the spot where the foil had penetrated. Joyliffe gazed in horror, unable to turn his head from the sight, unable to move, unable to cry out. His brain was filled with wool, his jaw as frozen as ice, his throat as parched as sand. He wanted to cry out above

all things, to call for help, to move his legs, but he stood as stiff as Lot turned into a pillar of salt. Harvard Divinity College hadn't prepared him for this.

How long he stood there gaping at the horrid sight he did not know. Only when the cries penetrated his brain and strong arms pinioned him was the spell broken.

“Ho! Help! Murder!”

Yes, yes, he thought with fervent gratitude, that's it! Thank you, he prayed in silence to the unknown shouter. Ho! Help! Murder! That's just what his soul longed to cry out, that his poor earthly body refused to utter.

“Ho! Help! Murder!” He stuttered the words all the way to the jail.

Chapter One

How times have changed, I thought. Here am I, Hetty Henry, a mere woman, invited to join in conference with the esteemed young Boston minister, Cotton Mather, and his younger cousin – also a colleague in the ministry – Mister Increase Cotton. (All the Cotton and the Mather men were in the ministry so far as I knew. Cotton Mather was the fruit and fruition of the two family branches, the Cottons and the Mathers.) In prior years I'd had to barge my way in on such conferences. I was related to Cotton Mather by his marriage to my cousin Abigail, but I'm much afraid that Cousin Cotton thinks me a forward female. However, I've proved useful to him on prior occasions.

Creasy, that is Increase Cotton in formal address, knows how to ferret out the guilty secrets of the human soul from his Harvard College divinity training. I have the connections and the fortune to buy information when needed. We make an efficient team, Creasy and I, especially when it comes to the delicate matter of murder.

Cousin Cotton Mather is of a very sensitive nature, you understand. Well, great things were expected of him from his birth and he has yet to live up to them. It's not easy being the progeny of a truly great man like Increase Mather. Uncle Increase happens to be in London at the moment and Cousin Cotton has charge of the largest congregation in all the Colonies. Cousin Cotton suffers from severe bouts of nerves, especially when called upon in his father's place to solve a community problem, and murder is certainly that. The fruit of two honored families bruises easily. That's where Creasy and I come in. We do the work for him. Creasy is more or less duped into doing it because he feels sorry for his cousin. (Creasy and Cotton Mather are first cousins by blood.) I do it because it is my duty. And because it relieves my own cousin, Abigail Mather, of much distress. Abigail believes the sun shines upon her husband's command. When he is in one of his nervous spasms poor Abigail is beside herself with worry, so she sends for me.

The matter upon which we were to be consulted was the death of a dancing master, one Francis Perkney, and for the arrest of a young Reformed minister for the murder. I myself found it difficult to imagine Jacob Joyliffe so much as pinching someone with a pickle fork, much less slicing the dancing master through with a fencing foil. I found the man a pompous prig, given to fawning over the Mathers. To some extent I could understand his admiration for Uncle Increase, who is a great man in our Massachusetts Bay Colony – minister, diplomat and political power. Increase Mather negotiated a new charter for the Bay Colony with two different monarchs; James and William of Orange. He is also president of Harvard College. I held my uncle in great esteem. But you'd think Cotton Mather was a knight in shining armor mounted upon a

snow-white steed to boot, the way Joyliffe toadied up to him. Cotton Mather was a bare thirty years to Joyliffe's twenty. I suppose a decade's difference is ancient to a younger man. I'm glad I'm not quite as old as Cousin Cotton.

As I stepped into the study, Cousin Cotton appeared to be in ill humor rather than in ill health. His handsome face was flushed and his mouth was puffed out like a flounder. His large eyes were dark with liquid mist, which threatened to spill over. My friend Creasy sat sprawled in his chair, his eyes burning like dark coals. It was evident to me that I'd walked into a quarrel.

"Where's Abigail?" I asked, breaking a strained silence. Abigail may be my dearest cousin, with the sweetest nature to boot, but she has a somewhat dim understanding.

Cousin Cotton turned his head to acknowledge my presence. "Murder is not a proper subject for the tender ears of a fair female." His eyes widened as he noted to whom he spoke. Cousin Cotton jumped up from his chair, waving his shapely hand to indicate I should occupy the vacated vessel. "Do forgive me, Cousin Hetty. I forget my manners." He strode over to his desk, slid around it and took his seat there. "This business has me so upset I cannot think with a logical mind!"

I walked over to take the seat offered to me, Cousin Cotton's head following me like a tufted owl. He wore an impressive curled periwig.

"My dear consort will join us with some India tea – it will only be a few moments," he said, his voice civil as treacle. "No doubt the medicinal properties of the tea will soothe our melancholic humors." He glanced rather pointedly at Creasy, who sat slouched in a chair, his long legs sprawled across the floor.

I glanced from one man to the other. Creasy's lips were set in a narrow line. Perhaps I could divert the two men from their argument. "I take it we are here to discover who murdered the dancing master?"

"We know who is the murderer, Cousin Hetty. It's more a matter of preventing the Mather name from being dragged through the mud by this vile creature... this viper... this toad!" In his outburst Cotton Mather's head jerked and the periwig slid askew. He raised both hands to adjust it, taking some care. He went on: "And the good name of all the ministers of Christ in Boston must be protected as well. We are all implicated by this disgrace. Do you know what that monster did?" The red cheeks grew mottled white.

Before I could inquire Cousin Cotton rushed on. "He had the effrontery to drop a pamphlet by the body! My father's pamphlet! By the body!" Flecks of foam gathered at the corner of his mouth. "My father's famed pamphlet, An Arrow Against Profane and Promiscuous Dancing, found next to the body! Now the Mather name is connected to a foul murder! The good Mather name, brought to these shores by my grandfather, the great Richard Mather, and illuminated by his son, my own father, Increase Mather of

Second Church. How dare Joyliffe destroy our good name with his jealousy, the lowly worm! The viper we nourished in our bosoms.... Oh, the words of his mouth were as smooth as butter, yet war was in his heart!” Cousin Cotton threw up his hands in mortification.

“Calm yourself, Cousin.” I looked over at my companion for assistance but he maintained a stubborn silence. “Creasy?” I said, prompting him to speak. He scowled at me.

“I don’t believe Jacob Joyliffe murdered that man.” Creasy sprawled further in his seat.

At my raised brows he went on. ”Just because he found the body doesn’t mean he did the deed. Jacob Joyliffe is innocent of murder. He said he’d argued with Perkney, not that he killed the man. Intemperate words --- that’s what Joyliffe said he had, intemperate words.” Creasy emphasized the latter phrase.

“Yes, well, to stab a man to death is intemperate, dear cousin, and to leave a copy of An Arrow Against Profane and Promiscuous Dancing Drawn from the Quiver of the Minister of Christ in Boston next to the body to justify his act is calumny and libel!” Cousin Cotton leaned over the desk as he argued with Creasy.

Creasy pushed his shoulder back against the chair until he leaned in a perilous angle on two chair legs. “Joyliffe says he returned to Perkney’s rooms to apologize. He was so upset upon finding Perkney’s body that he lost all coherence. Poor Joyliffe was in shock, Cousin.”

“Oh, of course... poor Joyliffe. Standing there with a bloody sword in his hand means nothing, I suppose.” Cotton Mather threw a fiery glance at his cousin.

“It means Joyliffe tried to help the man by pulling that obscene thing out of the man’s guts. I daresay I would have done the same,” Creasy said. “It was a natural reaction.”

“An unnatural act, rather, when the viper put it in there in the first place.” Mather spread his shapely hands upon the desktop. “Did he cry out? Did he call for help? Did he run for the constable? Those are natural reactions, dear cousin, and he did none of them. I am told on excellent authority that he did none of those things. He stood over the victim with the bloody implement in his hands, his victim’s blood dripping all over the floor, and he made no move until he was dragged from the scene of his foul deed. I was told this by none other than Constable Phillymort himself.” Cotton Mather leaned back in triumph.

“That fool, Phillymort!” Creasy spat out the name like a curse. “Phillymort would arrest his own mother if she baked a pie on the Sabbath.”

I felt I should intervene, as a disinterested party. All Boston talked of the death of the dancing master, but I'd been enmeshed in mercantile affairs. Not until I received the note from Cousin Cotton Mather bidding me to his home had I even thought about the murder.

I addressed the red-faced gentleman at the desk. "I trust you have no objection to our making a few discreet inquiries, Cousin Cotton? After all, if we – Creasy and I – discover that someone else had a reason for killing the dancing master, it would help clear the Mather name of any involvement. Not that I think the Mather name is tarnished in any way. Why... how could it be?" I played to my cousin's particular vanity here. "My dear cousin, I know you to be of such a sensitive nature that his matter causes you great grief. I applaud your efforts to keep the name of your forefathers free of blemish and I assure you, your own cousin Creasy and I shall do our utmost to assist you in that endeavor." I filled my voice with sympathy. A little sympathy goes a long way with a man.

Cotton Mather sat back in his chair and groaned aloud. "Ah, Hetty – how sweet is the understanding of a woman's mind! You do know my upset when the family name is concerned."

I nodded, taking care to keep my expression serious. I ignored the face that Creasy made at me, wrinkling up his nose and his eyes in distaste.

Cousin Cotton went on: "There are evil people in this town who would be only too happy to stomp the Mather name in the mud. Great men have enemies, Cousin Hetty, and while I am only a tiny gnat, my father is a giant among men. My little abilities are as a seedling beneath the shade of a mighty oak. Such is Increase Mather of Boston. His good name must be protected from the rabble. Oh, throw me into the mud and let mine enemies trample upon me, dear cousin, I care not! Only save my father's good name, I beseech you!" He sat up straight, clasping his hands to his chest.

How could I deny this appeal? A return of Cotton's bouts of nerves would mean a dreadful time for my gentle cousin Abigail. Mather's fits of weeping prostrate in the dust upset dear Abigail no end, especially since my cousin keeps her home as neat and ordered as a Sunday sermon. There was not one speck of dust to be found upon her floors. She would have to send out for some. Rather than put the sweet soul through such an ordeal, I acquiesced.

I rose from my seat and crossed the room, holding out my hand in fealty. Cotton grabbed it as if he sinking in the quicksand of the bogs. "Cousin Cotton, you may rely upon me – and upon your cousin Creasy, as you well know in your heart. After all, he is named for your father and cares for that name as you do. Come Creasy." I turned to that gentleman. "Let's go to Mister Willard. I understand the accused is under house arrest there?"

“That is all he is at the moment – the accused.” Creasy shot a stern look at Cotton Mather.

Mather ignored his cousin but he blessed me with a Saintly smile. “Yes, dear cousin Hetty, do you go and accost the miscreant. I knew I could count upon you to uphold the family honor.” This was a parting barb directed at Creasy.

I grabbed Creasy’s arm and hauled him out of the door before he could react.