

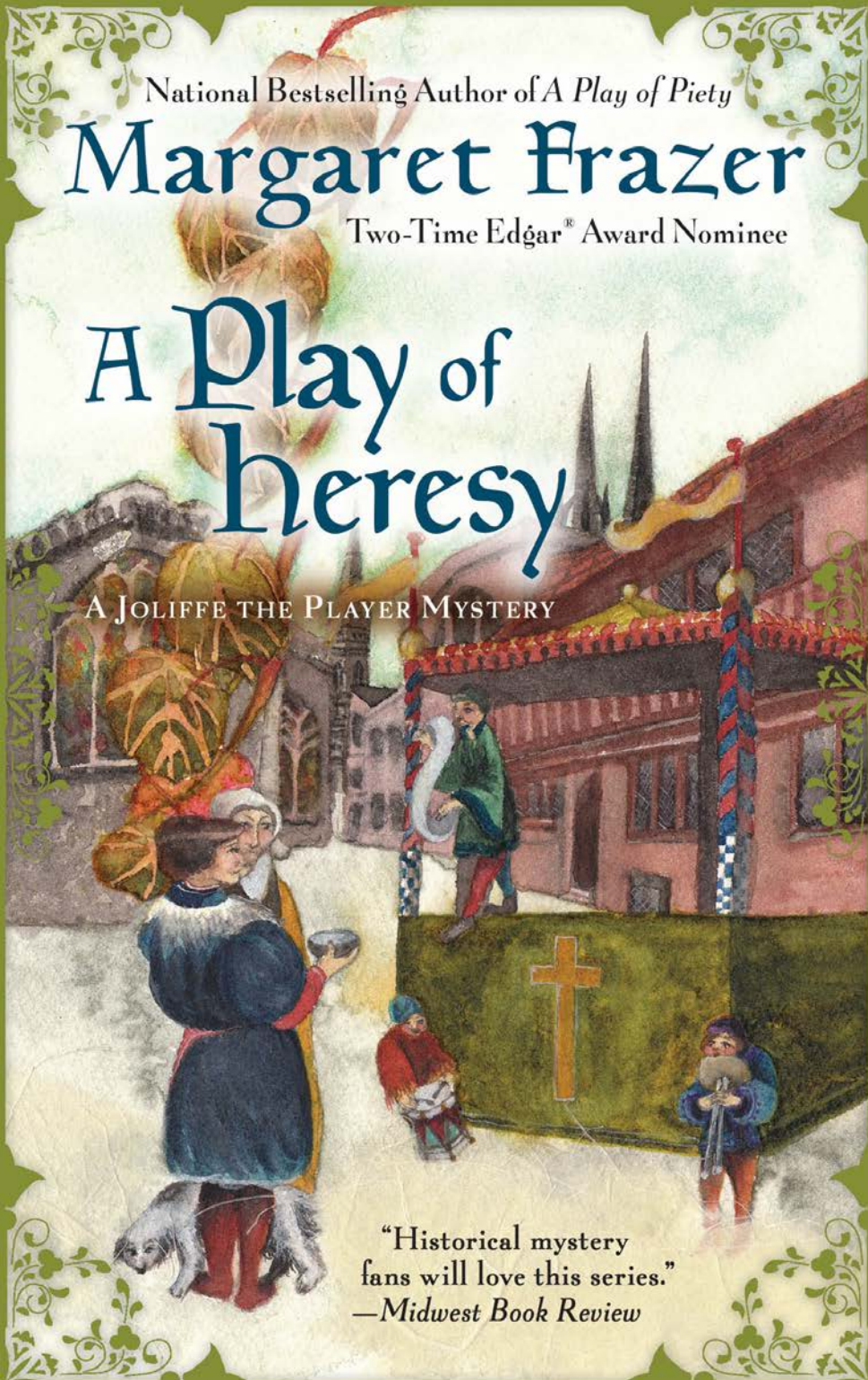
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Margaret Frazer

Two-Time Edgar® Award Nominee

A Play of Heresy

A JOLIFFE THE PLAYER MYSTERY



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A Play of Heresy

CHAPTER ONE

The day was dove-gray, soft under low clouds, with the rain mist-gentle on Joliffe's face and beading silver on his horse's dark mane. His cloak was a long way yet from soaking through nor had he troubled to pull up his hood; the rain felt good against his face. Too, he judged by blue patches of sky showing in the east that clearing weather was on the way and there would likely be sun enough to dry his hair and cloak well before he came to Coventry, especially since he was making no hurry of his going.

After a month of doing much, he was enjoying just now not having to do anything in particular. He would get to Coventry when he got to Coventry. There he would soon be doing much and more, and so was content in this while to be simply riding, with England at peace and in plenty around him. For such as worked the land, these were the year's gentle days. The spring's hard work of plowing and planting was past; the summer's hard work of haying and sheep-shearing yet to come. This year even the weather was kindly, with

sun and rain in their proper proportions and sufficiency, and all the mingled greens of hedges, meadows, trees, and fields were at their fullest, the yellows, blues, and sudden reds of wild-growing summer flowers in the long wayside grasses at their gayest. In the hotter days toward harvest time, the greens would weary, the flowers fade under wayside dust, but for now the world and all were burgeoned new and full of promises.

Some of which promises might even be kept, Joliffe thought. Then, if only briefly, he was ashamed of so unthankful a thought. He had nothing to be unthankful for. Or not much anyway. The bruised ribs were nearly well, and he would be in Coventry before nightfall, with work and his fellow-players waiting for him there, ready to tell him how everything had been going with them these few weeks he had been wandering England's middle counties, seeming a minstrel for the sake of learning things his worship the Cardinal Bishop of Winchester wanted to know. That his skills at singing and the lute were moderate at the best meant he had not greatly prospered as a minstrel. On the other hand, he had learned interesting things enough among the lords and gentry of Warwickshire and other parts to please my lord of Winchester. Please but not satisfy; my lord of Winchester was not a man easily satisfied when it came to knowing things.

That — among other matters — Joliffe had learned these past two years and somewhat more since coming into the bishop's service. Still, for this while he was done with serving the bishop in matters subtle. He had already passed along to someone else what he had learned and in Coventry would need to be simply a player. Or not so simply. There was nothing simple about the dozen and more plays that would be played through the town's streets in a few weeks time. They were played every year at Corpus Christi to show the citizens' great piety and (not at all by chance) to their great profit, because hundreds of outside folk came, both for the holy procession before and the plays themselves. This year

of 1438, the sixteenth of the reign of King Henry VI, would surely be no different, except that this year Thomas Basset's company of players, Joliffe among them, was to be part of it all. To their own great profit, Joliffe trusted.

The horse and he were come to Warwick where his way met and crossed the high road that, southward, went by way of Gloucester to Bristol, while northward it would take him by way of Kenilworth to Coventry. Today not being a market day, there was no more than an ordinary scattering of people going about their business as he rode into the market place around the cross atop a deeply carved tower of pinnacled stone rising from three stone steps. The rain had stopped, and Joliffe thought he would, too, there being a tavern with a fresh ale-bush on the pole above its door. The ale proved to be good, and so was the small meat pie he had with it, but he stayed only for a single bowl of the ale and finished eating the pie as he rode out of town, minded that even though he need not make haste, he did need to keep steadily on to be in Coventry by day's end.

His first certainty that this simple plan was not to going to go so simply came a few miles out of Warwick, at a crossroads where a tall wooden crucifix stood on a single stone step in the middle of the ways. On the step a rat-faced man with straggling hair pushed back of his ears was sitting at his ease, leaned forward with his crossed arms on his knees, a tall staff in the crook of one arm propped against a shoulder. He had all the look of someone who had been walking and was stopped here to rest, but he straightened as Joliffe neared him, and Joliffe, drawing rein a few yards from the cross but not dismounting, said, more surprised than unwelcoming, "Sebastian. What are you doing here?"

"Waiting for you, surely." When he did not choose to curb it, there was a slight Welsh lift to his voice.

"You knew I'd be coming this way and today?" Joliffe said, then caught up to himself. "No. You saw me in Warwick just now."

Sebastian's smile unfortunately tended to be a lifting of the front of his upper lip, increasing his likeness to a rat. It lifted now before he answered, "Aye. But you didn't see me, did you?"

"I didn't."

"That's because you weren't looking. You've been taught better than that."

Given that it was Sebastian who had taught him, yes, Joliffe had been taught better than that. Never come or go from a place without noting everyone and everything there was to see, on the chance that there might be something or someone that ought to be seen, and if you could go unnoted yourself, all the better. Today Joliffe just had not cared, and he let the justified chide go by and instead asked, seeing no sign of pilgrimage on Sebastian's hat or elsewhere to serve for excuse of travel, "So where are you bound that brings you here?"

Sebastian's face fell into lines of grieving worry. "There's my brother ill. I've hope to see him one time more before he dies."

Since Sebastian had a wide array of putative relatives always on the point of death when he needed to be somewhere other than he was and, for one reason or another, a claim of pilgrimage would not suit, Joliffe was unmoved, certain the imagined brother would live to die another day when need be. He was equally certain that Sebastian would not have troubled to meet him here without reason, and dryly and distrustfully, he asked, "Where's your brother dying?"

Sebastian's worry and grief disappeared somewhat more rapidly than a drop of water from a hot griddle. "Coventry. Where you're bound, yes?"

Immediately wary, Joliffe answered with a single nod, then brought himself to add, "Now that I've given over what I've learned these past weeks, I'm rejoining my company for the Corpus Christi plays."

"So there were things to learn," Sebastian said. "What?"

Since Sebastian was his senior and superior in the work

they shared and would likely have report of it anyway, Joliffe answered readily, "With the earl of Warwick gone to France—" By the king's will, not his own, so word ran. "—my lord of Stafford—" Another earl, younger but with ambitions to power "—is doing just what was expected. His people are still smarting and muttering at how Warwick saw to Bermingham getting back his manor from Chetwynd last year and are ready to back any moves Stafford may make toward bettering his power his side of the shire. He'll have to watch himself, though, because if he pushes too far, he'll come up against Lord Ferrers who doesn't look like being behindhand in gaining what he can while my lord of Warwick is out of the way. Neither of them have done much overtly yet, but there's shuffling in plenty going on out of sight. I won't venture a guess how long it will be until it's not out of sight anymore."

Sebastian accepted all that with a nod, showing ready, brooding comprehension. "You're done with that, then. You're made report and you're bound for Coventry now."

"Yes," Joliffe said. "And so are you. Have you been shifted to there?"

"Me? No. I'm still centered in Bristol for this while. I'm only here because someone from Coventry failed his meeting with me in Bristol. I had to finish something there that couldn't wait. Now I'm bound to find out what became of him."

"He found something better to do?"

"He's a mercer. He was to be in Bristol to deal over something that would have turned him a profit if he'd been there when he was supposed to be. No mercer misses a chance for profit without at least sending word why he's delayed."

"Things happen," Joliffe ventured.

"Aye," Sebastian agreed glumly. "With him, though, whatever happened, it happened after he'd left Coventry."

"How do you know he left Coventry?"

"Asked a passer-by, surely. Bristol to Coventry, there's always men back and forth, and mercers always know what

each other are doing. You ought to know that well enough."

Joliffe let the jibe pass. Sebastian knew he knew it well enough. Coventry town was growing richer by the year on its ironworking and the weaving of fine cloth from Cotswold wools. The cloth mostly went southwestward to Bristol whose sea-trade spread down the Atlantic coast to Gascony, Portugal, and Spain. Coventry cloth went. Dried fruits, oil, wax, leather, and other goods came back, to be traded out across the whole middle part of England. The iron for the widely traded ironwork came mostly out of the Forest of Dean beyond Gloucester, then by the same Bristol-Coventry road. All of that meant there was constant travel of mercers and other merchants between Coventry and Bristol. The hearing of Coventry news in Bristol would have been no great trouble for Sebastian, but Joliffe asked, "So who did you ask and what reason did you give for wanting to know?"

"A Coventry mercer's journeyman, come on his own on some business that didn't need his master and grateful for someone willing to show him the ways of Bristol's worser taverns and better flesh-houses."

"And when the evening was well enough along that he likely wouldn't remember what you talked of, you asked him about your man."

Sebastian touched a finger to the tip of his nose, then pointed it at Joliffe. "You have it. The fellow knew Master Kydwa was gone to Bristol but didn't know quite when. I finally made out he must have left Coventry about the time he should have if he meant to meet me in Bristol when he was supposed to. Since he didn't meet me, where is he?"

"Likely he had a servant with him," Joliffe offered. "Maybe the servant robbed and killed him."

"I'd be happy if I could think that were it, but Kydwa wouldn't have enough in the way of money to make him worth his servant killing him."

"A poor mercer?" Joliffe said as if that were a jest.

"It happens," said Sebastian gloomily.

"Maybe he's a bad master and it was for anger, not money, his man killed him."

"I've met with Kydwa twice before this. I'd not say he was a choleric man. His servant, too, had been with him a long while, was an older man, not likely to want to unsettle himself nor take a sudden turn to killing. No." Sebastian's gaze was brooding on the green and quiet countryside. "There's a murdered body out there somewhere, waiting to be found."

"Or two bodies."

"Or two bodies, aye."

"Plain robbery, you think?" Joliffe said. "And the bodies hidden better than robbers usually bother to do?"

"It would be simplest to think so," Sebastian said, plainly not thinking that at all. "But it will be Lollards. I feel it in my bone here." He jabbed a thumb against his doublet at the breast bone underneath. "Lollards sure as anything."

Since with Sebastian it always came to Lollards, Joliffe let that go, saying instead as he gathered up his reins, "I hear horses. I'd best ride on." Since they would do best not to be seen together.

"Right enough." Sebastian stood up, stretching, readying to walk again. "I'll leave Coventry to you for now since you'll be there anyway. Learn what you can about Master Robert Kydwa and what he might have found out that got him killed. He was going to bring me more word about the damned Coventry Lollards. He knew some. Now he's likely dead and it will be them that did it. Take heed on that. I'll seek you out later to hear what you learned." He was walking away as he said that. It was over his shoulder he added, "Stay alive."

The road to Coventry was straight ahead. Sebastian had taken the right hand road, his tread the weary one of a solitary traveler knowing he would get eventually where he was going. Joliffe's glare at his back was wasted and the coming horses sounded only the last bend of the road away, so he nudged his heels into his own horse's flanks, setting it moving again as a fresh shower of rain spattered down.

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The player Joliffe has assumed many roles on the stage to the delight of those he entertains. Now, in the company of a troupe of traveling performers, he finds himself double cast in the roles of sleuth and spy...

In the early summer of 1438, Joliffe and his fellow players have arrived in Coventry for the theatrical festival of Corpus Christi Day. Employed by one of the city's rich and powerful merchant guilds, they plan to present two of the many plays which will extravagantly depict all of God's Story in a parade of pomp and pageantry.

But even as they prepare to perform the Nativity, Joliffe may be called on to play a wise man off the stage as well. When the merchant Master Kydwa goes missing and is presumed dead, the cunning Bishop Beaufort calls on Joliffe's skills as a spy to uncover the mysteries of Coventry's elite. As suspicion falls on his own companions, Joliffe is drawn into the devilish machinations of a secret sect of heretics bent on destroying the Church. The players may be forced to present the harrowing of Hell, but will Joliffe be able to unravel a confession of corruption before Coventry's dark enigmas unleash a medieval massacre of the innocents?

MARGARET FRAZER is the author of 22 historical mystery novels and more than a dozen short stories. Her works have been published on three continents and translated into multiple languages, including French, German, and Thai. She has been twice-nominated for both the prestigious Edgar Award (*The Servant's Tale*, *The Prioress' Tale*) and the Minnesota Book Award (*The Bishop's Tale*, *The Reeve's Tale*). Her short story "Neither Pity, Love Nor Fear" won the Herodotus Award for Best Historical Mystery Short.

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