



A Play of Heresy

Margaret Frazer



BERKLEY PRIME CRIME, NEW YORK





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Table of Contents

[Title Page](#)

[Copyright Page](#)

[Dedication](#)

[Chapter 1](#)

[Chapter 2](#)

[Chapter 3](#)

[Chapter 4](#)

[Chapter 5](#)

[Chapter 6](#)

[Chapter 7](#)

[Chapter 8](#)

[Chapter 9](#)

[Chapter 10](#)

[Chapter 11](#)

[Chapter 12](#)

[Chapter 13](#)

[Chapter 14](#)

[Chapter 15](#)

[Chapter 16](#)

[Chapter 17](#)

[Chapter 18](#)

[Chapter 19](#)

[Chapter 20](#)

[Chapter 21](#)

[Chapter 22](#)

[Chapter 23](#)

[Chapter 24](#)

[Author's Note](#)

[Berkley Prime Crime titles by Margaret Frazer](#)

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Dedicated to Justin and Sarah and Seth and Preeti—
the doers and watchers of theater in my family.

And to Deb Murphy,
who shared in the excitement of watching
the twenty-three pageants
of the Chester Cycle those three days in May.

Chapter 1

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 so 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 marketplace 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 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 way. 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 and 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 more 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 on 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 Birmingham 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 has 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've 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 passerby, 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 why 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.

Chapter 2

He was shortly overtaken by a trotting line of pack-horses, their rope-bound bundles strapped firmly to backs and sides. Their rider at lead did not give him so much as a look, but Joliffe and the rear man shared friendly nods as they passed. The tittopping of hoofs faded, the rain gave up, and for a time Joliffe was alone on the road again, except companioned now by regret at how much of ease was gone from his day. He had been looking forward to being simply a player in Coventry. Now he was supposed to find out what he could about this Master Kydwa. And Lollards.

He did not know why it was always Lollards with Sebastian. The man worried at them like a dog at a bone it hated. Maybe a special charge from Bishop Beaufort had set him on, but Joliffe suspected it was the other way around—that they were Sebastian’s own-chosen foe and Bishop Beaufort simply made use of an itch Sebastian already had. However it was, Sebastian was hell-bent on his quest to find out Lollards and their complots, and that hell-bent sat uneasily with Joliffe. True enough, a goodly number of the wilder ones among them had made trouble hereabouts—seven years ago, was it now?—with an armed uprising. For a few weeks things had been chancy, and afterward there had been some hangings, but so far as Joliffe had ever seen, most Lollards were not out to make open trouble. Yes, they were known to gripe against the Church and the government, but who did not? They claimed they wanted to understand what they were told to believe, which was fair enough on the face of it, but what was their chance of it, given that scholars had been quarreling over how and what to believe for centuries?

From what Joliffe had heard, the core of Lollard gatherings seemed to be someone among them reading aloud from the Bible done out of Latin into English. Then they would sit around telling each other what they thought it meant, sure they could do better at it than priests and scholars. Priests and scholars of course felt otherwise, but still the whole thing might have been no great matter if only there were not some Lollards who thought—convinced as they were of how right they were; after all, *their* name for themselves was “the True Men”—that they must do more than try to argue into the ground anyone who disagreed with them. More than once and not just seven years ago, hotter heads among them had wanted that “into the ground” to be literal, and they had risen in armed rebellion, meaning to put into graves those who refused to agree with them.

Joliffe granted that was a sure way to have the final word in an argument, but he objected to the arrogance that spawned such certainty of the right to kill because of beliefs that could never be proved, only be believed. Lollards called the Communion bread “Christ in a cake” and said there was no proof that the bread and wine changed to the actual body and blood of Christ in the Mass. Some of them had staked their lives and died for their right to refuse that belief. Joliffe, for his part, reckoned whether the bread and wine changed or not was a matter of faith, and without evidence weighted more heavily one way or another by more than pride-filled, quarreling men’s words, he would make no trouble over it himself, thank you. To his mind, either way to take the sacrament of the Eucharist was a blessing and honor and therefore he took it gladly the one time of each year it was allowed to folk at large.

He did wish, though, that he knew why Sebastian had such great and apparently personal quarrel with Lollards.

Church spires let Joliffe see that he was coming to Coventry well before he was in sight of the town.

itself. With smaller places it was their church's tower that almost always showed first, tall above hedgerows and bends in roads. Larger, richer places often had spires atop their churches, and above Coventry two great spires thrust up against an afternoon sky no longer gray but blue and adrift with white fluffs of clouds. There was a third spire halfway built, its present stunted shape against the sky suggesting it might grow to be the tallest of them all but even now declaring with the other two that this was a town whose citizens readily used their wealth to the greater glory of God.

Undoubtedly a wise thing to declare and go on declaring after the mess and scandal of the Lollards seven years ago.

He had to wait outside the towered, stone-built gateway for a broad wain to rumble out over the cobbles, then rode through, into the wide street beyond. Tall, shoulder-to-shoulder houses lined both sides, their upper stories overhanging shops fronted along the street. Signs thrust out over the street from upper floors, well above the heads of riders passing by, telling what the shops had to offer, but Joliffe gave the shops no heed and only looked at signs until he saw the one painted with a rearing red horse that meant he had found the hire-stable where he was to leave the horse he had hired at the other end of his ride. Whatever the sign showed, his own particular mount had never showed even the slightest tendency to rearing, which assuredly suited Joliffe very well. He liked a peaceable horse and hoped, as he slung his bag over his shoulder and gave the gelding a final pat before walking away, that it had been as pleased to have a peaceful rider.

The day being well worn toward suppertime, many of the shops' keepers were swinging up the boards that served for displaying their goods in front of their open shop fronts during the day and as a stout shutter to close them for the night. Not being in need of anything at present except finding his fellows and being done with the day, Joliffe wove his way steadily along the street among a scattering of people homeward bound or on late errands, until he came to the wide meeting between his street and another. Satisfied he was well into the town, he looked around, saw the nearest tavern had a hanging sign of a canvas-wrapped, rope-strapped woolsack crossed by a pair of shears, and guessed that would be as good a place as any to ask his way.

The choice proved sound. In this supper-while before folk would gather in for the evening's drinking, only three men were there. Two were intent over a game of twelve-man morris, its lines and cups carved into a wooden tabletop where the light through the one window fell best. The third was behind the board at the back where piled cups and a pair of pottery pitchers waited for just such a willing customer as Joliffe. Told that one of the pitchers had red wine, the other ale, he took a cup of the wine, had a long, welcome swallow of it, told the tavern man that it was good, which it nearly was, then said, "I'm come to town to join my company of players. It's the guild of shearmen and tailors that's hired them. My reckoning is I'll easiest find them where they're practicing their play. Would you know where the guild's pageant is kept?"

"That'd be in Mill Lane, t'ward t'other end o' town," the tavern man said obligingly.

"Earls Mill Lane," grunted one of the men at the table without looking up.

"Everyone knows which one is which," the tavern man said with the easy good will of someone who would never be lost in his own town and assumed the same for strangers. To Joliffe again he went on, "You'll likely find your folk nearer than that, though. Master Silcok has the keeping of 'em and that's a lot closer than Mill Lane."

Joliffe put on all the brightness of a traveler receiving welcome news. "Master Silcok, is it? Can you tell me the way?"

"Just along Earl Street here." The man nodded toward the tavern's open door. "That's Earl Street. Cross it, go rightward maybe thirty paces, and you're there. You'll know the place. New glass window

two floors up. Big one. Proud as can be of it, Mistress Silcok is, I hear.”

One of the men at the table beside the tavern’s notably unglassed window gave a snort in comment on that. The tavern man said past Joliffe, “Sniff if you want, Tad Faber, but there’s those that work and get, and there’s those that sit about playing twelve-man morris of a good weekday afternoon.”

“Playing it badly, too,” Tad Faber’s companion said.

Tad Faber snorted again in answer to that and bent closer over the board.

Joliffe thanked the tavern man, finished the wine, picked up his bag from the rush-strewn floor—the rushes were due for a change, he thought—and went out. Earl Street was as wide and paved as the street by which he had come into town, the houses along it finer by what he could see of them in the gathering shadows under the day’s last long slant of sunlight over the rooftops. He had no trouble telling the Silcoks’ house among them, though. The new window was indeed a big one as windows went, wide across the housefront so that for much of most sunny days its many small diamond-shaped panes would glitter toward the street for the impressing of passersby and neighbors while giving equal pleasure to the owner by flooding the room beyond with light.

Now, though, with the summer sun setting so far to the north, it was in shadow, and anyway Joliffe’s greater interest was toward the gateway at one side of the house. The gate was standing partly open, not yet closed and barred for the night, letting him see into the narrow, paved yard beyond it, running the length of the house, back from the street to another, shut gateway at the far end. Better yet, he saw, crammed into one far corner of the yard, the players’ cart with its familiar red and yellow canvas tilt. Where their cart was the rest of the company must be, and with a heaved sigh of satisfaction, Joliffe went into the yard. An immediate welcoming cry of “Hai!” greeted him as Piers sprang up from a bench beside probably the kitchen door not far from where the cart stood. “Joliffe’s here!” he shouted.

On the chance his shout had not been heard, he leaned into the doorway and called again, “Joliffe’s here!” then pulled back, turned around, and said at Joliffe, “About time, too.”

“If I’d known you were waiting so hard, I’d have taken longer,” Joliffe returned, crossing the yard toward him, adding accusingly, “Are you taller than a month ago?”

“Grandda says it’s him shrinking, not me growing, but it’s not. It’s me growing. Mam says so.”

“No need to be so proud on it.” Joliffe gave the boy a friendly punch on one shoulder as they met. “It’s hardly your own doing.”

“Ellis says they’re feeding me too well and should starve me a bit.”

“I’ve been saying that for years.”

They were a company of six—or were when Joliffe was with them. Thomas Basset was their leader. Joliffe, Ellis, and Gil shared the playing with him, and his grandson Piers had up to now been useful. demon-imps and sweet-faced small angels and whatever else his size made suitable, while his mother Basset’s daughter Rose, had the often thankless task of seeing to their playing garb and feeding them all. Over the years they had been through good times and bad times together and were now again in good times, ever since Lord Lovell had become their patron and given them the protection of his name a few years past. Not quite so much to the good, perhaps, had been his putting Joliffe into the way of Bishop Beaufort of Winchester with word of Joliffe’s skill at finding out things. The bishop was powerful and wealthy, uncle to the king and a rival for high place among other great lords around the royal court. Lord Lovell wanted no open part in those rivalries but was as aware as lowly players were of the use of having a powerful patron. Joliffe had been something like his gift to Bishop Beaufort for the sake of having the bishop’s favor in his turn.

Not that Joliffe had minded. He had been given a choice and he had taken it, and for the most part

he enjoyed the new skills he had been taught and the tasks he had been set. Besides, it meant that now the players had another patron, albeit one whose favor was hidden from view. What mattered were the coins that came in return for Joliffe sometimes having to go away about the bishop's business, as he had been gone this past month. But he was back now and glad of it as Basset came through the doorway into the yard, broadly smiling, reaching to clasp the hand Joliffe put out to him, at the same time sweeping a look down Joliffe's length as if to be sure he was all there and well.

Basset, as master of the company, had a somewhat better knowing than the others of what Joliffe did when he was away. He therefore worried somewhat more but rarely asked questions and assuredly had no chance for any now as Gil, Rose, and Ellis joined them with a mixture of welcomings and, from Ellis, "About time you showed your face."

"Not to mention the rest of me," Joliffe said. "How goes it with all of you? Except someone's been careless—there's assuredly more of Piers than there was a few weeks ago."

Rose looked at her son with the mingled affection and irk that Piers so often raised in those around him and said, "I've had to sew longer ties on his hosen."

"What I need is a new pair," Piers complained.

"Not until we're sure you're done spurting upward for a while," Ellis growled.

Enwrapped in the glad familiarity of them all, Joliffe laughed, threw an arm over Gil's shoulders, and said, "As the one closest to whole-witted here, *you* tell me how it's been going."

They all told him, of course, while taking him along the yard, past their cart to the yard's far corner and up wooden stairs to a room that—whatever its usual use might have been—was presently half given over to a long table piled with various cloths and scattered with scissors and pipes of thread and a small cushion stuck full of pins, and set about with stools. Out of the way of all the sewing that clearly went on there, the rest of the room looked to be given over to the players, with their bedding and pallets rolled and stacked atop familiar wicker hampers against the wall. Joliffe, having already gathered some things out of the happy talk around him, said, "So this is Rose's domain here."

"It is indeed," Basset said.

"Mine and Mistress Silcok's," Rose said, a little edged.

"You have her well in hand," Basset assured her and added for Joliffe, "Her husband is high among the tailors. She thought that gave her the right to be the same here."

"She's quite skilled at the sewing," Rose said, fair as always.

"But *you* know what will work best for players," Ellis said. He reached out an arm around her waist to bring her close to his side so he could bend and plant a kiss on her forehead. "For which we thank you."

Rose smiled up at him. Her husband had disappeared while Piers was a baby and never been heard of since. That meant there could be no marriage between her and Ellis, and for years she had resisted there being anything else. Those had been hard years for both her and Ellis and occasionally for everyone around them, but at last their care for each other had won out over the strictures of the Church: in every good way but law they were wed now, and everyone was the far happier for it.

Joliffe lifted the folds of a scarlet cloth at the near end of the table and was surprised by its weight and fineness. With open surprise, he said, "*This* is to be for the play?"

"For Herod," Basset said. He had taken one of the players' floor cushions from their pile beside the hamper and was easing himself down onto it where he could lean back against a wall.

"And the blue, the green, and the saffron yellow here are for the Three Kings," said Gil, going farther along the table where apparently partly finished robes were folded. With a wide smile, he laid a hand on the yellow and added, "This will be Ellis', so no matter what he says, he's happy enough

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