

A Play of Isaac

Margaret Frazer



BERKLEY PRIME CRIME, NEW YORK

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A PLAY OF ISAAC

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For Don Wooten and the Genesis Guild, without whom, none.

Chapter 1

The summer day that had promised so fair at its beginning with a primrose sky banded by cream-colored clouds above the sunrise had kept its promise through to a warm, clear afternoon this June day in the year of Our Lord's grace 1434. The good citizens—and others—of Oxford had come out from their dinners after Trinity Sunday Mass ready for sport of some kind, and for those who wanted something less bloody than the bear-baiting on Gloucester Green or less brutal than the half-barrel-boating fight on the Isis beyond Greyfriars, the company of players had been more than ready to oblige them with *The Steward and the Devil* in the innyard of the Arrow and Hind.

All in all, the play had gone out of the ordinary well, the innyard both crowded full of folk and full of laughter at it, and at its end Master Norton—the innkeeper and sharp as his kind proverbially were—had had his imposing bulk and two of his servants waiting at both the yard's gateway and the tavern door with baskets out-held to collect the audience's gratitude in coin on their way out.

Thomas Basset, playmaster and equally sharp, as *his* kind had to be, had thrown his Old Woman's wimple, veil, and gown into a heap on the nearest basket in the changing room and been at the gateway on the last of the audience's heels, to help Master Norton with the counting out of what they'd taken in, lest temptation and sticking fingers make problems where there need not be. Left behind, the rest of the players—all three of them—were undressing more slowly, seen to by Rose who had no part in their acting but tended to nearly everything else that needed doing to keep their company together. Just now she was sighing at Piers—her son and the small demon who had come leaping and chortling onto the stage at the play's end to join the Devil in harrowing the Steward's soul off to Hell—as she helped him off with his tail and horns, telling him, “You've ripped your tunic out under both arms again and I don't see how I'm going to mend it this time.”

Joliffe, unbuttoning his doublet with care to lose none of the buttons, said, “I told you we should stop feeding him. If he isn't fed, he won't grow, and we'd save not only the cost of the food but the cost of having to re-clothe him all the time.”

“It's you we shouldn't bother feeding,” Ellis said from the depths of the fine linen shirt he was pulling off over his head. As the Steward, he had been garbed in their best-seeming shirt (at least the parts that showed were holeless) and doublet (the mended rend that had brought its first owner to sell it cheap did not much show so long as its wearer never fully turned his back to the lookers-on) and gaudy-dyed long-pointed leather shoes (never worn an instant longer than necessary once off stage, to keep them unworn out). Emerging from the shirt, bare to his waist and hosen, his dark hair as near to on end as its curls would allow, Ellis grinned at Joliffe and added, “Think of how little we'd have to listen to you if you didn't have the strength to talk.”

“Just feed me a crust before we have to perform, to see me through, and leave me to starve the rest of the time?” Joliffe suggested.

“The thought has possibilities.”

Joliffe laughed. Given the chance, he and Ellis could jibe at each other by the hour, but they had all had a hard push to reach Oxford by last night after the cart decided to crack a wheel outside of Witney. Then they had spent the morning putting up the scaffold and stagecloth in the innyard and crying their performance through Oxford before doing the play itself so for just now jibing at Ellis was too much effort and Joliffe let it go, laying his folded doublet aside for Rose to put away, because she'd snap at him if he tried to do it himself. As the Devil, he'd worn the company's high-necked, hip-short scarlet doublet, hardly long enough to keep the coiled tail hidden until the play's end, and a high black hat that concealed his devil's horns wire-held to his head and unseen until he whipped off the hat when he claimed the Steward's soul for his own at the play's end. The shirt worn under it all was his own, and stripped down to that and his own hosen and shoes, he was done undressing and sat down on the closed lid of one of the sturdy-woven wicker baskets while he coiled the devil's tail back into its bag.

He was tying the bag closed and yawning, wondering what his chance of a nap was—there was still the scaffold and stagecloth to take down—when someone shadowed the doorway to the innyard. He and Ellis, Rose and Piers stopped what they were doing and looked toward it on the instant, ready to be alarmed, because if Basset were back this soon it meant the day's take had been too small to need much counting and that would be very much to the bad—they hoped for today's coins to see them through to Thursday's Corpus Christi play so they could save up whatever they made between now and then to see them out of Oxford and on their way to wherever next they played. That would let them keep their Corpus Christi payment from St. Michael's church as cushion against whatever ill-paid stretches were sure to come later. Since last winter's stretch of bad luck that had stranded them for a time in remote St. Frideswide's nunnery where only a nun's help—Dame Frevisse still figured in Rose's prayers—had saved them from worse trouble, they had been living on a thinner edge of flat-out poverty than usual. A good take today would make the coming months more sure than the past half-year had been.

But it wasn't Basset in the doorway. It was the next most worrying thing, a man saying excitedly, "I've found you!" And adding over his shoulder to someone else, "They're here!"

Because too often someone looking for them meant trouble of one kind or another, Joliffe laid aside the bag and stood up, while Ellis moved to join him, and Rose pushed Piers to behind the heavy wicker baskets that held most of what they owned while shifting herself to where she could lay hands to both men's belts with their daggers, to hand them over if need be. But by then Joliffe had taken clear look at the stocky, undergrown, widely smiling man in the doorway and somewhat eased out of his readiness for trouble. He had rarely seen one of that fellow's kind grown to man-size because they mostly died young, but there was no mistaking their soft-fleshed, slant-eyed faces. Eden-children they were sometimes called, and children they stayed in most ways, no matter how long they lived, and there was rarely any harm in them. Whyever this fellow was glad to have found them, it was unlikely to be for trouble. The question was where were his keepers, since it took only a glance to see he was no stray, not someone's cast-off left to wander at will with the hope he'd not come home.

From his rolled-brimmed cap to his square-cropped hair to his fine-made doublet and hosen to his low-cut, fashionable shoes, he was well dressed and well-kept and must belong to someone.

As Joliffe wondered whose he was, two men appeared behind him from the yard, one of them saying, more amused than angry, "Lewis, what do you think you're doing, going off like that?"

The Eden-child turned to him and declared triumphantly, "I found them, Richard. Simon, I found them!"

Both men were as well dressed as the Eden-child and both were young, one of them probably barely twenty, the other somewhat the oldest of all three of them and carrying himself with the easy confidence of wealth and settled living as he said, a little laughing, "We see you did. But have you thought to ask if they wanted to be found?"

Lewis took a moment to think that through, then, stricken, looked back to the players to ask, faint with sudden uncertainty, "I did it wrong?"

Ellis instantly made a flourished bow to him and answered as formally as if to an Oxford burgess, "No wrong at all. You've done us honor, good sir, both in the seeking and the finding."

Lewis's round face blossomed into delight again. "I did it right? I can stay? Richard, Simon, I can stay!"

"That's not quite what he said," the younger of the two men began. "He. . . ."

"But I can, can't I?" Lewis asked of Ellis, eager as a puppy.

Probably mindful of Basset's saying, "Never turn away smiling men who look to have money," Ellis said over Lewis's shoulder to the older man, "He's welcome to a visit, if that suits you, my masters?"

"If it's not a trouble to you," the man said with equal courtesy.

"Our pleasure."

Lewis pointed at Joliffe. "You were the Devil!"

"He usually is," Ellis muttered without moving his lips and too low for anyone but Joliffe to hear.

Ignoring him, Joliffe swept Lewis a low bow in his turn. "Indeed, good sir, you have it right. I played the Devil."

Lewis laughed, pleased with himself, and pointed at Ellis. "You were the Steward!" A quick frown of concern furrowed his soft brow. "The devils didn't hurt you really, did they?"

"You can see he isn't hurt," the younger man said a little impatiently. "What they do is only pretense. It isn't real. I've told you."

"I know," Lewis said, impatient back at him but a little uncertain all the same.

A woman hovered into sight behind the men, well-dressed, too, as well as wimpled and veiled several layers deep in beautifully pressed, whitely starched light lawn. With an uncertain look at the players but claiming her place in things, she laid a hand on the older man's arm, claiming him, too, as she said, "Lewy loves plays, doesn't he,

Richard?”

Joliffe immediately judged she was his wife and that they all were a tidy little family group—two brothers, probably, and the wife of the elder, with somehow an idiot in tow. Another brother?

Lewis was saying happily, “Plays and plays and plays.

It’s almost Corpus Christi and there’ll be plays and plays and more plays.”

Piers, never one to keep out of anything for long unless he were forcibly stopped, made a small leap onto the sturdy-lidded basket nearest Lewis, struck a pose, and said, “We know! We’re to play the third play. The one at St. Michael’s Northgate. *Isaac and Abraham*. . . .”

“*Abraham and Isaac*,” Ellis corrected.

“. . . and I’m Isaac,” Piers went on, uncorrected. He and Ellis often differed on their views of the world and, presently, particularly on the name of the play they had been hired to do for Oxford town’s Corpus Christi plays. To Piers’s mind, if he was playing Isaac then Isaac had to be the more important. “I even cry when my father is going to kill me,” he said proudly.

“He kills you?” Lewis breathed, looking awed at Ellis.

Ellis was too often mistaken for Pier’s father for Piers to care; he went on, heedless of it, “My father in the play. Abraham. No, he doesn’t kill me. The angel stops him, remember. That’ll be Joliffe.”

“But aren’t you afraid he might kill you?” Lewis insisted, wide-eyed.

“No,” Piers said with bold scorn and friendliness. “The sword we use wouldn’t cut hot butter. I’ll show you.” Quickly, the way he did almost everything, he slipped off the far side of the basket and had it open and Lewis was come to join him before anyone could gainsay them.

The woman with her hand still on her husband’s arm said in embarrassed despair, “Oh, Lewy!” while her husband said to Ellis, “I’m sorry. He’s like that about things. Simon, can’t you . . . ?”

The younger man was already going toward Lewis and Piers as if taking responsibility for Lewis were a long accustomed thing for him, while Rose came forward, saying with a smile, “It’s no matter, sir. He’s welcome to see. But, Piers, if you mess things about, you’ll spend the afternoon straightening them.”

“I won’t,” Piers said in the voice of one forever much put upon by others.

Lewis echoed, “We won’t,” sounding so much like him that over their heads Rose and Simon unexpectedly widely smiled at each other with much the same depth of affection.

But beside her husband the woman was saying, “We really should have brought Matthew. He’s the only one who manages Lewy well, he really is. Richard, shouldn’t we be going home?”

Simon looked to Richard who slightly nodded agreement to his wife’s insistence. Unhurriedly but firmly, Simon set to extricating Lewis and Piers from each other’s

company and the depths of the basket with a casual hand on Lewis's shoulder and, "We must needs go now, Lewis. You heard Geva and Richard. We have to go home. The players have things to do. We have to go."

Lewis surfaced from behind the propped up lid. "Do we, Simon? I don't want to."

"We do," Simon said gently, firmly.

Great grief shimmered dark into Lewis's odd-formed eyes, but even as he protested, "I don't want to go," he was moving to follow Simon, probably too used to doing what he was told to do to make real trouble over it. Then suddenly delight as utter as his grief had been bloomed across his face. He stopped where he was between the baskets and said, "They can come, too! They can come and do plays for me!"

Geva cried with instant and complete dismay, "Oh, Lewy, *no!*", while her husband said more moderately, "I don't think so, Lewis."

Only Simon kept countenance, saying calmly, "Lewis, the players can't come with us. They have things to do."

"They can do things with me. Where I am," Lewis insisted.

"We don't have any place for them to stay," Simon insisted back patiently.

"Or time for them," Richard said, not quite so patiently. "Not with everyone who's coming and everything that has to be done this week. Nobody is going to have time or place for players on our hands."

"I have time. I have place," Lewis insisted. "There's lots of places."

What Simon would have said to that, Richard cut off with, "There aren't places. Everywhere is going to be full in a few days. Now come on. We're expected home. We've been here long enough."

"I want them!" Lewis said. He crossed his arms over his chest and dropped solid-rumped to the floor, defying anyone to change his mind or make him move.

Simon made a small gesture at Richard and Geva to stay quiet and sat down on his heels to come eye-to-eye with Lewis. Lewis looked scowlingly at him, but Simon said slowly, calmly, "Lewis, we have to go home now and the players can't come with us. It's no good worrying at them and no good worrying at us. They have other things to do. They can't," firmly, "come with us."

Intent on the dealing with Lewis, Joliffe had not noticed Basset come back from his dealings with Master Norton, but from the doorway he said now in the mellow, warm, commanding voice he used when he played God, a prophet, an apostle, or a saint in a kindly humour, "Not necessarily so, my good lord. Not necessarily so at all."

He must have been listening long enough to know something of what was toward, and with everyone now looking at him, he finished his entrance like the practiced player that he was, bowed first to Richard's wife, then to Richard, and finally to Lewis and Simon. In his younger days a strong-built man, Basset was, with years and gray hair, gone somewhat to bulk but carried his years well when he chose, and now, at his top of dignity, turned all his heed to Richard with yet another bow, deeper than the first, and said, "If there's some way we could oblige the young lord, we'll be more than merely glad to do so, sir."

Half-wit he might be but Lewis knew an ally when he heard one and scrambled to his feet so fast he nearly over-set Simon who rose somewhat more slowly and with a shading of . . . relief, Joliffe thought. At the same time he wondered at what Basset was aiming. Lewis, not bothered with any wondering, said, simply happy, "They can come! They can come!"

"That's not what he said, Lewis," said Richard, whose rapidly shifting expressions betrayed he was looking for his best way out of the tangle in which he suddenly found himself. He took the shortest one by saying to Basset, "What do you mean?"

If it had been to a cue written in a play, Basset's answer could not have come more pat. "Why, simply, that we're not tied to anything or anywhere these few days from now to Corpus Christi. If it would make the young lord happy . . ."

"Master Fairfield," Richard said. "His name is Master Fairfield. Not 'lord'."

"Lord, Lord," Lewis bumbled happily.

". . . Master Fairfield," Basset smoothly amended. He had taught Joliffe early on that you never went wrong giving someone a title higher than was actually their own. They would correct you, but they would remember the pleasure you had given them. "If having us to hand would please him for that while, we could make do with anywhere given us to stay. A corner of a stable. A loft somewhere?"

"Loft, lost, loft," Lewis said, close to singing now.

"It isn't . . ." Richard began.

But Simon moved away from Lewis to Richard, taking him by the arm and turning him aside to say, low-voiced, "Listen a moment. You know as well as I do what it's worth to tell Lewis he can't have a thing he's set to. If he thinks we're giving in, he'll come home with us, and when it comes out he's not having what he wants, he'll throw his fit there instead of here with everyone to see him." Simon suddenly smiled. "Besides, there's always the chance your father will say they can stay and then there'll be no need for tempers lost at all."

Except perhaps by Geva who said, "We can't troop through the streets with a band of players at our heels. I won't!"

She sounded as ready to make trouble over having her own way as Lewis was, but Basset, putting something of her own dismay into his voice, instantly agreed, "Assuredly not, my good lady. But if I came and . . ." He threw a quick look past Ellis in his shirt and hosen and bare feet to Joliffe, marginally more dressed with shoes already on and his workaday brown doublet in his hand. ". . . and Master Southwell with me, we can talk to whomever the decision lies with or . . ." He dropped his voice and leaned a little forward, conspirator-wise. ". . . at least have Master Fairfield home without trouble. You see what I mean."

She saw, and her struggle between choosing to go through the streets with a wailing Lewis or with two men who, after all, *looked* presentable enough, despite what they were, was both visible to Joliffe and brief before she said, taking hold of her husband's arm again, "Yes. That would do. Yes, let's do that. Simon, would you make him come now?"

Simon turned back to Lewis, quiet now that things seemed to be going his way. Joliffe flung on his doublet, and Basset turned to Rose who briskly smoothed his hair, centered his belt buckle, handed him his hat, and when he had put it on, nodded he was fit to be seen. She was his daughter and Piers his grandson but she saw to them both with an almost identical and frequently aggravated affection. Now, for good measure, she also ran a quick eye over Joliffe to be sure of him, which he acknowledged with a twitch of a grin at the corners of his mouth, knowing that to Rose he and Piers were much of an age and often of like trouble.

With the dignity he kept despite how much the world at large sought to take it from him, Basset faced Richard again. "We're ready when you are, Master Fairfield."

"Penteney," Richard corrected. "I'm Master Richard Penteney. Master Fairfield and his brother Master Simon are my father's wards."

Which went some way to straightening how matters stood—but not to explaining the mingled glint of wariness and question that crossed Basset's face, there and quickly gone and probably undiscernable to anyone who didn't know his face as well as Joliffe did. Besides that, Joliffe knew, too, how well Basset could keep hidden behind his face what he wanted to keep hidden. What had disconcerted him that much in the little that Master Richard Penteney had said?

There was time only to wonder at it in passing. Lewis, persuaded by Simon that at least some of the players were coming with them and the rest would follow, was eager to go; but after taking Simon's hand he turned back to say at Joliffe again, "You were the Devil."

Joliffe admitted that with a slight bow. "I was, indeed."

"I liked you."

"You were supposed to," Joliffe said, answering Lewis's grin with his own.

"Lewy, come on," Mistress Geva ordered from ahead, already away into the innyard on her husband's arm. "Be a good boy."

"Good boy, good boy," Lewis repeated under his breath, as if the words tasted bad, but Joliffe patted his shoulder and said, "Go ahead. We'll be with you," and Lewis went away with Simon, leaving Joliffe and Basset to follow in their wake as they left the innyard.

Joliffe took the chance to shift near enough to Basset to say, private under the general talk of passers-by around them, "What are you about? You really think they'll have us to stay? Or are you just being obliging, helping them take their idiot home?"

"Obliging, to be sure, my lad, and at the worst likely to have a few pence for our trouble. Then again, this is a very well-kept idiot. If they indulge him this far, they're likely to indulge him farther, maybe even to keeping us these few days to keep him happy."

"And if they do," Joliffe said, catching up to Basset's thought, "we won't have to pay for lodging and maybe not for food the while." And so save what they'd made today and be that much ahead, along with whatever else they might make in the streets in the three days between now and Corpus Christi.

Basset laid a comfortable hand over the pouch hung from his belt. “A little trouble and a large profit is how it looks to me.”

“How was the take today?” One of the two constant questions that rode with any company of players. First there was: Would they find an audience? Then: If they did, would they collect enough coins at the end of their playing to pay for the next meal and to see them to the next town?

“Today’s take?” Basset said with satisfaction so thick it could have been laid on with a trowel. “It was good enough that even Master Norton didn’t growl too deeply over his share of it.”

So even if this possibility with the idiot didn’t go through, they would still be comfortably off for a while to come, and a while was all, even at best, they could ever count on. It went with being a player, especially one with no noble patron to fall back to for protection from such troubles as the world—or, to be more precise, as mankind—might choose to visit on them. Comfortable “for a while” was boon indeed, and added to a warm, bright summer’s day, a well-performed play behind him, and almost a week’s sure work ahead of him, Joliffe enjoyed the easy walk along Northgate Street with its narrow shops rowed in front of tall, narrow-fronted houses crowded wall to wall, and out through North Gate into broader St. Giles beyond the town walls.

The houses were larger here, for richer folk who wanted out of the town’s crowding, but the people in the street were the same, a mixed crowd of townspeople and students out to enjoy the good Sunday weather. Ahead, the Penteneys and Simon and Lewis turned leftward through a stone gateway arch leading through a building that ran blank-walled along the street but above was timber-built, with windows looking out. Joliffe and Basset followed through the gateway’s passage into a cobbled yard that was wider and longer than the inn’s. The far end was closed off by a plain gateway and a large barn, while along one side were what looked to be stables and a cattle byre, and across the yard from them a house that lived up to the rich look of all the rest. Stone-built below, its two upper stories rose in timber and plaster work, with glass in every window and in the midst of it all the steep-pitched roof of a great hall, with a square stone porch for entrance from the yard.

Joliffe whistled almost silently with admiration and said for only Basset to hear, “If this goes our way, we’ve fallen in clover this time.”

Basset didn’t answer, probably because the Penteneys and Lewis had gone inside but Simon Fairfield had turned back at the porch, waiting, saying when Basset and Joliffe came up to him, “Master Richard has gone to tell his father what’s toward and see if he’ll see you.”

Basset bowed his acceptance of that and they were left with a pause that usually Basset would have filled with easy talk to make the waiting time pass less awkwardly. Instead, having taken off his hat when Simon turned to speak to them, he stood turning it slowly and steadily in his hands, looking downward as if in thought. Simon Fairfield, for his part, was equally, awkwardly silent, frowning aside into space with the look of someone trying to find something to say. Joliffe, too used to being kept waiting by his “betters” to be uneasy about it but unsettled by Basset’s silence and a little sorry for Simon, said, “Your brother seems a good-hearted fellow.”

Simon smiled with both affection and rue. “He is. He’s small of wit but very good of heart.”

“He was born so?”

“Born so, yes.”

And was the elder, since he was Master Fairfield and also—at a safe guess—was heir to something sufficient to make it worth Master Penteney’s while to have him in ward and keep him well. The oddness lay in the fact that usually an heir like Lewis would have been long since put aside in favor of a brother as well in mind and body as Simon apparently was. Joliffe was curious about that but manners meant he should not ask more and another pause began, this time ended by Simon asking, obviously grabbing at something to say, “You’ve been in Oxford long?”

“Only since yesterday. This time,” Joliffe answered when Basset did not.

“You’ve been here before?”

“Most years we’re here around Christmastide, usually through Twelfth Night. Sometimes we come again in spring or summer, depending.”

“On what?”

“On how the world is going.”

“Ah,” Simon said vaguely.

“You see, there’s good years for players to be on the road and bad years,” Joliffe explained. “The bad years, like these last few have been with the poor harvests, when there’s not much money and not much food to spare, folk may welcome us but they don’t have much to give and, alas, we need to eat, like anyone else. So we have to circle wider, farther, to more villages and towns, to make as much as we’d otherwise hope to make in fewer places.”

And a footsore, wearisome business it was. They had a cart and a horse: Tisbe served to pull the cart, the cart served to carry the necessities of their work and lives, neither served to carry any of them. Where they went, they walked, and while their usual route took them a long enough way, along the Chilterns and around through Berkshire and into Gloucestershire and up so far as Warwick-shire, these last two years they’d had to go as far eastward as Hertford and as far north as Nottingham in their quest to keep flesh on their bones.

“Ah,” Master Simon said again, this time with open interest. “Have you ever been as far as London?”

Basset finally roused to an actual answer, saying with something of his seemingly forthright way, “Alas, no, sir. Our company, fine as it is, is too small to venture there just yet.”

Master Simon looked ready to ask or say more, but a servant came to the door and while giving both Basset and Joliffe a sidewise look said, “Master Penteney says he’ll see them, please you, Master Simon. He’s in his study-chamber. Would you have me take them there?”

“I’ll see them to him,” Simon answered, and added to Basset with a smile, “I