

The
Apostate's
Tale

MARGARET FRAZER



BERKLEY PRIME CRIME, NEW YORK

The Apostate's Tale

Dame Frevisse Medieval Mysteries by Margaret Frazer

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*For Cindy,
with love, admiration, and gratitude*

...for ye han falle in freletee,
And knowen wel ynough the olde daunce,
And han forsaken fully swich meschaunce
For everemo...

—GEOFFREY CHAUCER
The Physician's Tale

The Apostate's Tale

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Chapter 1

As they rode under the gateway's broad arch, the horses' hoofs were suddenly loud on the cobbles and the rain briefly ceased to batter at Cecely's cloaked shoulders and head. Her dearest wish had been never to see this place any more, never to be here ever again, but now no matter that the rain-grayed walls under the dismal, drizzling sky looked even more a grim prison's than she remembered them, she was as thankful to be finally here as she had ever been for anything.

Ahead of her, Dame Perpetua said at the backs of the two men leading them, "We'll ride straight on to the cloister door, not to the guesthall at all," and one of the men answered, "Yes, my lady."

Cecely felt as if she had been "riding on" since forever, and if the cloister door was the only way out of this cursed rain and to a chance of dry clothing, a fire, and a warm drink, then she was ready to be even there, despite of everything and no matter what.

Tented under her cloak in front of her in the saddle, Neddie stirred, making a small sound of weariness and probably complaint. Cecely said down at him, "Almost there, little love. Almost done. Don't start whimpering now. You're not a puppy," and prodded him a little to be sure he heard her.

The horses plodded out of the gateway's far side and into the rain again and the nunnery's guesthall yard with its close surround of buildings and the church looming over all, its tall front blurred beyond the rain but not blurred enough. Cecely could feel

what lay waiting for her beyond that front, and her shudder had nothing to do with the day's rain-chill. But there was no going back now. The men had already drawn rein at the cloister door on the yard's far side and were quickly dismounting, one of them going to knock loudly at the cloister door, the other coming to help Dame Perpetua from her horse, while their fellow, who had been bringing up the rear, dismounted, too, and went past Cecely to help the other nun, the one who had not been here in Cecely's time.

Cecely waited. Of course, being the nuns' servants, the men would see to both of them first, and then probably to the other woman, the older one who anyone could see was not well, but the nuns might have—should have—ordered them to see to Neddie first, he was just a little boy. Then she could have got down, too. Why wasn't someone answering the door?

As if to her thought, the cloister door opened, and now both nuns, awkward in their long skirts and rain-heavy cloaks, were on either side of the older woman, helping her toward the door, while two of the men were gathering the horses' reins to lead them away, and only finally was the third man coming toward her. Impatiently, pulling her cloak away from Neddie, she said, "Here we go, lamb. We'll be inside in just a moment. Let the man lift you down."

Neddie, poor little thing, leaned sideways into the man's hands and let himself be dragged from the saddle. Cecely expected the man to set him down and turn to help her then, but instead he carried Neddie away toward the cloister door, leaving her, stiff with cold and riding though she was—surely just as cold and stiff as the other women had been, if not worse—to get herself to the ground.

Thinking bitterly that everything here was just as stupid as it had ever been, she dragged her rain-soaked skirts, sodden cloak, and weary legs clear of the saddle and eased herself to the ground. One of the men made to take her horse's reins but she snapped, "At least give me my saddle bags. Do that much for me."

As grudging to help her as everyone else was, he untied the bags without a word, lifted them off, and handed them to her. She did not bother to thank him, just stood clutching her bags, and when he had taken her horse and followed the other men and horses away, she went on standing there, suddenly unwilling to go where she had to go next. Behind her, everything her life had been was gone. Ahead of her the black emptiness of the open cloister doorway waited for her. The women and even Neddie were already disappeared into that darkness. Now she had to go, too. There was nowhere else. There was there, through that doorway—or there was here, standing in the rain. Those were her only bitter, bitter choices, and slowly she went forward. Because what else could she do? What else and where else were there for her?

Spring of this year of God's grace 1452 had been fretful, with days of cold sunshine broken by days of cold rain. When Dame Perpetua and Dame Margrett would return

had been as uncertain as the weather, with the first expectation being they would be back by Palm Sunday; but that had passed without them and so every day in Holy Week thus far they had been expected, because surely they would be here before Maundy Thursday, surely before the Easter Triduum, and now, on Wednesday, here they were, and drawn by Dame Amicia's glad cry of, "They've come!" St. Frideswide priory's other nuns were hurrying from wherever they had been at work around the cloister to where Dame Perpetua and Dame Margrett stood in the cloister walk, dripping onto the paving stones at the end of the passage from the outer door.

Dame Perpetua was trying to greet everyone at once, but Dame Margrett was saying past everyone to Dame Claire, "Please. My mother. If she could be put to bed as soon as might be..."

Mistress Petham, huddled shivering and shriveled in the curve of her daughter's arm, did indeed look more in need of care than greetings, Dame Frevisse thought, and Dame Claire, the priory's infirmarian, must have thought the same because she went instantly to put an arm around Mistress Petham's waist, taking her from Dame Margrett while saying, "I'll see to her. You finish your greetings and see to getting yourself dry. You can come to her afterward. Dame Frevisse?"

"Everything is ready," Frevisse said, coming to Mistress Petham's other side. "The fire was laid and lighted a while ago, on the chance they'd come today."

Presently St. Frideswide's hosteler, Frevisse's duty was the care of guests, but care for Mistress Petham went beyond plain duty. In these ten years since Dame Margrett had taken her vows in St. Frideswide's, her family had been good to the priory, both with money and gifts of food. St. Frideswide's was neither large nor rich. The widow who had founded it over a hundred years ago had died before fully endowing it, leaving it to lean times. It was presently, for one reason and another, doing well enough that Lent's fasting had been a willing choice rather than the dire necessity of some years not very long past. Still, gifts were always gratefully welcomed and repaid with prayers, those being the only thing the nuns had in abundance, and when word had come a few weeks back that Mistress Petham had been ailing through the winter and wanted her daughter's company on a Lenten pilgrimage to St. Alban's shrine in Hertfordshire, Domina Elisabeth had ruled that Dame Margrett could go, and because no nun should go out of the cloister unaccompanied by another nun, the prioress had added, "And Dame Perpetua will go with her."

Dame Juliana, being presently sacristan and precentor, with the church and the Offices of prayer her duty and worry, had protested, "But the Offices! There'll be only seven of us! With Easter coming!"

"We're eight with Sister Helen," Domina Elisabeth had answered. And added flatly in the way that meant talk about a matter was finished, "Besides that, it's our prayers, not our numbers, that matter."

"But *Easter!*" Dame Amicia had wailed, probably not least because Sister Helen,

presently St. Frideswide's only novice, while lovely of voice, was still uncertain at the Offices, and those for Holy Week and Easter and Easter Week were demanding beyond even the ordinary.

But Domina Elisabeth had said back at her, "Mistress Petham has asked she be permitted to spend Easter among us. Dame Perpetua and Dame Margrett will be here when they're most wanted," firmly quelling any more protest.

And here they indeed were, with Mistress Petham openly in need of every care and comfort the priory could give her; and Frevisse and Dame Claire between them helped her along the cloister walk and up the stairs and into the chamber there, where—just as Frevisse had said—everything was ready, even to a nun's undergown hung, warming, over the chair's back near the hearth and the bedcovers turned down to air.

Mistress Petham laughed, began to cough, laughed despite it, and said as she caught her breath, "You meant it when you said everything was ready."

"Of course," Frevisse said, pleased she was pleased but more concerned to have her into the dry, warm gown.

So was Dame Claire, and they made short work of it, helping Mistress Petham take off her headkerchief and wimple, then quickly having her cloak, gown, and undergown off of her and the warmed one onto her. She was a little woman, much Dame Claire's height and maybe close to Dame Claire's age, but Dame Claire wore her years with a determined vigor, while Mistress Petham's years were telling on her, along with whatever was ailing her. She had once been a plump little woman. Now she was tired flesh on bones, and when she sat down on the edge of the bed, it cost Frevisse no effort worth the mention to lift her legs and swing them up and around for her so she could lie back.

Mistress Petham settled against the pillows with a long sigh, closing her eyes and saying while Dame Claire pulled the covers over her, "Even a warm stone at the bedfoot. Bless you, my ladies." She opened her eyes and smiled at them. "Now, is it warmed, spiced wine I get next, or some brew of yours, Dame Claire?"

Mistress Petham had stayed at the nunnery more than once since her youngest daughter became a nun there; she knew something of Dame Claire's medicinal brews. This time, though, Dame Claire said, "Just now I think warmed, spiced wine *is* the brew best for you, to counter the cold humour of the day. My bidding is that you're to drink it down as soon as it's fetched to you."

Mistress Petham closed her eyes again with another satisfied sigh and said, smiling, "Whatever you bid, my lady."

That sent Frevisse and Dame Claire from the chamber with smiles of their own that lasted to the foot of the stairs, but they came out into the cloister walk again to find the other nuns still gathered there, clotted together in an odd, stiff silence, a few of

the cloister servants around the edges, and all of them facing a woman standing as if at bay just where the passage from the outer door came into the cloister walk, her hand tight on the shoulder of a small boy clutching a pair of saddlebags to his chest with both arms.

Frevisse's first thought was to wonder why the woman and boy were there instead of sent to the guesthall across the yard. She was just starting to wonder why everyone was standing there staring at each other like dumb-struck statues, when Dame Claire said, sounding half in disbelief, "Sister Cecely?"

And then Frevisse knew her, too.

Sister Cecely.

Gone these past nine years from the nunnery. Gone and never found. Fled, all her vows to Christ forsworn.

And now—God and his saints help them all—she was come back. With a child.

"Has anyone told Domina Elisabeth?" Dame Claire demanded.

The nuns scattered confused looks at each other, but Dame Claire could see as plainly as Frevisse did that they were all there and she ordered, "Dame Juliana, best you go."

With a flurry of black skirts and veil, looking glad of reason to be away, Sister Juliana hurried past Sister Cecely and disappeared up the stairs to the prioress' rooms while Dame Claire said sharply at Dame Perpetua, "Did she come with you? Where did you find her?"

"We came on her yesterday," Dame Perpetua said in a tired rush. "At the monastery where we stopped for the night. I might not have known her but she knew me, came to me after supper." As if crumpling under the weight of remembering that, Dame Perpetua sat down on the low wall between the walk and the cloister garth, still under the roof that kept the walk a dry place in wet weather, although the stone surely made cold sitting. "She said she wanted to come back here. I didn't know what else to do with her. I simply..." She made a helpless gesture with one hand. "...didn't know."

Frevisse would not have known either, was thankful the trouble of decision had not been hers, and was more than willing to leave it now to Dame Claire who said, "Before anything, you and Dame Margrett need to be out of your wet clothes. Does someone have your bags? Go to your cells to change, then to the kitchen to warm yourselves right through. Shouldn't the rest of you be at your work? You, Sister Cecely, and your..." For the first time, Dame Claire faltered, looking at the little boy, who had not moved at all and now only blinked, his face otherwise dead-still as Dame Claire's gaze fell on him. A little more gently she said, "The two of you can wait in the guest parlor until Domina Elisabeth will see you." She turned to Frevisse, starting,

“Dame Frevisse...”

Sister Cecely broke in, “We need food and to change and be warm, too. Neddie does,” she amended as Dame Claire’s look came sharply back to her.

Sharp to match her look, Dame Claire said, “Dame Frevisse will see to whatever is needful.”

Which was only right, Frevisse supposed, since she was hosteler and the boy at least was in some measure a guest. So as the other nuns and the cloister servants, reminded they had other duties, began to draw away to them, Dame Margrett helped Dame Perpetua to her feet and away toward the stairs to the dorter on the far side of the cloister walk, Dame Perpetua at a slow, stiff shuffle, Dame Margrett keeping a hand under her elbow as if to steady her. Dame Claire looked after them with a worried frown that Frevisse would have matched except she was left looking at Sister Cecely and the boy, both of them looking back at her.

The guest parlor, where nuns could talk with any visitors permitted them, was there, beside the passageway to the outer door and the stairs to the prioress’ rooms, and Frevisse said more to the boy than Sister Cecely because even looking at her was difficult, “If you please to go in.” Gesturing for him—for them—to go ahead of her. “The wait shouldn’t be long.” Then she called to Sister Helen, nearest among the departing nuns, “Sister, have someone bring bread and warm milk for the child, please.”

Sister Helen bobbed her head, put up a quick hand to the white veil that marked her for a novice among the nuns, her final vows not yet taken, stooped quickly to pick up from the stone paving the pin that had fallen out, and hurried her leaving.

Her hand still held out toward the parlor door, Frevisse said, this time at Sister Cecely, “Go in,” no please about it.

Chapter 2

Among everything Cecely had willingly forgotten about St. Frideswide's was Dame Frevisse. Always one of the older nuns, the woman had a way of never showing on her face what she was thinking. Even when the irksome rule against talking in the cloister had begun to ease while Cecely was a novice, Dame Frevisse had mostly kept to a forbidding silence that always made Cecely certain that, whatever the woman was thinking, it was unkindly.

Yet now, having seen her and Neddie into the guest parlor as if Cecely were a stranger who had never been there before, she looked down at Neddie and asked, as if it mattered to her, "Is he chilled? Should he go to the kitchen to be dried and warmed?"

Cecely instantly put out an arm, drew Neddie to her, and said, "He was under my cloak. He stayed dry, didn't you, Neddie? And he isn't cold either, are you, Neddie?" Neddie had been goodness itself these last difficult days, doing what he was told to do and making no more trouble than he could help. Now, never mind that Cecely could feel him a little shivering against her—but that was probably more from fear than anything—he obediently shook his head that, no, he was not cold. Cecely had told him over and over these past days that he had to be a brave boy for her. Now, as Dame Frevisse reached out and laid a hand on his shoulder, he proved his bravery by not flinching away from her touch.

For her part, Cecely glared at the woman, defying her to say his cloak was damp and that he was shivering, but before Dame Frevisse could or could not, Dame Claire

said from the doorway, "Dame Juliana says Domina Elisabeth will see them. We're to bring them up. Both of us," she added in answer to a swift look from Dame Frevisse.

Cecely remembered where the prioress' parlor was. Seeing no reason to wait to be taken, she pulled Neddie away from Dame Frevisse's hand and started out of the chamber. Dame Claire, as if afraid the touch of Cecely's skirts might taint her, stepped well aside. Pleased at that, Cecely turned toward the prioress' stairs. Dame Juliana was standing on the lowest one, but to be out of the way she scurried back up them, nimble for so old a woman, Cecely thought, following her with firm hold on Neddie's hand. He stumbled a little on the steepness, and she jerked to keep him on his feet. At the stairs' top the door to the prioress' parlor stood open. Dame Juliana was just saying, "She's come, my lady," when Cecely swept past her into the room. Or would have swept if Neddie had not stumbled yet again, this time on the threshold, so that she had to pause to pull him firmly upright again.

That done, she took in the room with a single quick look, judging both it and Domina Elisabeth standing beside the table in the room's middle. Seeing it still all the same both reassured and sickened her. St. Frideswide's prioress lived better than her nuns. They made do with no more than a narrow sleeping cell for each of them in the dormer and a shared, rarely lighted fireplace in the warming room. The prioress had this parlor, its fireplace, and a bedchamber all to herself, and because sometimes she had to receive visitors who were maybe important to the nunnery's good, the parlor was better furnished than anywhere else in the cloister, with two chairs where otherwise everyone had only stools, a woven Spanish carpet over the table, and embroidered cushions on the bench below the wide, glassed window overlooking the guesthall yard.

When Cecely's aunt had been prioress, there had been other comforts in the room, and a bright sense of life happening. Those and that were all gone. Everything still here simply looked older and faded and over-used. Including Domina Elisabeth, Cecely thought savagely. Her ten years as prioress had aged the woman. In the white surround of her wimple, her face was far more lined than Cecely remembered, and she looked tired.

Would that help or hinder? Cecely wondered. Had she softened or hardened with years?

It was too soon to tell, and Cecely did as she had planned, ended her swift forward movement halfway between the doorway and the prioress by pushing Neddie to his knees by a hand on his shoulder and following him down, falling to her own knees, her hands lifted prayerfully as she entreated, "My lady, I beg forgiveness! I've sinned and been sinned against, and I beg shelter and sanctuary for my poor child and for me the penance and punishment that are my due. In Christ's name and in Christ's mercy, I beg it of you!"

Tired though Domina Elisabeth might be, her voice was crisp enough as she ordered, "We kneel on both knees only to God and Christ."

Cecely immediately struggled with her wet skirts until she was only on one knee, then clasped her hands together again, ready to renew her plea, but Domina Elisabeth demanded, “Who is the child?”

Cecely immediately put her arm around Neddie’s shoulders and drew him to her, to make plain how precious he was while saying, “The son of my shame. His father was the man I fled with. It was with his father I’ve been all of this time. If not in mercy to me, then in pity for him, I pray you...”

Behind her, Dame Frevisse said, “He’s wet and he’s shivering and he should be beside the fire.”

“He is and he should be,” Domina Elisabeth agreed. “What’s his name?” she asked Cecely with no particular kindness.

“Neddie,” Cecely returned in kind, then forced herself to say more humbly, “Edward, if it please you, my lady.”

Kindly to him at least, Domina Elisabeth said, “Edward, take off your cloak and go stand near the fire while we talk.”

Taking her arm from him, Cecely said, “Do as my lady says,” as he looked questioningly at her.

Moving as if he were sore or stiff, he stood up and went to the red-glowing coal fire on the hearth. Cecely would not have minded being there with him but Domina Elisabeth was asking sharply, not interested in her comfort, “Where is his father now?”

“He’s dead.” Cecely did not try to stop her voice’s tremble. “He died at sea two months ago. Now his cousins have taken everything and cast us out.”

Beside the fire, Neddie was fumbling with his cloak’s clasp, unable to loose it one-handed while still holding the saddlebags. Cecely was about to tell him to set them down, when Dame Claire crossed the room to take them from him, laid them on the floor, and was undoing the clasp for him as Domina Elisabeth went on coldly, “So you’ve come back to us not in repentance for your sins and your broken vow to Christ, but because you have nowhere else to go.”

Cecely knew she would have done best to bow her head to that, but she could not, could only answer steadily, “I’ve known my sin all this time, but while he lived, I wasn’t free to return.”

“He held you prisoner all these nine years?” Domina Elisabeth asked, more with scorn than honest question.

“There’s more than one kind of binding.” Cecely jerked her head toward Neddie standing close to the fire with his hands held out to its warmth while Dame Claire

carefully spread his cloak over the back of the prioress' chair to begin drying. Bitter that no one offered her like comfort, Cecely went on, "There were other babies besides Neddie. Three others. But they died. All my babies but Neddie have died. For my sins," she added, her voice threatening to break. She struggled to hold it now, wanting to be believed on this next part. "So I want to give Neddie to the Church. He's all I have left. I want him safe. I want him to live. While I suffer the penance that I've earned by my sins."

Only after a long moment and somewhat more gently, Domina Elisabeth said, "You would have done best to go to your bishop with that wish and your repentance."

Cecely shook her head hard against that. "Here is where I betrayed Christ. Here is where I needed to come. Your brother is an abbot. He can speak better than I can pray to the bishop for Neddie's sake. He would even take Neddie into his abbey, wouldn't he? If you prayed it of him?"

Whatever Domina Elisabeth was thinking she kept behind her stiff face, only finally saying, after a long pause, her level voice giving away no more than her face did, "All that is to be thought on. There are other questions for you to answer, but not now. For now, you will begin your penance on your knees in the church before the altar, begging for the forgiveness you so deeply need, while we arrange matters for your keeping and your son's. Dame Frevisse, see her to the church. Set someone to watch her and come back to me. Dame Claire and Dame Juliana, I'd have you stay here."