

IT'S A VERY BRITISH HOMECOMING—
A MADHOUSE OF MAHARAJAHS AND MURDER....

Friend or Faux

A Lady Margaret Priam Mystery

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14701-0 (Canada \$5.99) U.S. \$4.99

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FAWCETT GOLD MEDAL • NEW YORK

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**A Fawcett Gold Medal
Published by Ballantine Books
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Library of Congress Catalog Card Number: 91-92114

ISBN 0-449-14701-0

Manufactured in the United States of America

First Edition: November 1991

The maharani peered again into the darkness. She thought she saw a dark shadow move across the passage, but it might have been a trick of her weak eyes. She did not believe the stories of these pale English ghosts the maids had been speaking of. The ladies who served her were far more sensible. She moved forward, intent on reaching the dark-paneled sitting room with its strange white columns at the end of the passageway.

She heard the rustle of fabric sweeping the stone paving of the hall. Close. Closer. She turned, raising her arm to ward off the glinting knife in the hand of a hooded creature in a dark robe. She felt a sharp pain as the knife sliced across her fingers and palm, and the blood flowed. She staggered forward. The knife was raised again, and it slashed again, then it plunged through the silk of her sari into her heart. . . .

Also by Joyce Christmas

Published by Fawcett Gold Medal Books:

**A FÊTE WORSE THAN DEATH
SUDDENLY IN HER SORBET
SIMPLY TO DIE FOR
A STUNNING WAY TO DIE**

*For Jon Peterson,
with whom I first took
fictional pen in hand*

Chapter 1

*L*ady Margaret Priam was not certain that it had been a good idea to get a fax machine for her home.

The fax in her hand said, "I tried to ring you, but I can't bear your beastly answering machine. There's a problem at the Priory. I need you here at once."

Lady Margaret usually had difficulty deciphering the handwriting of her brother, David, but so far, at least, it was remarkably clear.

Then in a different, highly legible, and possibly feminine hand: "Oh to be in England now that April's here."

As it was already June, the literary allusion suggested to Margaret that the young Earl of Brayfield had attracted yet another young lady with her eye on the possibility of becoming his countess. This one had decided to provide a touch of culture, specifically Browning.

"Ram-Sam has arrived with entourage and intends to stay the summer." This again in David's hand. "The prospect is driving me mad. You could always handle him, and he still likes blondes, so you're the one, unless you've done something purple or green to your hair."

Ram-Sam was now simply Mr. Ramsamai Tharpur, as decreed by the government of India, but in his own mind, to his many of his former subjects, and to some segments of

the world, he continued to be His Highness Ramsamai Singh, Maharajah of Tharpur.

Over the years, the maharajah's visits to Margaret's late father at Priam's Priory had invariably sent Margaret's mother to her rooms with a sick headache, but as a child, Margaret had been delighted to accept handfuls of unset diamonds or emeralds from his beautifully manicured, slightly pudgy hand. They were immediately confiscated by her nanny and returned to His Highness in the morning, but yes—Ram-Sam had a particular fondness for blond girls of all ages. And polo, of course. Her father had played a lot of chukkers with His Highness when they were both fit and young and shining lights of what remained of the polo world after World War II.

"You must come at once." David's hand started to decompose. "He must be persuaded to move on. Fax your arrival time. Potts will meet you at Heathrow."

David signed off with a flourish, confident that his sister, older by a half dozen years and therefore wiser when it suited him to think so, would immediately book a flight from New York to England to handle the maharajah.

"No, David," Margaret said aloud. "I will not rush home at your command."

She would simply telephone him now and tell him. It was noon in New York; David and his houseguests would likely be having tea as the English day declined into evening. She picked up the phone in her comfortable East Side Manhattan apartment and dialed the 011 international code. Then she paused.

Her life in New York City had slowed to a near standstill. The antiques shop where she had worked for several years persuading rich society ladies to purchase bits of Chinese jade and porcelain had closed. Although her former employer had arranged a generous severance for services beyond her modest job description, the money would not last forever. She liked to live well, but she was not rich, and she had few qualifications for a high-paying job. The life of an idle, titled English lady making the New York social rounds had never enchanted her, however many free dinners and

gala parties were hers for the asking. Even her romantic life was drifting aimlessly, since her most constant companion, Detective Sam De Vere of the New York City police, had disappeared into his work so as to become nearly invisible to her.

True, she was seeing one or two attractive men—who held almost no appeal for her. Not infrequently she wondered if, by arriving at an age slightly past her mid-thirties, she had become too critical of men in general. In any event, none of them came close to comparing favorably with De Vere during happier days.

Margaret made a sudden decision. What was there to keep her in New York? Very little. She dialed the country code to England, and then the familiar number of Priam's Priory off in the peaceful green countryside near the village of Upper Rime.

"Hello? Hello?" A high-pitched, singsong female voice answered. "Hello? Hello? Who are you telephoning, please?"

"Lord Brayfield, please." Margaret was mystified. Where was the butler, Harbert? Or Mrs. Domby, the housekeeper, or even one of the maids?

"Hello? Hello?" The woman said. She sounded like an Indian.

Then: "Blasted woman. Give it here." A sort of muffled giggle and the sound of a scuffle. Finally Harbert's dignified voice came on the line, sounding somewhat harried. "Priam's Priory."

"Harbert? It's Lady Margaret, calling from New York."

"Ahh. So *good* to hear your voice, Lady Margaret." Harbert quickly regained his normal pompous dignity. He had achieved his position as butler and majordomo at Priam's Priory at a fairly young age, only a few years before, coming from some grand country house in the eastern counties to replace the legendary Mr. Noakes of Margaret's childhood. Margaret thus did not know him well, but knew for a certainty that Harbert took his position very seriously. Almost too much so, Margaret thought, given her slightly mad,

charming, and unpredictable brother, who took nothing seriously.

"His lordship is out about the estate with . . . with some film people from America," Harbert said.

"No! Not the maharajah *and* a film company." Her brother's occasional business of letting out Priam's Priory for films and television helped pay the expenses, but Harbert sounded as though it was greatly beneath the dignity of the family.

"I understand they are shooting exteriors only," Harbert said grimly, "but the confusion, what with His Highness here, and his wife and the rest of them." He sighed. "One of his . . . his . . . entourage answered the telephone just now. It is a troubling situation." He paused. "Especially with a Second Her Highness in residence." His disapproval came through clearly across the wide Atlantic.

"Do you mean another wife? Ram-Sam brought *two* wives?" Margaret did not think that sort of thing was permitted any longer.

"That is what she is said to be, m'lady, although not . . . a native of His Highness's country."

"Please tell David that I will wind up some affairs here and fly over as soon as I can arrange it."

There was silence, then Harbert said, "Very good, Lady Margaret. I shall have you met if you inform us of your flight."

"Don't trouble," Margaret said. "If I require to be met, I shall let you know, but I will probably find my own way home." She might spend a day or two in London first. David could demand an immediate arrival, but it had never been her position to allow him his way too often. Since childhood, she had used her slight seniority to keep her brother in check, most frequently when he became too demanding on the basis of his status as heir to the lands and titles of the Priam family.

"All this business is stirring up the ghosts," Harbert said gloomily. "One of the maids claims she was accosted by the gray lady. . . ."

"Ah, the ghosts," Margaret said. "In that event, I shall make haste."

* * *

Margaret thought long and hard about whether to try to track down De Vere to tell him she was departing New York, perhaps for an extended period. Then she decided that if his response seemed intended to discourage her from leaving, she would have to deal with a desire to cancel her trip with no assurance that matters between them would change. If he expressed indifference, she would have to deal with the issue of rejection. She was not, she concluded, courageous enough to face either possibility. Instead, around midday, she rang her young friend, Prince Paul Castrocani, at his offices at United National Bank & Trust, far downtown in a sedate corner of financial Manhattan.

She fancied this a crafty move, since Paul shared his Chelsea apartment with De Vere in an amiable arrangement whereby neither was required to pass more than a few hours a month in each other's company. De Vere was dedicated to serving justice via the New York City police department, while Prince Paul was dedicated to finding the perfect young woman, preferably very rich, via any means available. On the other hand, information on Margaret's whereabouts could be passed on by Paul, without the need for Margaret to be personally involved. So much for the vaunted courage of the Priams.

"I seem to be leaving for England late tomorrow," she told Paul when his eager secretary had tracked him down somewhere in the bank, where he had no doubt been puzzling out the meaning of the prime interest rate. Paul was not a notable success as a banker. "There are a few problems at home. Could we meet tonight for dinner?"

"Ah, well . . . yes," Paul said, "certainly. I can arrange something."

"You don't sound taken with the idea," Margaret said. "I may not be back for a long time."

"My mother arrived from Dallas two days ago," he said. "I am scheduled to escort her to some elaborate formal event this evening. Although I have heard that such activities are fewer because money is tight, it seems not the case in my

mother's circles. In any event, she enjoys hearing people say that I surely cannot be her son but rather a younger brother. She had hoped to see you on this trip."

Carolyn Sue Dennis, formerly Princess Castrocani and now Mrs. Benton Hoopes, had some years before rid herself of Paul's father, an impoverished Italian prince, and had gone on to make her mark in her Texas hometown as the very rich wife of the equally rich Ben Hoopes. She appeared sporadically in New York to flaunt her affluence before the city's haute social set. If social New York was beginning to find that overt displays of wealth and self-indulgence no longer played well to the local masses, and if the wealth itself was not what it once was, Carolyn Sue was never bothered by such concerns. Not now, not ever.

"Unless you and she can dine with me tonight, I must miss her," Margaret said.

"She certainly cannot," Paul said. "I believe the requirements of preparing herself to go on display will prevent it. There is a ballet performance first that I have already declined to attend. You and I might have an early dinner, and I will join her in time to whisk her around the dance floor."

"Lovely," Margaret said. "I need to set my mind straight about returning to England, and seeing to some silly business about an old maharajah who was a friend of my father's and who has moved into the family home for an extended stay."

"I see," Paul said. "And obviously you wish to impress me with the desirability of informing De Vere of your whereabouts, should he inquire."

"Certainly not! I haven't even spoken to him in ages."

"I see," Paul said. "It will do you no good to ask me what he has been doing. I know nothing."

Margaret booked her flight and winced at the cost, began tidying up her affairs for an open-ended return to her homeland, and berated herself silently for choosing to leave De Vere behind without a personal word.

Meanwhile, her brother, David Priam, the twenty-second Earl of Brayfield, led a motley crew of dinner guests into the

formal dining room at Priam's Priory. The candles had been lit and the heavy old silver had been polished to a glow by Harbert. The linen was snowy white and thick, and masses of flowers from the Priory's gardens filled the priceless Georgian silver epergne at the center of the long table. Ancestral portraits in gilded frames hung on the cream-colored walls above the crystal decanters on the mahogany sideboard.

Mrs. Domby in her role as cook to the household had provided a nice plate of cold asparagus to start and a lovely roast chicken, with a blackberry ice to finish. But, as she said at least three times to Harbert, what with Indian princes sitting down with rich Americans and those film people and his lordship, there was no telling who would be pleased. And with food being consumed at a great rate, someone would have to be off to London again soon to restock the larder. Harrods would deliver, of course, but on its own schedule, and there were always items forgotten until the last minute, too late to telephone to London.

The young earl found the necessity of entertaining his incompatible guests tiresome, but in one way or another, they represented the promise of many pounds paid in return for goods and services, enough to keep the old Priory going for the rest of the year, if all went well. He lounged at the head of his table, and longed for a quick release to his private rooms.

The Maharajah of Tharpur, portly and elegant and splendidly jacketed in brocade that harked back to the glory days of the Indian princes, was seated beside Miss Jazmin Burns, the platinum-tressed gift of Hollywood films to the world. On his left was Miss Chloe Waters of Figge Hall, Warwickshire, and Sloane Street, London. She could recite patches of both Browning and Tennyson, and even some bits of Keats. She quoted no immortal lines tonight, however, preferring to pout at being placed some distance from David.

Quintus Roach, also of Hollywood, found himself next to Mrs. Lester Flood (Phyllis to her friends), late of someplace in the middle of America and only recently a new neighbor of the earl. The empty chair on Roach's other side was soon taken by the young Englishwoman who styled herself the

second wife of the maharajah. She had delayed her appearance to make a dramatic entrance in silken sari threaded with gold and an excess of gem-encrusted baubles. She swept through doors held open for her by the butler. Roach, who had spent too many years in Hollywood not succeeding in show business, was unimpressed.

Lester Flood, was pleased that he had been seated on the other side of the luscious Jazmin Burns, who was momentarily displeased at being upstaged by an upstart maharani who had chosen to don the national dress of a country of which she was obviously not a native. He did not really believe that he had heard Jazmin murmur, "Ah, the English bitch of life."

Across the table from Lester was a rather seedy Priam cousin, to whom Lester had lost quite a bit of money at a London gambling club a few months before. Nigel Priam had dropped by unexpectedly, as the party enjoyed preprandial drinks in the immense Tudor Great Hall, and had accepted the earl's reluctant invitation to dine. He had not changed for dinner. Lester himself wore black tie, and had to admit that his new Savile Row tailor had done a fine job of making him look much trimmer than he actually was. And Lester thought Phyllis looked just fine in one of those designer dresses she'd bought in Paris, although since her facelift, she often had some difficulty in forming her mouth into a smile.

Mrs. Domby peered in from the pantry, and noted that no one had much conversation except the incessant Mr. Roach, who was regaling the table with tales of devious Hollywood agents, corrupt producers, and sex-crazed starlets, none of whom were known to the assembled party. A flurry of interest ensued at the mention of Sylvester Stallone and Clint Eastwood, but subsided as soon as it was clear that Roach knew neither of them personally.

"His Highness's wife indeed, Mr. Harbert," Mrs. Domby whispered over her shoulder as she took in the new maharani fitting a cigarette into a very long, jeweled holder. "The old countess would never have permitted this wife business. And certainly no one smoked during dinner." Mrs. Domby's out-

rage got no response from Harbert except a frown. He took himself off to pour more wine. "They won't be sitting about late," she said aloud to her empty kitchen. "Eat and be off, mark my words."

The dinner hour ended quickly, as Mrs. Domby had predicted. Before she had finished up in the kitchen, with Tilda, the maid on late duty, to help out, the guests had scattered, minutes after the men had finished their port and joined the ladies for coffee in the drawing room.

"The standards are going down, Mr. Harbert," Mrs. Domby began, but Harbert was already locking up the wine cabinet.

"I don't have time for idle talk about our guests," he said sternly. "I have business to attend to. This house is a great responsibility." He soon departed, leaving her the key to the silver chest in the pantry. Relations had never been warm between them, but Mrs. Domby was beginning to think that Harbert was getting above himself.

Mrs. Domby looked out the windows of her kitchen. It was almost dark, and she heard the patter of raindrops on the pebbled drive, the first June shower they'd had in days. She switched off the lights and made her way to the back stairs.

The house was almost in darkness, with only a night light glowing in the long hallway that ran parallel to the Great Hall. She stopped and listened. It seemed to her that behind the sound of the rain, she heard voices coming from the Great Hall. She peered down the hallway, and thought she glimpsed one of the Indian ladies wearing that sari thing they wrapped around themselves instead of a decent dress.

Mrs. Domby shook her head. She had had quite enough of these foreigners from the East and America all in one dose.

As she started up the stairs that would take her to her comfy room on the top floor (his lordship had given her a lovely new color telly in honor of her thirty years of service), she heard the unmistakable sound of Jazmin Burns's merry false laugh, and a hearty chuckle that she was sure was His Highness.

Such goings-on would never have been permitted when the present earl's mother was alive.

Mrs. Domby made her way to her bed, and the drumming rain blotted out any further sounds that might have raised in or about the ancient house.

Chapter 2

The heavy embroidered sari worn by Her Highness Laxmi, the recognized Maharani of Tharpur for some forty years, fluttered behind her as she padded quietly along a dark hallway in Priam's Priory. It was after eleven by the Priory's clocks. The house was still, but she knew she must find her husband sitting late with the young earl in a room at the end of this corridor, which the silly English maids called the Nun's Walk. And with him would be the monstrous woman who claimed to be Second Her Highness, but who was nothing more than a stupid sow of an Englishwoman named Doris whom the maharajah pretended to have married three years ago. An ugly, awkward blonde with feet too big and limbs too pink, who would never wear a sari gracefully. Her Highness's sleek, still black hair was covered with a filmy silk shawl, and the bangles on her arms clicked softly. She wore little other jewelry except for a favorite necklace of small diamonds set in gold filigree—but then, she no longer traveled with her good jewelry as she had when her husband was still a ruling prince. As she moved, she kept her back straight and held her head high, as a woman of royal lineage should.

Her Highness stopped in the damp, musty passageway and listened. Her eyes were not good nowadays, and spectacles were not dignified, but her hearing was sharp. She looked back down the long hall. The housekeeper had said that few