

Historical Note

On 12 October 1678, a popular London magistrate named Sir Edmund Berry Godfrey left his home in Westminster and never returned. Five days later, two local tradesmen found his slain body in a drainage ditch at the base of Primrose Hill, a London suburb. To this day the murder remains unsolved. *Mistress of Fortune* is based upon these events and their aftermath.

Chapter One

Wednesday, 9 October 1678

I was born with a head full of fiery red curls, which caused my mother to weep the first time she saw me. It was a bad omen, she said; ginger-colored hair was the mark of a sorceress. It was just a quaint superstition, so the question that prompted the memory of my long-dead mother might have amused me had it not been asked by Sir Edmund Godfrey, justice of the peace of Westminster.

“Are you a witch, Mistress Ruby?”

He shifted his eyes about my shadowy, sparsely furnished room and widened them as he explored the contents of the bookcase behind my desk. Crowded with books, it also housed bottles of alchemical liquids, a human skull, and several other curiosities, displayed for the sole purpose of exploiting my customers’ unease.

Now, however, it was I who struggled to keep my nerves steady.

If such creatures as witches existed, I was not one of them. My expertise as a soothsayer consisted mostly of keen intuition and skillful manipulation rather than actual divination. While it was a dubious distinction and a questionable means of earning a living, it was not illegal. Nevertheless, Sir Edmund’s query sent a ripple of fear through me, for as a magistrate, he could arrest me if he suspected me of practicing witchcraft. Though many years had passed since my imprisonment for debt, the cold, hard memory of the gaol remained vivid in my mind.

Small beads of perspiration formed under my ill-fitting gray wig, causing my scalp to itch. Moisture collected on my upper lip and I worried that the heavy paint I used to simulate an age even greater than my actual thirty-one years would begin to run and smear. I fought the urge to wipe it away. I couldn’t risk raising Sir Edmund’s suspicions further by showing he’d discomfited me.

“No, sir, I’m not,” I said. “Witchcraft is against the law. If that’s the service you require, I suggest you find someone else to render it.” I rose from my seat, ready to escort him out.

He raised his hand. “Truly, I don’t mean to offend. I just want to know—exactly what is it you do?”

He seemed even more nervous than I. Had I misjudged the reason for his presence?

“I am a fortuneteller and a healer. I offer advice and help to solve problems. I employ a number of methods to help my patrons rid themselves of their troubles.” I returned to my seat. “Now, how may I be of service?”

A look of resignation crossed his face. “My own foolishness has placed me in a predicament and I can think of no solution. I’m not the superstitious sort but you’ve been highly recommended, and I hope that with your assistance I’ll be protected from the danger threatening me.”

Sir Edmund’s appeal for help seemed sincere. Though he wasn’t handsome, his unusual height and gauntness made his appearance noteworthy around town. But now he sat on the wooden bench across from me, shoulders slumped, in the pose of a man defeated.

“What sort of trouble do you find yourself in?”

He hesitated. “I’m afraid I can’t tell you that.”

God’s blood, he wasn’t going to make this easy, was he? “I don’t mean to pry into your affairs sir, but I must have some knowledge of your dilemma so I may decide upon the best course of action.”

“You must understand the information I have is dangerous. It’s of the utmost importance that you divulge it to no one.”

“Discretion is the cornerstone of my business, I assure you.”

“I’ve unwittingly become involved in the discovery of a plot to murder a person of great import. Now I fear the very men who would so wickedly kill him have turned their attention to me.”

I was unaccustomed to hearing such dramatic claims. The most serious request I usually got was to discover if a husband was actually as faithful as his vows demanded. “Perhaps you should start at the beginning,” I said.

He took a deep breath. “A fortnight ago a man named Titus Oates came to see me. He asked me to take his oath swearing to the authenticity of a deposition he’d written, in which he revealed a wicked conspiracy.” Now that Sir Edmund had begun his confession, he spoke quickly, purging himself of his angst. “He asked that I keep the contents of the document secret, but upon reflection, I cannot keep the information to myself. In doing so, I’d be failing to report treason.”

“Treason?” I said, understanding at once the gravity of his predicament. I regretted my previous insistence that he share his story, for I had troubles enough of my own without involving myself in a treasonous matter. Nonetheless, he had piqued my interest and I could not bring myself to dismiss him outright. “Who does this Oates say will be murdered?”

Sir Edmund paused and then seemed to come to some decision. He raised his head and fixed his gaze upon me.

“The Catholics have devised a plot to kill the king, madam.”

An involuntary gasp escaped my lips, and the previous concern I had for my own welfare was displaced by fear for the king.

King Charles II had sat upon the throne of England for eighteen years, presiding over a court infamous for its secret deals, schemes, and intrigues. Furthermore, if there was one thing English Protestants feared more than demons and witches, it was Catholics—rumors about papist plots and conspiracies ran rampant, and as soon as one was put to rest another cropped up. There was no reason to give this one more credence than any other. Still, Sir Edmund’s suggestion that the king might be in danger frightened me. Charles had been my lover since I was sixteen years old, and though we’d been estranged for much of the past six months, I couldn’t bear to think he might be killed.

I needed to conceal my alarm, however, for any hint of my history with His Majesty risked the revelation of my true identity. Posing as Mistress Ruby was my sole source of income and it was essential to my livelihood that this secret was kept. I wanted information, but I would have to proceed carefully to get it.

“You were right to come to me,” I said, striving for a calm tone. “I can help you.”

Sir Edmund was visibly relieved. “What shall be done?”

“My fee is ten pounds.” The sum was generous, but in addition to his duties as magistrate he was a successful wood merchant and he could afford to pay it. He withdrew a leather purse from his pocket and counted out several coins. He handed them to me across the table and I tucked them into the top of my bodice.

“First, I shall examine your palms,” I said, peeling off my gloves. I’d forgotten to remove the large ruby ring I wore on my right hand and it glinted in the candlelight. I hid my hands under the table and took it off, slipping it into my cloak pocket. I held out my newly naked hands to Sir Edmund. “Place your hands in mine, palms down.”

He reached out tentatively. His damp hands were soft and smooth, the tops spotted with age and heavily landscaped with veins.

“With which hand do you write?” I asked. He raised his right hand slightly and I turned them both over, comparing the two. “Your left hand tells me what you came into this world with, your right tells me what you’ve become. You were destined for success from birth.”

Sir Edmund showed no reaction other than to stare intently at his upturned palms.

I ran my finger along one of the more distinct grooves. “Your heart line is not very long.”

“What does that mean?” he asked.

“Your inclination is toward business rather than family. But here,” I said, pointing to the lines that appeared as dead branches drooping from the main line. “This suggests fierce loyalty, almost to a fault.” I looked up at him. “You sometimes let your allegiances interfere with protecting your own interests.”

Sir Edmund’s posture stiffened and he pulled his hands away. “Without loyalty there’s no integrity.”

Here was a discreet opportunity to learn more about the potential danger the king was in. “Perhaps, but you’ve allowed yourself to be compromised by this man Titus Oates. Tell me what you know about him.”

He shrugged. “Not much, I’m afraid. He claims to have been present at a clandestine gathering of Jesuit leaders, during which they planned the assassination. He wanted me to authenticate a deposition he’d prepared attesting to what he’d learned at that meeting.”

“Do you have the deposition on your person?”

“No,” Sir Edmund said. “I couldn’t persuade Oates to entrust me with a copy.”

This disappointed me, for I’d hoped to review the document myself.

“My duty was to notify the king of the conspiracy immediately,” he continued, “yet upon reading the document I found that in several places there appeared the name of my friend, Edward Coleman.”

Edward Coleman was secretary to the king’s brother, the Duke of York. He was also an ardent Catholic. I had met him at Whitehall Palace on one or two occasions, and though he had a reputation for interfering in royal affairs, conspiring to kill the king seemed well beyond his aspirations.

“So it’s your loyalty to Coleman that caused you to compromise yourself?” I asked.

“On that point I suppose you’re correct. But Coleman is a respected member of the Duke of York’s household—I couldn’t risk ruining his reputation based on the allegations of a stranger. After speaking with Oates, I informed Coleman of what I knew. He vigorously denied there was any sort of Catholic plot and I believed him. Hence I felt no need to inform the authorities.”

My tension eased a bit. It seemed this supposed plot might indeed be just another rumor. “If Oates’s story is untrue, what have you to fear?”

Sir Edmund uttered a short, bitter laugh. “Yesterday I received word that Edward Coleman was arrested and taken to Newgate Prison. Don’t you see? He must’ve been part of the conspiracy, so now the Jesuits know I have seen Oates’s deposition. They will surely seek to silence me. And I can’t inform the king, as too long a time has passed. If he or his ministers learn of my knowledge of the plot, it won’t be long before I’m sharing a cell in Newgate with Coleman.” Sir Edmund leaned forward and put his head into his hands, causing his hat to fall forward. “I’ve made such a mess of this affair, my head is spinning.”

To be certain, Sir Edmund had created a troublesome situation for himself, but I was not yet convinced that either he or the king were in any serious danger. “Quiet now,” I said. “We’re

not yet finished.” I motioned for his hand again and I returned to my reading, tracing a third crease on his palm. “This is your lifeline.”

“What does it tell you?” he said anxiously, readjusting his hat with his free hand.

The truth was I didn’t know. But I’d been trained in soothsaying at the hands of one of London’s most notorious fortunetellers. She taught me that my customers didn’t pay me to deliver bad or ambiguous news. They expected definitive answers and reassurance that life would unfold as they desired. I told Sir Edmund what I knew he wanted to hear.

“You shall live a long and fruitful life,” I said.

As it happened, I could not have been more wrong.

Coming Soon

Mistress of Fortune by Holly West
Coming Feb 2014 from Harlequin's Carina Press