

Ian Morson

# Falconer's Crusade

A MEDIEVAL OXFORD MYSTERY



## FALCONER'S CRUSADE

Ian Morson was born in Derby in 1947 and read modern languages at Oxford University. He now works in local government. *Falconer's Judgement*, his second novel featuring Regent Master William Falconer, is also available in Vista paperback. The

third in the series, *Falconer and the Face of God*, is published by Gollancz in hardback. Ian Morson lives in Berkhamsted.

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*Also by Ian Morson in Vista*

**FALCONER'S JUDGEMENT**

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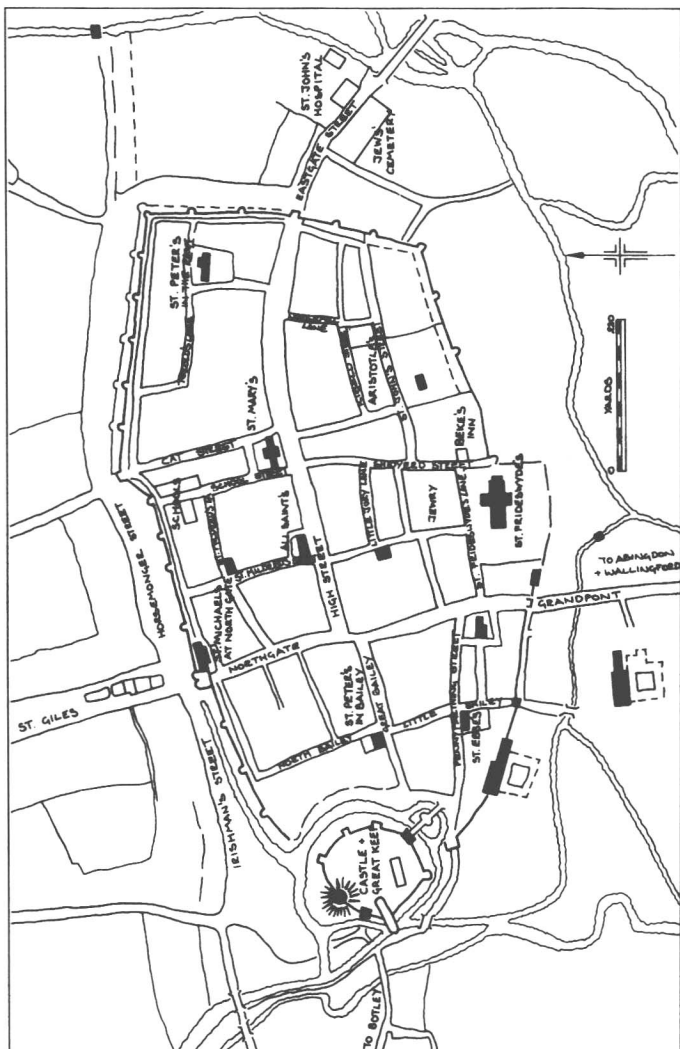
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## *Prologue*

**T**he chill of the gloomy stone palace gripped his bones, even though this was Rome. Amaury de Montfort shivered and pulled the furs tighter around his body. Leaning across the table, he took the proffered sweet from the hands of the Englishman.

‘You are ill, my lord?’ asked the Englishman.

‘A little cold only. Two years in a Saracen prison takes a long time to leach from your bones.’

He bit into the succulent marchpane, and the sensation of sugar and almonds caused his mouth to water. Saliva dribbled on to his beard, now peppered with grey from years of imprisonment. He shuddered again and the other man, his solemn face expressing concern, leaned forward. As the Englishman’s features came into the pool of light cast by the candle, de Montfort thought he saw a look of disdain. He blinked and looked again. Now he could detect merely a mask reflecting nothing but the pomposity Amaury had come to expect. He stuffed the rest of the sweet confection into his mouth and reached for an apple. The Englishman anticipated his move.

‘Take this one, Count. It is the ripest of the lot. Food must have been poor in the Saracen gaol.’

‘I would not grace what we were given with the name of food. Swill was more like it.’

De Montfort began to eat the apple, though a twinge in his bowels warned him that he was overindulging. Still, better to



be ill from a surfeit than from too little. The griping pain came again, more violent this time and he twisted in his hard wooden chair.

'My lord, I fear you are ill.' The Englishman's voice seemed distant and distorted. His face was ebbing and flowing in and out of the light of the candle. A grotesque mask.

'There is something wrong. Send for my physician.'

The other man brought his face close to Amaury's. He could feel the sweat coursing down his features, dripping from the end of his nose. He shivered with cold then instantly felt hot. The voice he heard was cold with hatred.

'I fear it is too late for the physician.'

A pincer of pain twisted his entrails, burning like a sword thrust deep into him. Amaury pitched forward on to the floor and the chair fell over with a crash. Surely his servants could hear the noise? He tried to call out but his mouth was full of blood and vomit, and his shout was a mere bubble.

'No need to waste your energy. I ensured your servants were well supplied with wine. They will not hear you.'

A croak escaped the throat of the dying man, which now burned with a fire equal to that of his stomach.

'Murder.'

'Merely a merciful release from the sinful material flesh of the body. I give you a release more swift than your father did mine. It is a blessing.'

His body was racked with great spasms of pain and his legs kicked out involuntarily, hitting the table. It tipped and the pottery bowl crashed to the floor, spilling apples and sweetmeats all around him – all brought by the Englishman, who claimed to know his brother and who sought to bring news to a Crusader with two years to catch up on. The stone flags pressed cold against his burning cheek. His limbs would not obey him. He

could merely gaze at the feet of his killer and the great black shadow he cast. His voice came again, whispery and distant.

'I dispatched your brothers long ago, but had to wait until you returned from your mad Crusade. How like your father you are.'

As he lay dying, besmirched by his own vomit, a strange clarity came over Amaury's mind and the truth echoed through his skull. His lips tried to form the word, but he died before he could say it.

Heretic.



## *Chapter One*

**T**he crude bird-shaped thing flipped in the air and plummeted to the ground at the foot of the tower. It splintered into pieces on the icy, hard earth. At the top of the tower, a face peered out over the parapet and then disappeared. Eventually the man emerged through a door at the foot of the Great Keep fortifying the west end of Oxford and began to cast around in search of the artefact he had launched from the tower. He walked in ever greater circles out from the yellow stone walls until his foot crunched on a piece of the debris. He sighed as he picked up the evidence of his continuing failure to emulate the simplest of God's creatures. He still could not mimic the birds' skill of flight, and he turned the hide and stick construction over in his hands. It had been a long day for Regent Master William Falconer.

He had risen well before the first hour of the day, barely six hours past midnight. In the darkness of the winter morning, he briefly splashed icy water over his face before sharing a simple breakfast with the students in his hall, Aristotle's. By then he had already taken the opportunity to finish the bird-shaped form he thought would soar and swoop from the tower when he had time to launch it. He insisted, as was the custom, that his students spoke only Latin when sharing meals. But by sext, the sixth hour of the day, after having taught his younger students in the hall and having got the main meal out of the way without too much attention to Latin, he was impatient

to try out his model. However, he still had lectures to give all afternoon in schools. The ninth hour, nones, was well past before he had a chance to test the thing, and he gladly forewent supper to hurry to the Great Keep in the gathering gloom.

Now he was hungry and it had all proven a waste.

How he missed his friend and teacher, Roger Bacon, to discourse with. The outspoken friar had been banished to a Franciscan convent seven years ago, in 1257, and Falconer often felt a need to test his ideas against the man's mind. It was Bacon who had taught him that science was a matter of investigation, not playing with words. And it was Bacon who had opened his eyes to Aristotelian logic, which Falconer used to solve all sorts of problems. Including murders. Though Friar Bacon would have scorned such a curiosity as idle interest, diverting William's mind from the study of mathematics and alchemy.

Falconer had led a varied life before meeting the friar, travelling the world and seeing its wonders. He had arrived at Oxford via the University of Bologna, where he had learned from great minds, and had determined to settle down to a life of study. The quibbling, disputatious nature of the regent masters had begun to convince him that he had made a mistake, when he happened to attend a lecture by Roger Bacon. The friar was already developing a reputation as a magician, and this attracted William. Anyone who roused the envy of the narrow minds at the heart of the university must have something to offer. The lecture on the 'usefulness of nature' fired him to understand the physical world.

Although clearly he had not understood the physical nature of flight yet. Returning down the High Street of a darkening Oxford, head down against the icy wind that blew along its

length, he recalled that a new student was due to arrive today. What was his name? Symon – yes that was it. He cursed that he had spent too long at the tower with his experiment. He should have been back at Aristotle's to greet him. Who knows what other Master, touting for students, might snatch him from Falconer? The annual fee of four shillings per student was welcome to supplement his frugal existence. He skipped over the freezing sludge in the centre of the road and hurried on.

Thomas Symon stepped stiff-legged from the cart down to the frozen mud. Stumbling on tired limbs, his foot slipped in the channel running down the middle of the street. The grey, turbid water slid warm over his ankle despite the cold of the evening and he shuddered to think what had been cast into the gutter higher up. This was not how he imagined his arrival in Oxford. He should have had a fetcher to bring him to the university, but he had not turned up and Thomas had had to undertake the journey on his own. He pulled his foot out of the slime and sighed. The son of a farmer, he had been lucky to be chosen for a place at the university. At least that was what his father had said: 'You should be here helping me and your mother, so be grateful.'

Thomas was grateful, but he knew his ability at grammar had shone through the mud of the farmyard. He knew the local priest occasionally sponsored clever minds to train as clerks, especially if they were from poor families. Thomas had striven hard to impress Henry Ely, and now it had paid off. He was indebted to him, and reluctantly to his father, who would never let Thomas forget the fine he had to pay to release his son from his obligations to the manor. He was glad his mother understood and was able to persuade her husband, and glad to be free of the dawn to dusk grind of the farm work. He had been forced

to delay his departure until his father was satisfied no more work existed on the farm, and would now have to catch up on the other students. But now he was here. The university.

On the long and tiring journey through the troubled England of 1264, he had whiled away the time with dreams of how his arrival would be. Town folk would nudge each other and point at this no doubt brilliant scholar as he made his way down the main street. The Master of his hall would rush to welcome him, ushering him into the blazing warmth of the great communal room of the scholars, already eager to debate subjects from the quadrivium with him.

The reality in no way matched those fond ideas as the carter hurled Thomas's bundle down from his perch above. It landed with a thud at his feet and the carter whipped his horse into motion. Thomas leapt clear of the wheels as they cracked through the surface of the frozen mud. The rear one dropped into the channel of sewage and squirted filth over Thomas. His clothes already reeked of chicken droppings picked up from the hours spent on the back of the cart squeezed between wicker crates of live squawking birds on their way to market. Now the stench of human ordure was added to his travel-stained clothes. He bent to pick up his bundle and, as he slung it over his back, looked around. The cart had already disappeared into the mist. He was alone and it was dark.

Thomas had planned to arrive in full daylight and ask his way to Aristotle's hall which he knew lay between Kibald Street and St John's Street. There he was to ask for Master William Falconer. But his plan had gone awry when he reached Nuneham and found that no one was travelling north because one of the vast baronial armies was passing Oxford on its way to the Welsh Marches. It was not safe for anyone to get in the way, especially if you didn't know who to claim allegiance to. Thomas had

fallen into conversation with a carter whom he had encountered breaking his journey by the side of the roadway with a tasty meal of dry bread.

'Why can't de Montfort and his cronies settle with the King and leave us poor folk to earn a crust?' grumbled the carter. 'I have no more feed for them chickens and must get them to Oxford tonight.'

Thomas too was anxious to reach his destination. He had no money to pay for a room and dreaded the thought of sleeping out in the cold overnight.

'If I spy the land ahead for you, we could travel together. And when the coast is clear I could travel in your cart.'

The carter's beady eyes sized up Thomas. He was only a lad – fifteen years of age perhaps. But he was tall, blond-haired and his blue eyes made him look strong and alert. And a second pair of hands was always useful to fight off robbers. He hawked and spat at Thomas's feet.

'Get up on the back. The first five miles is open country and we'll need to hurry to make Oxford before dark.'

Although the cart had lurched and bounced along the rutted road, Thomas had managed to doze off and woke with a start when a rough hand clutched his neck. It was only the carter.

'You'd not be much use in a fight,' he grumbled. 'I could have slit your throat already.'

'Sorry,' mumbled Thomas, ashamed at his lack of manhood. Then doubly ashamed for apologizing to this coarse peasant. Wasn't he a scholar after all?

'Let go.'

Thomas struggled in the strong, horny grasp of the man, whose grip tightened on the jerkin at his throat. His face drew close enough for Thomas to smell his rotten breath and see the



stumps of decayed teeth. The man snorted and released his grip.

‘Aah. You’re lucky I need you. Keep your eyes open now – we have the forest to go through and I must keep my eyes on the marks.’

‘Marks?’

‘Have you not travelled before?’ grunted the carter.

Thomas did not wish to reveal that he had not, until now, travelled more than a mile from the village of his birth, and kept quiet.

‘Other wayfarers mark the trees and bushes with the safe routes. Look, see that knot there.’

Thomas nodded, though unsure what he was supposed to be looking at. Keeping his eyes peeled for robbers must surely be easier. At last clear of the forest, Thomas had his first sight of Oxford. A low slope ran up from two rivers to the clean lines of the new town walls showing yellow in the gathering dusk. They had barely made it through the South Gate before it was closed.

But now Thomas was in Oxford. Suddenly he realized the carter had left him without a word of advice on how to find his way. His feet began to feel the cold of the ground striking up through his thin soles. He shuffled on the spot and looked around. The dark houses with their shuttered windows towered over him, and the street stretched for ever into the darkness. Thomas felt alone, yet it was said over five thousand people lived in Oxford. Where were they all? There was nothing for it but to find his own way. If this was South Gate, then he should take the first turning right to find Aristotle’s hall in the east of the city.

He shouldered his bundle and set off up the street, careful in the dark to look out for the dung heaps scattered along this