



Ian Morson

# Falconer's Judgement

A MEDIEVAL OXFORD MYSTERY



It is 1261 and Oxford is in turmoil. Pope Alexander has died and in far-off Rome the Cardinals are in vicious conclave. In Oxford, Friar Fordam is preaching the imminence of the Last Judgement. An eclipse of the sun is predicted – and the brother of Bishop Otho, the Papal Legate, is murdered by an arrow.

Master William Falconer has been struggling to decode papers sent to him by his mentor, Roger Bacon, exiled to Paris by the Franciscans. Will they at last realize his dream of flight?

Flight has to wait as Falconer must manoeuvre through the pitfalls of Church and Monarchy to tackle his second, baffling case . . .

And don't miss Ian Morson's first medieval mystery:

## Falconer's Crusade

'An interesting character, eager to explore new thoughts and ideas . . . We shall hear more of the author' *Books*

'Ellis Peters has put a Mills & Boon rose-tint on the Middle Ages: this is much better written, much more satisfying' *Oxford Times*

Cover by Splash Illustration by Martin Baker



**VISTA**

A Vista  
Paperback  
CRIME

**£4.99**

ISBN 0-575-60004-7



9 780575 600041

# Falconer's Judgement



First published in Great Britain 1995  
by Victor Gollancz

This Vista edition published 1996  
Vista is an imprint of the Cassell Group  
Wellington House, 125 Strand, London WC2R 0BB

© Ian Morson 1995

The right of Ian Morson to be identified as author of  
this work has been asserted by him in accordance with  
the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act, 1988.

A catalogue record for this book is  
available from the British Library.

ISBN 0 575 60004 7

Printed and bound in Great Britain by  
Cox & Wyman Ltd, Reading, Berkshire.

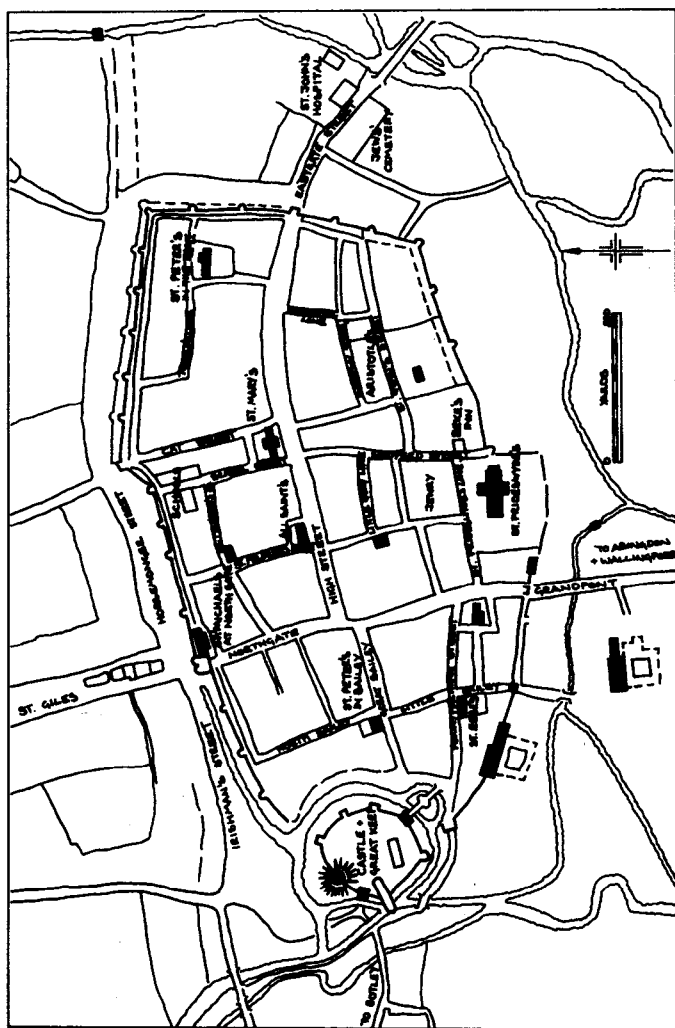
All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be  
reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means,  
electronic or mechanical including photocopying,  
recording or any information storage or retrieval system,  
without prior permission in writing from the publishers.

This book is sold subject to the condition that it shall not,  
by way of trade or otherwise, be lent, resold, hired out, or  
otherwise circulated without the publisher's prior consent  
in any form of binding or cover other than that in which it  
is published and without a similar condition including this  
condition being imposed on the subsequent purchaser.

96 97 98 99 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

## *Preface*

Observant historians will know that the central event described in this story actually happened some years earlier than I place it. At that time Regent Master Falconer was not in Oxford. So I beg the indulgence of historians in making it possible for him to solve the mystery.



## The Beginning

**I**n the beginning, God created the world without light or darkness. He created Heaven and the firmament, but we cannot see Heaven because of its height above the earth and the weakness of our eyes. For the first three days the world was in darkness. God then created the sun, moon and the stars, beasts and cattle, and before He rested on the seventh day He created Adam and Eve.

God set the sun in the East, where the equator is, and on the same day He made the moon and placed it in the East along with the bright stars. The sun outshines the moon and stars because it is Christ the Healer.

The first day of the world was March the eighteenth.

From the *Chronica Oseneiensis*





## *Prologue*

**T**he heavy scent of incense hung over the bedchamber like a miasmal fog that had risen off the River Tiber. The figure on the bed was draped in rich robes and his hands were clasped in silent prayer on his chest. Marble-faced, he seemed already to have metamorphosed into the icy statue that would soon top his tomb, without requiring the intervention of the stone-mason. In the far corner of the room a huddle of figures whispered urgently to each other, their heads close together as if afraid the figure on the bed would hear. One man turned his hooded eyes towards the bed, thinking he discerned movement, and almost craving the final stillness.

Seeing no evidence of the final act, the man turned back to those crowded around him. Although they were closely huddled together, the others seemed separated from him by an invisible barrier. His very presence demanded deference. When he spoke, all hung on his every word.

'I must speak with the Grand Master today. Arrange it, will you.'

The last words were spoken not as a request but a command. He pointed a beefy finger weighed down with rings at one of his hangers-on, who scurried out of the room to do his bidding.

'We cannot allow any other factions to gain a lead over us.'

All those around him knew that the 'other factions' came down to the Colonna family. No other groups were as powerful as the man's family, for he was an Orsini by birth.

'The Grand Master has intelligence agents everywhere between here and England, and if action is called for he will issue

instructions to suit our purpose. The old fool is falling over himself to regain the favour of the Pope. This one or the next.'

The ring of richly garbed men around the speaker sniggered respectfully. But the man's attention was on the prostrate figure on the bed.

The sheets covering the dying man seemed so heavy as to press the life out of the frail figure. As if in protest at the group ignoring his struggle with the Angel of Death, he took a deep breath. The air snorted in through his angular nose, and the group of conspirators abruptly ceased their impromptu conclave. They hurried towards the bed, their heavy robes raising a cloud of dust from the floor. A myriad motes were transformed into sparkling jewels in the single shaft of Mediterranean sunlight that cut through the closed shutters into the darkened sickroom.

The leader of the group peered closely at the man's half-closed lids, but could discern no awareness in the eyes. He felt a soft breath on his face, and fancied he could smell the odour of cold earth on it. He looked back at the circle of faces around the bed, each with its own expression. Some were framed by fear, others by keen anticipation. Every one had good reason to wish to know the fate of the man on the bed.

Cardinal Benedetto gave the barest of negative movements of his head, and all concealed their feelings behind downcast eyes.

A slight figure stood alone at the foot of the bed as though barred from the circle of power around the dying man. He murmured a soft prayer of thanks for the life that continued to cling to the frail body on the bed. He had examined the man's urine that morning and there was no sign that he would die today, despite the apparent wishes of some of his colleagues. He set great store by the examination of urine as an indicator of the fate of the sick and felt a complicity with the man's hold on life. He resented the others in the group behaving as though the man was already gone, his power to be grasped and taken by another rather than dispensed by God. They even spoke of the campaign in

England in the most venal terms, mocking the sycophantic English King's efforts to buy favours for his family.

He lingered by the bed after the others had drifted back to their corner to continue their conspiracy. Thin and ascetic, he could not condone their greed, or the extraction of funds from remote parts of the Holy Roman Empire. The Church was too great to soil its hands with the coinage of bribery. He looked down at the figure on the bed, and saw more than a frail human body almost reduced to the skeleton it would soon be. He saw the long line of the man's predecessors linking the present with the early days of the Church and dreamed of himself carrying that holy torch forward. Master James of Troyes, Patriarch of Jerusalem, pulled himself up short – such thoughts made him no better than the others in the room.

Pope Alexander might be dying but while he lived he was still God's Vicar on Earth.



## The First Seal

**I**n the year 1239 that terrible race of inhuman souls known as the Tartars came swarming from the remote fastnesses of the East. They were as one with their steeds, never leaving their backs. To many they were the embodiment of the ancient centaur. Murdering all who stood in their way with sword and with bow and arrow, they laid waste to Hungary and its neighbouring lands. Thus is the First Seal broken. For it is written in Revelation that then a horseman with a bow came forth and rode out conquering the land.

From the *Chronica Oseneiensis*



## Chapter One

**T**he crowd filled the crossways at the bottom of the lane leading to Westminster Hall, the home of the King's Exchequer in London. Some knelt in the mud, their hands clasped in fearful entreaty to the Almighty. Others stood with their mouths agape, rooted to the earth as though in a trance. At the core of this silent knot of humanity, like a spider at the centre of his web, stood a Dominican friar, his hands raised to the heavens. His face was contorted with fervour, bulbous veins pulsating on the side of his head laid bare by the severe tonsure. He invoked the forgiveness of God for the palpable sins of those who stood around him, his voice piercing and lifting to the skies.

The fear gripping the crowd had come upon them because of the friar's words leading up to the prayer. He had assured them the Apocalypse was nigh.

'Did not your teachings warn you that the Sealed Book was fixed with seven seals? I have already told you of the consequences of the first five seals being broken. I am now here to tell you that at the breaking of the sixth seal, Revelation tells us that there would be earthquakes and the sun would turn black. All manner of storms would ravage the land.'

He paused and scanned the crowd.

'I need not remind you of the turmoil of the last years.'

His gaze pierced each and every person who stood in the crowd, as though his eyes could read to the depths of everyone's soul. And truly each person there was reminded of their own tragedy. It was only three years since, in 1258, a famine had ravaged England and one man recalled eating the bark off the trees to



survive. In the year before that, another man's house had been swept away by floods caused by endless heavy rain. An older man, with a longer memory, remembered the year of 1252 when an unusually hot summer had claimed the lives of his grandparents, who died unable to draw breath. That same year a terrifying thunderstorm had raged on the day after the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin. Every person in the crowd provided his own natural disaster to fulfil the prophecy of the friar preacher.

His voice then broke into all their separate visions.

'At the breaking of the seventh seal you will all be judged and few will be called to paradise. The world will be rent asunder and there will be a new heaven and a new earth. The new Jerusalem will descend and God will have his dwelling on earth.'

He paused enough to give the crowd a crumb of hope, then dashed it from their hungry lips.

'But the cowards, the faithless, and the fornicators will burn for ever in the sulphurous lake.'

Now his prayerful invocation was stirring every soul to think of purifying his life before the impending Apocalypse. Every soul, that is, but the big, raw-boned man who stood at the periphery of the mob. William Falconer, Regent Master of the University of Oxford, was passing through London after his fruitless journey to Paris. Spying the crowd blocking the crossways, he had dismounted from the nag that was carrying him, albeit at a snail's pace, to Oxford and approached the throng with curiosity. He now regretted the waste of his time.

He had heard news of these apocalyptic visionaries, but this was his first encounter with one. He was not impressed. He thought the friar resembled a demented magpie pecking over the carrion remains. Indeed the man strutted round the patch of bare earth enclosed by the crowd exactly like the bird he so closely resembled.

Falconer snorted with laughter at the image he had conjured up in his mind. He turned to the man standing next to him at the back of the crowd, ready to pass on his amusement. All he