

A Speculation George Robson

As well as his three novels JMF wrote two published short stories -

A Midsummer Night's Marriage and *Charalampia*.

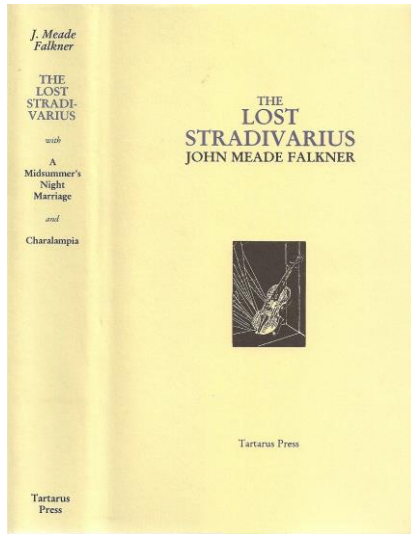
Surely all Society members have read and much admire the novels, but I recently realised I had not read the short stories.

I was lucky enough through Amazon to purchase in pristine condition a Tartarus Press edition of *The Lost Stradivarius* which included the two short stories.

Having read *The Lost Stradivarius* many times I turned straight to the first of the short stories - the first in the book and the first to be written - *A Midsummer Night's Marriage* (1896).

After reading the very first page I had a feeling that the story-line was somewhat familiar to me. And as I read on more and more did this

feeling of *déjà-vu* strengthen. Into my memory came the Northumbrian legend of *Sir Guy the Seeker*, and I determined to find what I could of the origins of this folk-tale, study the text of both stories and then put my findings/thoughts to the pen.



Kenneth Warren writes of *A Midsummer Night's Marriage*:

Symbolism is heavy, and perhaps reveals much about the author. Among other questions, one is left wondering whether Cecilia, an idealised heroine, is modelled on someone he himself had admired from afar, or whether he had some early experience which made him feel that for him too the married state would be tragic. When he wrote the story he was 38 and still single.

He goes on to report that the critic Haley described the story as *an oddly wooden tale... told in the flattest style imaginable* but that some years later he tempered his views with this more favourable judgement - *the flat matter-of-factness of the telling casts its own spell.*

Kenneth Warren himself is of the view that *a less tolerant critic might suggest that contrived coincidence and the black hand of fate give it a starkness and artificiality which is unsatisfying. (1)*

As is to be expected of any literary work, opinions of quality and style differ. It needs to be noted that *A Midsummer Night's Marriage* is an early work of JMF and it was to be a number of years before his major work *The Nebuly Coat* went to the printers. However the quest here is to concentrate on the **plot** and whether or not it is original.

In this quest we need here to divert for a while:

Most people are versed in at least some of the folk-tales that every area of our country has had handed down over many centuries. Usually in folk-tales the author is unknown but the story has been kept alive by communities and passed through the generations. There is little doubt that in the early stages of their history these stories were believed but now we have come to calling them inventions of popular imaginations. Though largely fictitious they have lived on and on and have the power today of charming us.

Some stories grew up as attempts to explain unusual features in the landscapes - a deep ravine, a large cairn, a village name, a ruined castle - and often serve some useful moral purpose. Some contain a kernel of historical truth and others are accounts of dream-like experiences which lead to some dilemma or having to confront some awkward decision.

In Northumberland, as elsewhere, there is a rich heritage of folk-tales of all these types. One ‘dream experience’ tale centres on the ruins of spectacular Dunstanburgh Castle, built in 1313 and proudly standing on the very edge of a high cliff over looking the North Sea.



As with most folk-tales the plot is not complicated, indeed it is simple, and is consequently easily memorised. It has its origins lost in the mist of time and is known as *Sir Guy the Seeker*.

Dunstanburgh Castle

Might it be claimed that *A Midsummer Night's Marriage* is an expanded version of *Sir Guy the Seeker*? (2)

Sir Guy the Seeker alongside A Midsummer Night's Marriage

Both Sir Guy and Santal are travelling in desolate areas during severe storms.

In the folk tale we read of *a fierce wind... black clouds... hailstones... darkness.... sharp lightning flashes.*

In *A Midsummer Night's Marriage* the weather conditions are put as *black with ominous thunder-clouds... rising wind... mutterings of distant thunder... heavy raindrops... night growing exceedingly dark.* Sir Guy and Santal both come across impressive buildings and hope for shelter. On dismounting both see their horses panic and gallop off into the darkness.

In the folk-tale we read - *his horse plunged and bolted over the fields.* JMF's story tells us Santal's horse *breaking loose rushed madly away* into the darkness. Sir Guy knocks on the door of the building with the shaft of his spear. Santal does this with the butt of his whip. Sir Guy is welcomed and guided into the building by *a hideous gigantic figure,*

while Santal is welcomed and guided into the building by a strange figure dressed 'entirely in black'. Both are conducted into large, sparsely furnished halls. One is described as *a lofty banqueting hall* and the other as *a vast hall*.

In the Dunstanburgh hall lay *a beautiful princess... dressed in a long robe of snow-white silk*. In the Bejant hall *there entered a very beautiful girl of eighteen or nineteen years... Her dress was of pure white silk*. At Sir Guy's first sight of the princess *his heart filled with pity. Her loveliness took his breath away*. On first seeing Cecilia Santal felt *deeply moved, his sorrow and sympathy overcoming his astonishment. He saw how wonderfully beautiful she was*.

In the folk-tale the dramatic climax comes with Sir Guy ignoring the choice of a sword and choosing to blow a horn in the hope of shattering the crystal globe that encases the princess after which *the room seemed to grow full of thick vapours and Sir Guy fell to the ground*. He awakens to find himself no longer in the hall but transported to outside the castle's walls.

In JMF's work the climax comes with the priest confirming the marriage between Santal and Cecilia, immediately after which Santal felt a heavy hand on his shoulder and the next he knows is waking up to find himself not at Bejant Place but transported to the bedroom of the very Winterbourne inn where he had earlier planned to spend the night.

Therefore both protagonists are suddenly and cruelly transported, separated from hopes of happiness. Sir Guy *became a hermit, never straying far from the castle. He spent many days and nights searching... He could not put out of his mind the memory of the beautiful princess*. Santal became anchored to the Bejant Arms where *he went out generally only to visit the ruins of Bejant Place where... he not unfrequently (sic.) passed the entire night; indeed his chief solace consisted in haunting this spot. The image of Cecilia was ever present with him*.

We are told Sir Guy died without ever finding his beautiful princess, lonely and his health broken. Thought at first to be dead and gone by the people of the nearby village of Craster, it slowly became evident that Sir Guy's ghost is lurking to this very day:



Good peasants, tell, why ring that knell?
- 'tis the seeker-Guy we toll -
His race is run, his search is done,
God's mercy on his soul.
The villagers round know well the sound
And when they hear it poured
Hark! Hark! they cry, the Seeker-Guy
Groans for the giant's sword.
But still he seeks and aye he seeks
And seeks, and seeks in vain;
And still repeats to all he meets
Could I find the sword again! (3)

The Lilburn Tower

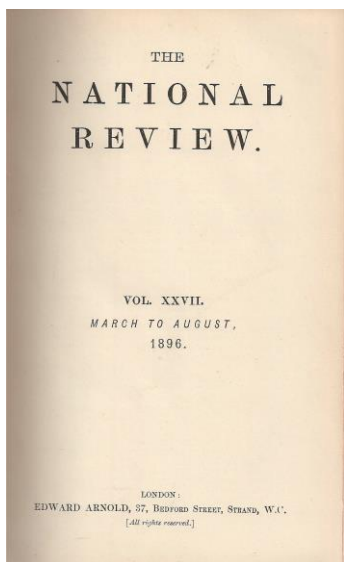
(where it is said Sir Guy gained entry into the castle)

Santal also becomes *sadly changed*. *His once robust health had completely given away..... He grew thin and weak* before contracting *a severe cold* during a night spent in the ruined chapel of Bejant Place, and *on the 20th June... breathed his last.*

As with Sir Guy Santal is fated never to be reunited with his love. His funeral is attended by mysterious, ghostlike figures.

The 'bones' of the plots of *Sir Guy the Seeker* and *A Midsummer Night's Marriage* are therefore very similar indeed. However, as befits a folk-tale, *Sir Guy the Seeker* has a simple plot-line. There are only three characters and there is little attempt to delineate or dissect them. Events move quickly. It is a tale which has a moral but the reader is left to deduce it for himself.

JMF's story has wrapped around the bones of the plot details surrounding the life of Anthony Santal, views of marriage, issues concerning Roman Catholicism, transposition between the sixteenth and the nineteenth centuries. There are a number of characters who appear, some descriptively 'fleshed out'. The story is something more than a folk-tale.



A Midsummer Night's Marriage was written in 1896, and published in *The National Review*, by which time thirty-eight - year - old JMF would have had good knowledge of rural Northumberland and, with his enquiring and retentive mind, its traditions and folklore. By the time of JMF's first visit to Northumberland many of the folk-tales had progressed from merely verbal to written form and a number of collected stories in book form were on the market, often bought as presents.

The National Review

(published by Edward Arnold, who also published *Moonfleet* and *The Nebuly Coat*)

As resident tutor to two of Sir Andrew Noble's sons and after this a family friend, JMF had on many occasions over a period of thirteen years (since 1883) joined the family at their Northumberland summer retreats of firstly Lorbottle Hall and after this Nunykirk Hall (both in hamlets themselves boasting their own widely-known folk-tales). Perhaps copies of books containing Northumbrian folk-tales appeared in the Halls and it is very likely the Nobles along with JMF would have had outings to the likes of Lindisfarne, Alnwick Castle, Bamburgh Castle, Warkworth Castle, Hadrian's Wall and the Farne Islands with their Grace Darling and St. Cuthbert associations.

On the coast south of the Farnes are the remote and imposing ruins of Dunstanburgh Castle. Inaccessible by road, everyone who manages to walk to them is impressed. Although prohibited since the 1970s, visitors to the castle invariably descended into the large, damp, atmospheric dungeon which would induce all sorts of imaginings. The history and romanticism of Dunstanburgh could well have infected JMF with visions of King Edward II, John of Gaunt, struggles between Lancastrians and Yorkists, skirmishes with the Scots and, very likely, the legend of Sir Guy the Seeker.

Plagiarism is a word we would **never** even whisper when discussing JMF. But might we be allowed to wonder whether consciously or subconsciously JMF had in mind the *Sir Guy the Seeker* folk-tale when penning *A Midsummer Night's Marriage*? When considering this further we might bear in mind this passage from the JMF obituary written for the Armstrong - Whitworth bi-annual internal Journal by company secretary Wilfrid Cochrane:

A born storyteller, he had the knack of attracting the most remarkable of adventures - at least by the time he had finished telling about them they appeared most remarkable, and he was too an unflinching fund of information on every sort of unusual subject - the only difficulty in this case being, as with his stories, to know exactly where strict fact ended and imagination began. However, fact or fiction was not of importance when one set in the other scale the exhilaration and refreshment that he had, to such an exceptional degree, the gift of dispensing.

Further to this George H. Atkins' remarks in his companion sheet to the Puffin edition of *Moonfleet* are relevant: *Meade Falkner had the skill to be realistic in blending fact with fiction... Meade Falkner did use forms of disguise... to borrow features from another locality... to invent hybrid places... to distort distances. He suggests we can sometimes imagine there is a tinge of mischievous humour lurking somewhere.*

Henry Newbolt, a regular visitor to the Noble houses and a friend and admirer of JMF wrote: *Above all he loved... the folklore of Old England, the local speech and customs of the country villages. It was believed, and not by way of disparagement, that he **wrote or re-wrote some of the best folk-songs himself**, and taught them carefully to old men and children that they might be rediscovered by laborious antiquaries.* Here, surely, is the kernel of this discussion.

Are there early examples of these skills in *A Midsummer Night's Marriage*? Is the story an unacknowledged reworking of an old Northumbrian folk-tale? There is room for speculation.

NOTES:

- (1) *John Meade Falkner - A Paradoxical Life* - Kenneth Warren
- (2) The quotations of this folk-tale are taken from a version of the early 1800s.
- (3) Verses from *The Wandering Knight* - James Service (a poem written in 1838)

REFERENCES:

- F. Grice *Folk Tales of the North Country* (Thomas Nelson and Sons)
- J.M. Falkner *The Lost Stradivarius with A Midsummer's (sic.) Night Marriage and Charalampia* (Tartarus Press.)
- Websites Dunstanburgh Castle and the legend of Sir Guy the Seeker.