Charalampia: A quasi-Byzantine romance?

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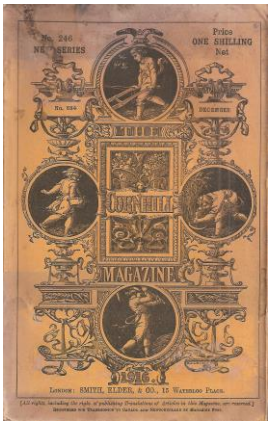
John Meade Falkner's career as a published novelist came to an end with the appearance of *The Nebuly Coat* in 1903. However, one more fictional work appeared in print, much later. The *Cornhill Magazine* of December 1916 contained the short story *Charalampia*. No one could claim that *Charalampia* is a major piece of writing, yet I hope to demonstrate that it is not without interesting features.



> "Coming as it does in the middle of an issue in which the War figures prominently, it strikes a strange note, but a very beautiful one…there is a beauty, a mellowness, and an artistic artlessness that gives the whole tale an air of simplicity and wonder."
>
> Sir William Haley (1957)

Falkner is very specific in dating his story to A.D. 596. His heroine, Princess Charalampia, is the fifteen year-old only child of the Duke of Petraia. He is less specific about geography than about date, but Petraia is Greek-speaking and bears a certain resemblance to Constantinople. Charalampia's mother has died when she was young and she is brought up under the direction of a gouvernante. She is headstrong, neglects her studies and does not read the Persian manuscripts her father leaves for her so that she should become proficient in the Persian language. The Prince of Caucasia arrives to ask for Charalampia's hand in marriage. He wishes to marry her and she is not unwilling. Unfortunately the King of Caucasia stipulates that his son's bride speak Persian, so that she may converse with his Persian subjects. The Duke is horrified when he discovers his daughter's ignorance. The Prince returns to his father to report that she cannot speak Persian, announcing that he will not press his suit for a year. At the suggestion of the Grand Silentiary, her father sends Charalampia for a few

months to the Convent of the Panachrantos of the Order of the Acemites at Panormium where she can learn Persian and some discipline. Charalampia also seeks a salve for her freckles, as she is convinced that this is why the Prince left. This can only be found from the holy man Paulus, whose cell is on the way to the convent.

The main part of the story is an account of her journey to the Convent of the Panachrantos and her experience there. She learns Persian and becomes (a little) less headstrong. The holy man Paulus gives her the salve for freckles- although its effect is not quite what Charalampia wishes! She returns to Petraia and, after further complications resulting from her contrariness, marries the Prince, now King, of Caucasia. They found a dynasty, which unites their two territories for 700 years. The whole is presented as a rather tongue-in-cheek fable, whose moral is the phrase that Falkner skilfully inserts in various guises throughout the story:

Make the most of occasion. Drink of the brook in the way. You do not know when you may reach the next well.

Charalampia ignores this advice before eventually taking it and emerges triumphant - but a slight ambiguity in what happens suggests that she would have emerged triumphant anyway!

In spite of the highly specific date the vaguely Byzantine world of *Charalampia* bears as little relationship to any historical reality as the world of The Idylls of the King does to medieval England. The name Petraia does exist as a suburb of Constantinople but it did not have a duke- nor were there any in the sixth century. The references to the Ministry of War with its high tower and to a church dome convey the Constantinople that Falkner knew rather than that of AD 596. There was no kingdom of Caucasia and a dynasty lasting 700 years has no foundation in reality! Similarly the 'Convent of the Order of the Acemites' bears no relation whatever to any real traditions of Greek Orthodoxy. In the first place there is no structure of religious orders in the Orthodox churches matching that of the west. Houses may keep a common rule but they will not be organizationally linked. Nor, for that matter, had a structure of religious orders developed by the sixth century in the West. Greek nuns would not have known Latin or cited Homer. It should be said that Falkner is not unique among writers of his era in his ignorance of Orthodoxy. *The*

Dancing Floor by John Buchan is fiction of a higher order than *Charalampia* but Buchan still expects a village priest in Greece to know Latin and to be celibate.

What Falkner has done here is to create a Byzantine fantasy world that parallels the medieval worlds of Tennyson and Keats. The holy man Paulus may not bear much resemblance to any Greek saint but he stands firmly in the tradition of the beadsman in The Eve of Saint Agnes. Of course Falkner here has a degree of lightheartedness that neither Keats nor, even less, Tennyson aims at. The *Journal* has already included an excellent article by Dale Fraser about Falkner's antiquarian allusions and inventions (1). I would not presume to repeat this, merely noting Falkner's exuberant use of classical Greek language and literature. On the whole he prefers his own coinages to actual Greek religious titles. For example, he uses the word Eporthrion for Matins rather than the actual word Orthros. Panachrantos, 'all-unstained', does exist, although it is not a common title of the Mother of God and is a distinctly uncommon word. The frogs by Lake Astyanax, until the holy man Paulus converts them, croak 'a jargon of "Brek-kek-ke-kex-koax-koax", which had come down to them from pagan times'. It is, in fact from Aristophanes' The Frogs! Paulus' influence over animals has another source. As a resident of Durham, Falkner will have known the stories of Godric and Cuthbert and their influence on animals. He may possibly have come across the similar stories of the Desert Fathers. He has clearly done sufficient reading in Procopius or other sources of Byzantine history to encounter the term 'Grand Silentiary'.

Possibly the most original feature of the story for admirers of Falkner's fiction is Princess Charalampia herself. His treatment of young female leading characters shows some development over the three novels. Constance Maltravers is completely passive. Grace Maskew is strong on endurance but is still someone to whom things happen. Anastasia Joliffe shows a more decided personality. Her rejection of Westray's preposterous proposal represents a superb piece of writing but still the main focus is on the characters of Lord Blandamer, Westray and Sharnall. Charalampia represents a definite progression. She is the most dynamic personality in the story, the person around whom the action revolves and she emerges triumphant in spite of her missed opportunities. Beside her the Prince of Caucasia is rather a colourless character, almost a male counterpart of Constance Maltravers. We are never even told his name.

Significantly, the son of the couple is named Charalampius, who becomes the founder of the Charalampiad Dynasty. Her characterization demonstrates Falkner's unpredictability and elusiveness. From both his adult personality and his other writings the last heroine one would have expected from him is a well-realised teenage girl- a soul sister to Claire Bretecher's Agrippina. Clearly he quietly observed the girls in both his own and the Noble families.

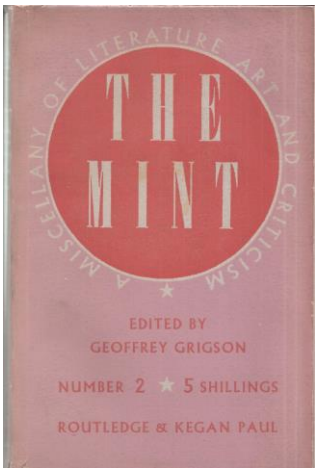
In *Charalampia* Falkner demonstrates his powers of description of artefacts. To take two examples, the Persian manuscripts and the Prince of Caucasia's presents to Charalampia are superbly realized. At one point in the narrative these descriptive powers are used to telling effect.

In the *Cornhill Magazine* of 1916 *Charalampia* is surrounded by titles like 'Tales of a Flying Patrol", "In the North Sea" and 'Dublin Days: the Rising", by Mrs. Hamilton Norway. Falkner's romantic fantasy world seems remote from these urgent contemporary concerns. Yet obliquely the world of 1916 suddenly intervenes. For the most of the narrative the authorial presence is mild and unobtrusive. However, after describing how the holy man Paulus has exorcized the cockroaches from the kitchen of the convent of the Panachrantos, the author comments:

There was never another cockroach seen in the Panachrantos till the unspeakable Turks took the house in 1438 and turned the great Church into a mosque. They covered with whitewash all the deep-blue mosaics and the regiment of Holy Peltasts, and the Panagia herself; though the golden wings of the four archangels are still seen supporting the dome, and sometimes, when a patch of whitewash flakes off, a pale and thin-faced Saint looks out.

The change of tone is striking. The comment adds nothing to the story and we remember that 1916 was the year after Gallipoli, of which the *Cornhill* readers would be well aware. Yet Falkner had sold arms to these very Turks whom he now describes as unspeakable. His letters from as little as five years before show that he got on well with the Turkish officials he met and that he liked Constantinople as a city. Is he here using fiction to deal with confused emotions or explore the ethical contradictions he could not publicly acknowledge? Is he simply writing something to match the public mood? The second sentence bears interesting testimony to his visits to

Constantinople and to his powers of careful observation. As descriptive writing on architectural features it stands to be compared with *The Nebuly Coat.* He has clearly in mind Hagia Sophia, where the archangels in the apse were never painted over, and probably other churches converted to mosques. Within two decades Ataturk would secularize many of these mosques and the work of restoration begin, so that this description has a degree of historic interest beyond the intentions of its author. The author swiftly returns to his Byzantine fantasy with an attractive evocation of Christmas at the convent of the Panachrantos, yet, for two sentences the transition to reality and time present has been made.



Geoffrey Grigson, a critic whose praise had to be earned, admired Falkner. He included *Charalampia*, together with some poems in his anthology, *The Mint* in 1948. (2)

It has since been republished by the Tartarus Press in 2000, with an introduction by Mark Valentine, a member of the John Meade Falkner Society.

If not a major piece of Falkner's writing, the story would lead readers who had not previously encountered his work to explore further. It increases the sense of regret for the fiction that got lost or never reached the page and demonstrates that he would have continued to surprise us.

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(1) Dale Nelson 'Antiquarian Allusions and Inventions in *Charalampia*' - The John Meade Falkner Society *Journal* Vol. 1 No. 4 (2003) pp. 25-27

(2) Geoffrey Grigson *The Mint 2* [London, 1948], pp.34-57