Mr. Meade Falkner's Last Tales – The West Door & Other Stories (Arnold)

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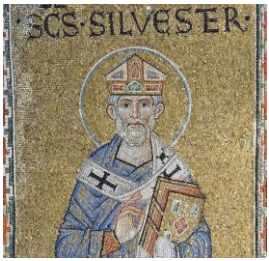
Mr Meade Falkner is the author of three previous fictions that have many admirers. *Moonfleet*, that tale of smuggling in Dorset, is already a favourite for children but also appeals to the child of wonder in all of us. *The Lost Stradivarius* is a masterly exercise in the macabre, just such a book as Dr James might have given us had he favoured the longer story form. And as for *The Nebuly Coat* – why, it is quite indescribable a romance. To say it concerns an inheritance makes it sound like so many of the more contrived mysteries of the last century: and to say that it has also a crumbling minister church may suggest some gothic extravaganza. It is neither of those, but a subtle, humane, delicate study of impoverished visionaries sustained by forlorn hopes in the little town where they live: with a distinguished villain too, whom we almost cannot help ourselves from admiring, despite his sins; and a quite enough satisfying enigma at its heart, a curious painting, with strange heraldry. We must content ourselves with remarking that many of those who read Mr Meade Falkner's third and best book feel compelled at once to tell others about it: and that is a recommendation any author should cherish.

Mr Meade Falkner died in 1932 without, it seemed, leaving us any more of his splendid tales. A tale was told that the author's fourth romance, well-advanced in manuscript, had been lost upon a train; that the author, with too modest an estimation of his story-telling, had made no close enquiry about it; and that, busy as he was on the board of a major industrial enterprise, he had decided against reconstructing the work. Mr Meade Falkner's followers, when they heard all these rumours, repined greatly amongst themselves. Some

even went so far as to make enquiries of the railway authorities, in case in some dusty corner of a lost property office there might still be, some many years later, an attaché case holding the mislaid manuscript; but in vain.

However, though it must seem that we will never see again another full length romance from so seasoned, so piquant a pen, we are now presented with what must certainly be the very next best thing: a collection of shorter pieces from his hand. These, it seems, were found tied up in a bundle among his manuscripts by one of the devoted friends Falkner so firmly made: they were evidently written for the author's private recreation, and never seem to have been sent to any editor, though there would have been many very glad to have them. They seem, says the anonymous editor, to be quite finished in form: a verdict with which this reviewer would readily agree. And, although it would not be reasonable to expect the stories to soar to the heights of the three fine novels, they all evince the distinguished mind, the fastidious vocabularist, the delicate and indulgent commentator upon human vanities, that we know so well from these.



Five stories only have survived: our introducer to them says there may have been more, but, if so, diligent search has not uncovered them. Three of them reflect the writer's keen interest in the antiquarian and in ecclesiology, such as we might easily discern from his novels. '*St Sylvester's Eve*' is perhaps the slightest. The editor tells us that this feast held an especial attraction for Falkner: readers who do not have the saints' calendar at their fingertips may know it better as New Year's Eve. The saint was the 4th century Pope who secured official recognition

of the faith from the Emperor: his emblem is a chained dragon. The author makes a whimsical fancy of the appearance of a (fairly benign) such creature in the pale, salamander clouds of an English winter's eve.

'Painted Autumn' is perhaps appreciated best as a mood piece. Falkner conveys the melancholy joy of the season with finesse: "the citron patches on the elms,"; "the chrysanthemums dripping in the garden lane"; "the snow-cloud on the downs" hardly able to hold back winter's head. His traveller stops to admire the blazing red and gold of creepers upon the wall of a ruined house: in the dim light they seem to form a shape, a design, like some escutcheon of old. He makes a quick sketch. Later, among the drowsy papers and books of his study, he finds just such a blazon, belonging to an extinct family connected with some tragedy. The plot need hardly detain us: everything is in the sorcery of the author's telling. Few have evoked Autumn in England so well.

All of Mr Falkner's novels had their main scene in this country, and a great part of their attraction rests in his ability to evoke the local scene so that it seems familiar to us, as if we had ourselves walked the shores, the city squares, or the streets of the dreaming minster town. It will come as a surprise, therefore, to find that two of his tales are set much further afield. '*The Spices of Hadramaut'* introduces us to the keen mind of an explorer from the days of adventure, when maps still showed great blank spaces. He has been out beyond Yemen, into the furnace of noon and the nights of cold purple, out a thousand miles from Aden. All the while he knows that his quest is not for the sake of study, of geography or archaeology,

but a search for something else, which he can only name “the outer silence”. Just as in the burnt air he at times thinks he senses the spices from the bazaar, and his tongue tastes iced fruit, so at moments he feels the nearness of this rarer goal, this elusive vision. Dwelling upon it, he does not heed the difficult route to the few green oases. The story is notable for the acuteness of Mr Falkner’s insight into the minds of such men; the more remarkable since all that we know of his own life bespeaks the study and the library.

The best of the stories, perhaps, also goes far from England’s shores, indeed to Constantinople. Two men, merchants, are hurrying through the ill-lit streets of what was once, they remember, the capital of Christendom, known to men then simply as ‘the City’, a place of purple and gold. But now it is reduced: “the ways were deep in freezing slush, the bitter north wind racked the street, and our feet were muffled with the hush of falling snow.”

They are prosperous – well fed, well clothed in furs and cloaks – and expect soon to find their hotel, their opulent caravanserai for the night. And yet the way seems long – and shadows like spectres seem to rise on either side. I shall say no more of ‘*Obols for Belisarius’* or the reader will be indignant with me, but just this: that Falkner achieves a fine contrast between the imperial past of Byzantium, and its condition now, and awakens in his characters too a long-buried sense that they must seek for other things than just prosperity if they are to be fully men.

Something of the same atmosphere, but if possible even more delicately limned, may be seen in '*The West Door*".

For many years a couple of university men have spent their holidays church-hunting, seeking out the noblest fanes in all the shires that they can find: and not noblest only, but also the most humble and unregarded. They have their specialisms; one is an amateur of heraldry in churches (we may suppose we know his original); the other of carven wood, in choir-stalls and screens, pulpits and benches. Both are in the autumn of their years. They have had a good day, with much to interest them, when they espy over a hill a spire they do not know, where no church is shown. Of course, to this they must make their way, though the dews of evening are falling and the red sunset fading. The echo of summer owls accompanies their footsteps as they pass through the darkening glades to their goal. The lich-gate is open; the west door seems to have retained something of the sunset's last light; they enter in. And there this reviewer must leave them, yet I feel certain the reader will not.