

**“Accident or Foul Play?” The death of Mr Sharnall in
The Nebuly Coat
Peter Davey**

This is the choice presented at the inquest into Mr Sharnall’s death. Does murder take place once, or even twice, in *The Nebuly Coat*, or is the author just playing with us? When John Meade Falkner said of Lord Blandamer, “I am quite in the dark as to whether he killed the organist or not, but somehow I don’t think he did”, he is taking a delight in being disingenuous. By distancing himself from his responsibility as novelist, he was aiming to heighten the mystery of this dark Romance.

But let us take a closer look at the red herrings he sets for us. First of all, who is the strange man who visits Martin Joliffe on the day of his death with the offer to buy the painting? The only description we are given is that his hair is wavy like Anastasia’s (Ch.5) In chapter 6 Lord Blandamer is said to have dark hair, and in chapter 18 he and Anastasia are both described as being dark. They might even be taken for brother or sister. Later, after Martin dies, Dr Ennefer states that he has been given an overdose of sleeping draught, and Miss Joliffe is made to feel guilty since there is no one else who might have administered it. Or is there? Rumour has it that Lord Blandamer is “the very wickedest man that ever lived”. And there is no one else who would have been so keen to buy the painting? So this is not, then, the first murder in the story, and does it not

**First edition of *The Nebuly Coat*
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suggest that Blandamer is capable of murdering Sharnall?

Let us now return to the inquest. Dr Ennefer is obliged to admit that “one would scarcely expect so serious an injury to have been caused” by Mr Sharnall’s head striking the pedal-note which was “a yielding substance”. But because the doctor cannot offer another explanation, it does not mean the reader has to accept it, any more than Mr Westray does. The inference is that the death blow has been caused by the hammer about which the poor victim hallucinated.

So who wielded the hammer? When Falkner said, “I think that the suspicious figure who Mr Westray saw lurking between the buttresses on the night

of the murder could not have been Lord Blandamer - because Lord Blandamer was at Cullerne Road station taking his ticket just at the time that Westray saw the figure", he is again being disingenuous to lead us astray. In fact, the author is almost certainly telling the truth. In chapter 2 when Westray is accompanying Sharnall past the old chapel known as the Bonding House, "the architect fancied that he discerned the figure of a man standing in the shadow of the end buttress. But, as he took a few steps nearer, he saw that he had been deceived by a shadow".

If he can be the victim of fancy once, it can happen again. As he approaches the Minster where the dead Sharnall lies, he has "the impression of someone standing in the shadow". This time the description is more elaborate. "The illusion was so perfect that he thought he could make out the figure of a man, in a long loose cape that flapped in the wind." It is, nonetheless, still an illusion. What makes it appear more credible is that we recall the description of "a man of middle height, who wore a loose overcoat, with the cape tossed lightly over the left shoulder," (chapter 9) a description associated with Lord Blandamer's departure from Mr Janaway's house.



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The fact is, Westray's perceptions are unreliable, and Lord Blandamer had sufficient time to murder Mr Sharnall and reach Cullerne Road station on foot. Falkner gives us a precedent for Blandamer changing his mind about his travel plans. It is eight o'clock in the evening on the Saturday when Blandamer is invited into the Janaway house. "I should be very glad to rest a few minutes before my train leaves", he says, but ends up staying until "the night was far advanced", possibly midnight. But on the day of Sharnall's death, when Blandamer "tells them at Bellevue Lodge that he was going away by the afternoon train", perhaps he does not change his mind. Maybe this misinformation is designed to divert attention from himself while he pursues Sharnall in order to kill him.

The final evidence we need to deduce that Lord Blandamer is guilty of murder is given by Falkner himself in his resolution of the plot. The author had created two polar characters: one, aristocratic, worldly, mysterious, powerful and wealthy; the other, insipid, inexperienced, puritanical and a snob. There is no way that the novel could have ended with Westray bringing Blandamer to justice. Falkner must have viewed the dramatic finale where Blandamer heroically saves the architect from death, only to be crushed himself as the spire falls, as the perfect redemption for the guilty, colourful villain.