Writers in the James Tradition
J. Meade Falkner
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By an improbability of a type more often encountered in fiction than in life, John Meade Falkner [1858-1932] rose from being a tutor in an armament manufacturer's household, to being chairman of the company. An odd career for an ecclesiastical antiquarian, the author of some forgotten verse and three cherished novels, each quite distinctive.

The Lost Stradivarius [1895] is Falkner's ghost story, albeit not strongly in the manner of M.R . James. It could be counted as a precursor of Oliver Onions' *The Beckoning Fair One*: in both, the male protagonist is gradually seduced away from the woman who loves him by a ghost that is associated with a passage of music, a process that ends with the protagonist's death. The seduction theme is made overt: John Maltravers' mother-in-law conjectures that her daughter "has some rival in his affections". While the "Beckoning Fair One" is a female presence, the ghost in Falkner's book is male, and there is a suggestion that Maltravers is led into homosexual sentiment under its influence: part of the book's air of 'Nineties' decadence.

Brooding over the novel are not only the ghost, but physical decay [the health of the main character; his Italian residence] and antiquarian details about violin manufacture, Neoplatonism, university life in the 1840s, etc.

Falkner does not engineer a plot, nor attempt a style, that emphasises terror or eerie suspense; John Maltravers seems always to have been doomed because of his aesthetic absorptions, which appear to preclude a happy union with a flesh and blood woman, and so the moods characteristic of most of the book are anxiety and regret. For much of the story - the narrative of Maltravers' sister - it is as if we are reading about the slow decline of someone due to a wasting disease, its stages marked by Maltravers' increasing abstraction, secretiveness, pallor, and thinness, even a change in his handwriting. Falkner's ghostly scenes are well executed, but, as they come relatively early in the story, they are restrained, in favour of later developments.

The theme is possession, both in the ordinary sense and in the psychic. The displacement of Constance from Maltravers' affections - she is 'dispossessed' of her husband - proceeds from his jealous possessiveness of the violin , which he finds in a secret

compartment in his Oxford rooms, and keeps despite the doubtfulness of his right to it. The book's artistry is subtly demonstrated in that, while Maltravers has taken the Stradivarius violin from a cupboard, he himself 'retreats' to the 'cupboard' of his room at the family house.

Unless I am mistaken, authentic accounts of psychical possession relate immediate changes in the physical appearance and/or manner of the person possessed. The very gradual submersion of the original personality that occurs here, as well as in Onions' story, seems strongly coloured by the Romantic interest in progressive insanity.

The completion of Maltravers' possession and his spiritual ruin are carefully foreshadowed by a reference to what his sister calls the "departure of the angels" prior to the destruction of Jerusalem [pp. 96-7 of the 1991 World Classics edition]. The historian Josephus said the cry "Let us remove hence!" was heard before the Temple was destroyed in AD 70. Probably coincidentally, allusion to this passage in Josephus is also made in *The Experiment*, the first section of Arthur Machen's sensationalistic *The Great God Pan* [published the previous year], which recounts the supernatural violation and possession of an innocent girl. The veiled sensuality and diabolism of the conclusion of *The Lost Stradivarius* is reminiscent of Machen, but I don't know that Falkner had read him. Also, as the denouement approaches, Maltravers' sister writes briefly of her investigation of a cave where rites of Isis once were enacted. The panic that overcomes her and a servant may be a little like that of Mrs. Moore on the occasion of her visit to the exotic Marabar Caves in E.M. Forster's *A Passage to India* [1924].

The most Jamesian sequence in the book comes late, when Sophy Maltravers visits, with her brother, a house in the Via del Giardino in Naples, where the older structure - previously glimpsed in imagination by Maltravers' friend - has been hidden by subsequent remodelling. Descending into a vault, they discover something that looks like "a heap of dust or refuse", or a "bundle of rags": the remains of the diabolist whose spirit is possessing Maltravers. However, the remains do not stir!

An allusion in the title of the accursed violin music to "the Areopagite", i.e. to the Pseudo-Dionysius, is basically decorative, as his Neoplatonism was not, in fact, magical but ecclesiastical, angelogical, and theological [compare the use of Dionysius made by Charles Williams in *The Place of the Lion* , 1931]. Falkner's combination of authentic bits of learning with his own imaginings -

e.g. a passage 'by' Michael Praetorius - is Jamesian.

The Lost Stradivarius is worth reading for its own sake; I can imagine that many readers of James would enjoy it [its narrative technique conforms, in its way, to his doctrine of the gradual disclosure of the 'thing', although here the 'thing' is information pointing to Maltravers' fate, rather than an actual on-stage violent eruption of the demonic; the ghostly appearances having come in the earlier chapters]. Others would find the book too long, too sentimental, and not frightening enough.

In August 1896, the London *National Review* published Falkner's *A Midsummer Night's Marriage*. It is a rather Pre-Raphael -itish story of a young man who, after being briefly stunned near a ruined manor house by a fall from a horse, attends the funeral, centuries before, of a Catholic recusant, and marries the tall and beautiful daughter of the house. Falkner's understanding appears to have been that Catholic doctrine is that once man and woman are married by the Church, they are married forever - even though the marriage is not consummated before the hero returns to his own time. When [in the nineteenth century] the hero is about to marry, the Roman priest crosses time to put a stop to it, as he does again to give the hero his funeral sometime later. The story is perhaps most noteworthy as an expression of the attractiveness, for some aesthetically-minded Late Victorians, of 'Romanism'.

Falkner's second novel, *Moonfleet* [1898], is a splendid yarn of Stevensonian adventure, superbly imagined [e.g. the bumping smugglers' casks beneath the church, and the agonising climb up a cliff]. His last published work of fiction, *Charalampia* [in the December 1916 *Cornhill*], is a charming pseudo-Byzantine fantasy: I like the exorcised cockroaches that "came out of their holes with a downcast expression and marched rustling across the kitchen floor out through the open door into the darkness". There is a very agreeable antiquarian flavour about *Moonfleet* and *Charalampia*, as with *The Lost Stradivarius*, but they are not Jamesian.

Reportedly, a fourth Falkner novel was lost or stolen while he was on a train journey, which leaves *The Nebuly Coat* as his last novel [1903, from MRJ's publisher, Edward Arnold]. If *The Lost Stradivarius* resembles the later *The Beckoning Fair One*, here Falkner seems to have anticipated Dorothy L. Sayers' *The Nine Tailors*, a better-known mystery also furnished with ecclesiastical, antiquarian, and rural interests. In both there is a sense of the author's enjoyment in character portrayal and in the depiction of place.

Other writers of whom the reader of *The Nebuly Coat* may be reminded are Hardy [Chapter 4 could be a Hardy short story] and, in the depiction of Canon Parkyn and his wife, Trollope. Falkner's portrait of nineteen-year-old Anastasia Joliffe is, like her name, romantic and anti-romantic 'by turns', perhaps giving the impression that she is a character of more depth than she really is. In the background of the story there is a quest for documentary proof which will secure a man's fortune, a quest that wastes his life. Here, the Jarndyce case from *Bleak House* may come to mind.

Given its resonances with numerous other authors, is Falkner's book also Jamesian? The first half dozen paragraphs of Chapter 1 could easily be from one of James's travel guide-type openings [such as in *The Ash-tree*]. But there is no ghost at this point or later on. Yet the book's inclusion in 'The James Gang' is appropriate. As in MRJ's own stories, the sense of the past here is something outwardly picturesque, but liable to erupt destructively into the present. Does the Cullerne cathedral, St. Sepulchre's, harbour 'the malice of inanimate objects'? The visiting architect Westray fancies [?] he hears the arches that support a vast tower complaining of their burden, and promising to shift it. Falkner does not enable the reader to say that the voices are purely subjective; as in D.H. Lawrence's *The Rocking-Horse Winner*, the voices in *The Nebuly Coat*, which are not audible to everyone, are literally attributed to lifeless objects. Beneath the cathedral floor lie the remains of generations of the dead, which the organist Sharnall fears to disturb. When the rector laughs over his own joke about paying a debt when the tower tumbles down, the reader will feel this is not a very prudent remark to make there.

The book's claim to be Jamesian must depend on its atmosphere and its technique, in which we "see [the characters] going about their ordinary business, undisturbed by forebodings, pleased with their surroundings" at first, with the gradual preparation of something ominous that will, at last, hold the stage. In MRJ and here, that something is out of the past, harmful and inhuman.

However, the James fan who reads Falkner may be pardoned if he or she wishes that JMF had - *once*, in his customary way - written a true Jamesian ghost story.