

John Meade Falkner and Sir Nicholas O'Connor

Christopher Hawtree

By November 2nd 1906, Falkner had again returned to Elswick, just "back from Brazil, where I signed the largest contract that we have ever had at Elswick. It was for battle-ships amounting to about £6,000,000". He then elaborated upon another deal, one that was worth anything from £205 to a cool £280, with a discount of 25%: to wit, a steam-powered wood-cutter. This was required by his correspondent, Nicholas O'Connor, for some purpose or other which also necessitated a 36" saw. Falkner assured him that "the cost of fuel is merely nominal" and that, if he asked around, he could probably find a secondhand one for a third of the price.

This might appear some trouble for a man of Falkner's eminence to take, for all the world as if he were making an offer at the bar in a saloon, but Nicholas O'Connor was Ambassador in Constantinople, and had come into his life a couple of years earlier. As so often, Falkner's spirits had been low at that time, and, not long before leaving, he had been bicycling in Dorset, where he watched a crescent moon go down over the great earthwork of Maiden Castle. Grander to him than any forest was "the awful starlit silence of the downs: and the ineffable memories of prehistoric times, and of Roman that are produced by the remains all around; the great hill-fort, the barrows; the straight, straight road, and the amphitheatre". He told John Noble that he much wished that he could have been there to see it all and hoped that "in this new year of change" they could make an old expedition: "I believe they are more needful now than then, and that they would do us both good".

Lord Rendel must have intuited as much, for the following March - 1904 - he told Sir Andrew Noble that Falkner was overworked. That very day Falkner was in Constantinople, and, while hoping to leave within a week, realized that the work there was too important to neglect and that a local man could not be found to do it satisfactorily. Just such an experiment had been made the previous year in Athens with one Captain Acland and what a fiasco that had proved to be. The situation had been remedied by Falkner himself on his journey out this year. He had met his "old friend" the Navy's Chief Engineer, promising the fellow full technical assistance in their building programme and this would "keep him free from any grave blunders, as his own knowledge is weak" and some of the £235,000 budget might come Elswick's way. He was doubtful about committing the firm to a destroyer, and their Minister in Athens, Sir Edwin Egerton, was helpful. This was partly due to his being charmed by a visit to Durham, whence they went to Cragside where Mrs Watson Armstrong bought - for £120 a sample quilt woven in the embroidery schools which Lady Egerton had established in Greece.

With Falkner as plenipotentiary, an order was in hand for a state barge at £13,000 and an armed yacht whose cost had doubled to £120,000. Good in themselves, these heralded future business and “seem to point to the shaking of the Krupp monopoly”. England had found the Turkish market closed to her for some thirty years, and it was being opened up by this most unlikely of salesmen, one who was willing to spend much of his time lurking about palace anterooms amid “all the backstairs and ignoble wash” which was necessary to being granted a hearing. Obtained, these then involved great delicacy. And there was a risk throughout that everything would collapse. But theirs was a good chance of success - “I know personally and for an Englishman intimately some of the highest possible officials”.

In this, he was aided by Sir Nicholas O’Conor, to whose embassy he made frequent visits. O’Conor, then aged 61, was to die four years later while still Ambassador to Turkey in Constantinople. His career had taken him from Ireland to study in Munich and into the diplomatic service, and his voluminous surviving papers - some of which bear more than traces of a long sojourn in a barn - chronicle a career in Germany, America, Brazil, France, and, in particular, a time in China, where his soothing powers had quelled a potentially dangerous dispute over the border with India. By the mid-Eighties, he was in Bulgaria at a time when Prince Alexander had abdicated in the face of pressure from Russia; it seemed certain that the prime minister Stambuloff would seek control but was pre-empted by Prince Ferdinand of Saxe-Coburg, and O’Conor’s brisk charm was brought to bear on Stambuloff as he resumed the potentially disruptive role of prime minister. All this, as well as a return to China during its war with Japan and massacre of British missionaries, together with a hairy spell in St. Petersburg, were as nothing compared with the problems presented by Constantinople, to which he had come in 1898: this troublesome post was only ever given to men with such diverse experience as his.

Even so, he was known there by the Turkish word of “konar”, which means intelligent and easy to get on with. Moreover, as a note in *The Times* put it when recording a temporary, serious illness, “the Sultan has on more than one occasion found that the pleasant Irishman has a firm will as well as a pleasant manner”.

Falkner’s visit and spirits benefited from such help. All the while, as ever, he wrote in different tones to various correspondents. Rendel, for example, was informed that “Elswick’s spell has fallen irresistibly upon me, and I am devoted to her, soul and body, for she makes calls on our bodies too. No one except those at Elswick know the attraction of her, the mother that bred us, and fed us”. Certainly, he admitted that there was a time, long before, when he looked forward to leaving, but now his greatest happiness was for their great firm to do well. Few authors would nowadays care to find themselves so far away when a recently-published novel has proved to be something of a bestseller. Where once he had thought that a businessman should not publish over his own name, “I am told that is mere

moonshine"; indeed, with *The Nebuly Coat* in its fifth printing by then, "I believe that it adds to one's circle of friends - the most important of business possessions".

In passing, he was glad to hear that Rendel could sleep well again - "an altogether inestimable boon that is, as I know very well indeed". Of all that kept him awake, some part must be spent in thinking of his dead brother, and in July he wrote to Edward Stone about an inscription for the tomb in Burford churchyard. This had just been built and "I have not seen the tomb myself, but I trust it is sound and modest". He suggested that Stone visit the place, explaining that he and John Noble had put up the restored figures at the East End and he apologised for the bad, painted window to his brother and sister by Kempe - all of which "quasi-ecclesiastical, and mediaeval survivals will not appeal to your progressive and enquiring mind". Even so, he would surely find soothing the tranquillity and old-world grace of Burford. Amid the clamour of Constantinople, he yearned for the country and for the quiet, routine life - perhaps the feeling would compel him to give up work (and by now, as he did not tell Stone, his salary was £3,000). For all that he had averred to Rendel, a writing life was a congenial prospect, and one can only wish that he had taken it, assuming all the while that, by some quirk, he did not thrive upon the adversity of slotting his writing into the awkward Elswick hours.

Only the previous day, he had written in far different vein to Rendel, saying that "Turkey is an extensive market which is opening when most others are closing". He had to stay on, ensure an order and have Armstrong's worth established there, "but American competition is keen, and all may come to nothing". A complaining nature would "whimper" about the continual wearing of top-hats, frock-coats and black trousers in this heat but Falkner did not exactly do so; more wearisome to him was the waste of work caused by so many changes of plan, so much uncertainty about what was required. In all of this he was still aided by O'Connor, who "does more for me personally than he would do for anyone else. As a rule he shows himself difficile, and contemptuous of all things commercial".

Some of the atmosphere of Constantinople at this time is contained in the diplomatic correspondence of O'Connor, who had noted at the beginning of February that there were rumours about the Sultan's health, which Palace sources attributed to his drinking, "but they may be untrue". Whatever, the following year, the potentate would be fit enough to be "devoting himself to a new Ceicassian beauty", but this liaison was no protection against a fear of events in Russia: "the erratic proceedings of 'the Potemkin' are distracting the Sultan's nerves". Word of revolution was in the air, haunting the Sultan with "fear of bombs and conspirators. Should there be an influx of Young Turks, mostly moselems, they will get hold of the Soldiers and the Ladies in the Harem".

Meanwhile, in the summer of 1904, it is a sign of the influence that the Sultan commanded that innumerable British diplomatic man-hours were spent in satisfying his expressed desire of adding to his collection some examples of

Australian minerals, animals - and birds. In particular, as O'Connor recorded, "I know he is looking for a tuft-headed canary. They exist but are very rare and I don't know if they are to be found in Australia". Illustrated volumes were consulted, and there was alarm not only at the difficulty of procuring such a bird but at the additional expense of hiring a keeper to bring it across the globe to Turkey so that they did not run the risk of presenting a dead bird to a Sultan who would not be appeased by the explanation that "it likes kipping on its back". Reference to an official at the Natural History Museum duly yielded the happy information that in fact the Laughing Jackass was merely a sort of kingfisher, as big as a crow, and "as to the Tuft-Headed Canary, I can easily get a stuffed specimen of that - or even a live one. It is not an Australian bird, but a domestic one".

The beginning of July was a momentous time for Falkner: his first private audience with the Sultan. "It is reputed to be the only audience that he has given to a merely commercial Englishman since he saw Sir John Pender on telegrams in 1893." Falkner evidently did not see fit to tell Rendel that on leaving the presence, protocol required his walking backwards - and that, as he did so, he misjudged his position, not only colliding with a pillar but crushing his top-hat against it, a misfortune which brought a smile to the Sultan's lips.

The Nebuly Coat may have helped. The Sultan had heard that Falkner was "an author of repute", and even wished to read his work (as - bizarrely - he had that of the poet Arthur Symonds, who also thanked O'Connor for Help), but perhaps the interest was prompted by his ministers' remarks about the influence of the English press "and thinks that any one who writes may write perhaps an apologia for him". All of which, Falkner feared must look egotistical "but that is the result of the position not of my own desire".

He was still there on August 4th, happy to leave at any moment, especially as he had gone down with a fever thought to be appendicital. He should have left a week earlier, but he was a good deal at the bidding of O'Connor, who wished him to stay until they reached some conclusion, made more complicated by Russia's being at war with Japan and claims that Turkey's purchase of any battleship would be a menace. He was still there on August 23rd, when he was at last able to write to O'Connor, again thanking him for his official assistance, and said "how very much I have valued the great kindness which you have shown me personally. Often, I have felt, you must have been bored to death with the very sight of me: and I am grateful for the way in which you have made the Embassy an open house to me during a very long visit. The hours which I have spent with you will always be a very pleasant recollection".

As O'Connor summed up the situation on August 24th: "some time ago I presented Mr Falkner, Messrs Armstrong's Agent, to the Sultan, who, after detaining him for three months, notified that he did not see his way to giving him an order for a ship at present and he could leave at once. The Sultan spoke of the

matter on Friday, saying he would like to order a ship if he could get one for the legitimate price and without ruinous 'backsheesh' being paid. I suggested that this could be done by Mr Falkner presenting his designs, specifications, prices etc in a sealed cover addressed to H J M to be opened by himself, that I undertook to say that the price would be the same as the British Admiralty price etc etc. The Sultan was immensely tickled at the idea of doing his "Camarilla" for once out of their illicit gains and it was arranged that Mr Falkner should act as proposed and that the Sultan should shield him from the wrath of the irate Palace officials. I will not tell the Secretary of State the difference in price but it is appalling. I hardly expect success but the ship was lost in any case, so that, if I can for once get an honest business through in spite of the corruption of the Palace, we shall have given a blow to these dishonest practices...The Sultan was immensely amused at the possible discomfiture he was about to inflict on his satellites and said, 'besides it will prove to my subjects that I am an honest man and economise public expenditure'".

Back in Elswick, Falkner wrote (September 19th) to sympathise over the sudden illness which had struck O'Connor and offered a strange recuperative combination of investment advice and a list of country houses for rent.

The beginning of 1906 saw Falkner make his first appearance in *Who's Who* and inform O'Connor that, after a summer's good health, he was again in bad shape. This brought a certain oneupmanship, for "I have had to go back to a stricter regime than you find necessary". He shied from writing to him more often lest he appear to have some *arriere pensee* "and wanted to enlist your aid for business, but this is never so with me". Even so, he asserted that "your kindness has added much to the halo which always invests Constantinople to me. Somehow or other, I want very much to find an excuse for coming out again this year; I wish you could induce the Sultan to require my Services. I have quite forgotten, & forgiven, all his perfidious promises, and the way he fooled us last time: and am quite ready to be kept hanging about for another month". Falkner derived a certain vicarious excitement from momentous events, telling O'Connor that he should have liked to have been out there "at the time of your last 'flutter': and to have been a little behind the scenes. The sizing of the customs at Mitylene, and the gradual moving up of the fleet, must be almost a conventional process for you now". Falkner had evidently reckoned that the only way in which to stay sane in such circumstances was to regard business "more or less of a pleasant interlude. I never take it too seriously, and it irks me terribly to bore you with it. I often have my heart very much in my boots when Vere drives me up to interview you. That side of business bores me, as much almost as it must you: and I should be glad enough to be able to deposit it safely with hat & coat at the foot of your great staircases, when I have to see you".

Meanwhile the civilised life had been disturbed on another front, for "we are in the thick of elections. I had another period of tremendous pressure to stand for Parliament: but I feel devoutly thankful that I did not. In theory it is pleasant enough,

but in practice electioneering up here is terribly exacting and sordid, and the present election seems particularly personal & envenomed. Saturday's results, at Manchester and elsewhere, have stupefied everyone, Conservatives & Liberals alike: and I must say, so far as I am concerned, the extraordinary increase of the labour vote fills me with the greatest misgiving".

Latin America now beckoned, but Falkner had by no means seen the last of a Constantinople that would become increasingly turbulent. Meanwhile, these previously unchronicled glimpses of his dealings with Sir Nicholas O'Connor show us more of Falkner, ever the diplomat, one whose skills were surely not dependent upon bravado but that charm and humour which found so much more congenial company in such men as O'Connor than it ever did with Lord Rendel.

[Christopher Hawtree is working on a biography of John Meade Falkner]