

The Nebuly Coat

Some Reviews of *The Nebuly Coat*

In *The Spectator*, 14 November 1903

“Mr. Meade Falkner has already established a well-founded claim to the gratitude of the reading public by two admirably written and engrossing romances, - The Lost Stradivarius and Moonfleet. In the remarkable volume before us he has, in our opinion, improved on the high standard of excellence attained in his earlier efforts. The strange title is enough in itself to provoke curiosity, and curiosity is fed and stimulated by the contents right on to the close of the narrative, for Mr. Falkner is a master of the art of suspense, and relies for his most impressive effects on the exercise of a discreet reticence.

If, however, he stimulates the imagination by his artistic omissions, he is indefatigable in the patient elaboration of details which go to the creation of the environment and atmosphere by which his dramatis personae are affected. It is thoroughly characteristic of the author and his method that the title should be heraldic, that two of the principal personages engaged should be an architect and an organist, and that the scene should be laid in a quiet country town, dominated by a great and ancient Minster, every part and aspect of which enters into the life of the story. Under its shadow, within its walls, within the sound of its chimes, all the incidents in the drama are played out. The beauties of the fabric, the splendour of its glass, the tones, and even the names, of its bells, the quality of the organ, the resources of the choir, - all these are brought home to us, not in any bald catalogue as of a guide-book or with the fatiguing precision of an antiquarian treatise, but in passages in which we learn to realise the very aura of the Minster of Cullerne. The style is in perfect keeping with a theme in which the present is largely controlled by the past, - leisurely, transparent, dignified, but rising on occasion to a level of measured eloquence, for Mr. Falkner is poet as well as scholar, and combines with a perfect clarity of style the occasional but illuminating use of decorative, or even recondite, phraseology, drawn from the mystical medieval literature he knows so well.

It must not be supposed, however, because so much curious lore is expended on the setting and mounting of the romance, that the story itself is unduly overlaid and overburdened by detail. On the contrary, there is not one of these ‘patient touches of unwearied art’ which does not assist the development of the drama. The ‘nebuly coat’, it may be explained, is the coat-of-arms of the family of Blandamer, and the story is concerned with the long and persistent efforts of the acknowledged holder of the title to obliterate the evidences of his grandfather’s bigamous marriage, and with them the claims of the rightful heirs. The story opens with the arrival at Cullerne of the young architect entrusted with the task of supervising the restoration of the Minster. The “pretender”, Martin Joliffe, a ne’er-do-well farmer who has wasted his life and substance in a vain endeavour to substantiate his claim, has recently died, and Westray, the architect, takes rooms in the lodging-house kept by his sister, an elderly spinster, and her niece, Martin’s daughter. They have never joined in the quest of the “nebuly coat”, and Martin’s papers have been handed over to the organist Sharnall, a clever, disappointed, embittered man who also lodges under the same roof. Westray’s enthusiasm for the Minster forms the basis of a friendship with his fellow-lodger,

and he is gradually put in possession of a good deal of the family history of the Joliffes. Meanwhile Lord Blandamer, who has recently succeeded to the title after a long minority, appears on the scene, displays unexpected munificence in assisting the work of restoration, and utilises his official relations with the architect to visit the Joliffes' house and to engage the affections of Anastasia, - the niece. His attempt to conciliate the old organist fails, for the old man is secretly convinced of the justice of Martin's claim, and by the study of his papers has reached a point at which only one piece of evidence is wanting to make it good.

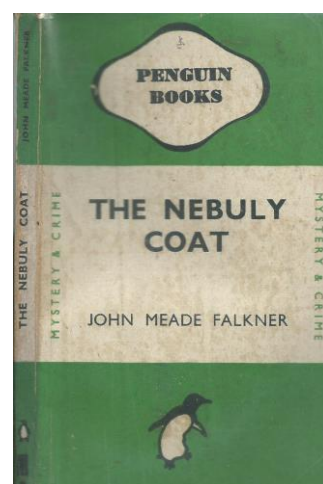
At this stage, however, he is found dead in his organ-loft – the result apparently of a fall – and the roof sleuth-hound devolves on the conscientious but timid Westray, who is harassed by vague but sinister suspicions and the consciousness of his inability to support the burden cast upon him. The burden becomes intolerable when an accident reveals documentary proof of the validity of Martin's claim, and circumstantial evidence accumulates to the extent of convincing him that Sharnall's death was not only due to violence, but was merely one incident in a deep-laid scheme of his patron to secure his succession, of which the last move has been his marriage to Anastasia. The situation thus created is handled by Mr. Falkner in a manner at once unexpected, impressive, and romantic; and Lord Blandamer atones in some measure at least for his guilt by the fashion of his exit.

The excellence of the story, as we have already hinted, is largely due to the author's artistic use of reticence and suggestion, and we can imagine that not a few readers will close the book without coming to a clear conclusion as to the precise extent of Lord Blandamer's criminality. It may, possibly, be objected that there is an element of extravagance about this nobleman, with his mysterious past, his Mezzofantian achievements as a linguist, his profound knowledge of music and architecture, the strange mixture of culture and anarchy, pride of birth, and contempt of convention that characterises his proceedings. But for all that, he is an interesting and romantic figure and, if a villain, a most distinguished and original representative of the part. The organist is, perhaps, the most finished piece of portraiture in the book; Anastasia is somewhat colourless, but her aunt is a perfect specimen of harmless foolishness in speech combined with innocent goodness of heart."

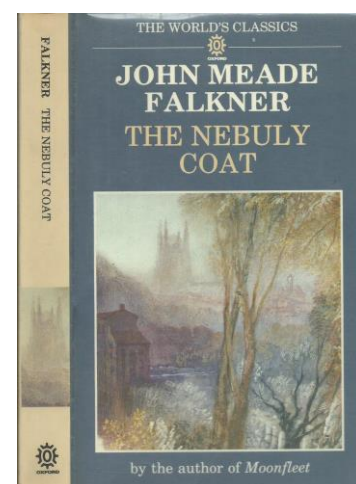
Some editions of *The Nebuly Coat*



September 1919 edition



July 1943 Penguin edition



World's Classics 1988 edition