

“*Rich and Hard by Name*”?

A 1483 Mystery

John Meade Falkner (1858-1932), is probably best known for his novel *Moonfleet* (1898), a boys' adventure story which has been ranked with *Treasure Island* and *Kidnapped*. He only wrote two others, *The Lost Stradivarius* (1895) and *The Nebuly Coat* (1903), each justly admired. His own passions embraced baroque church music, literature and palaeography and, well before he retired, he had become known as a wealthy and discriminating collector of fine things – a variety of objets d'art, furniture, silverware and, above all, books. He built up a huge collection of missals, breviaries, Books of Hours, psalters and incunabula 'with rare taste and knowledge'. He owned the 15th century *Closworth Missal*, in which the English Channel and Dorset downs were depicted as the background for the Crucifixion, and a York Missal once belonging to Catherine Parr. His copy of Jac de Voraigne's *The Golden Legend*, published by Caxton at his Westminster Press sometime after the autumn of 1483, was a particularly prized possession.

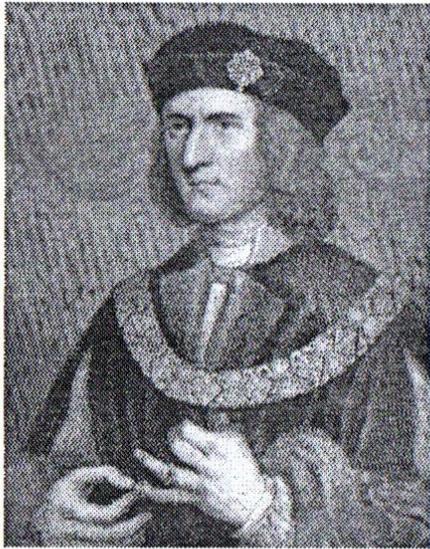
Falkner's wealth came from his position as a Director of Armstrong Whitworth, the massive armaments manufacturer based on the banks of the river at Elswick, Newcastle-upon-Tyne. (In 1910-11 just under 11,000 persons in Britain were assessed for Super Tax, set on incomes over £5,000. Falkner's remuneration in the latter year was £9,842). In December 1915, he was appointed Chairman of the Company, during the greatest war in history, and therefore at a most critical time for the firm -one of the world's major producers of weapons of mass destruction.

In the previous February and March, the French had lost 50,000 men advancing 500 yards into the German defences in Champagne and in April they lost a further 64,000 in an attack against the St. Mihiel salient that proved a complete fiasco. On 25th April Sir Ian Hamilton landed on the Gallipoli peninsula and managed to hold on precariously, although heavy fire from the Turks turned two of the five beaches into death traps. Meanwhile, back home in Britain the shortage of shells had become so obvious as to lead to a public outcry initiated by Colonel Repington, the military correspondent of *The Times*, after consultation with Sir John French.

Falkner, only just elected Vice-Chairman of Armstrong Whitworth, had also been reading *The Times* that week - at breakfast in the National Club, London. However, he had been discussing with

other diners a Latin version in that paper of an epigram on Mr. W.G. C. Gladstone's death. He wrote on 28 April to Montague James, Provost of King's College, Cambridge, asking whether the latter had seen the epigram and enclosing a copy for him. He went on,

Richard III



'Mr. Saxton Noble, who is I believe a friend of yours, suggests that I might write to you on another subject. In a bible of mine c. 1280 there is written on one of the blank leaves at the end, something that looks like a lampoon – possibly on Richard III. It is in rhyming hexameters (16 lines) and is dated 1483. It is difficult to read, and the allusions are obscure, but I have made a transcript of it. It is not without some human, possibly political, interest, and

it occurred to me that you might like to see it. If you would, I will send you a copy of it'.

Falkner destroyed all the letters he received, so we have no way of knowing exactly when M. R. James replied. It was not until 13 August that Falkner wrote again to Cambridge.

'Please forgive my delay in answering your kind letter. It is simply that the times are out of joint, and that till tonight I have found no chance of writing. The lines are carefully written at the end of a Vulgate (c.1280). The handwriting is difficult but I have no doubt of the accuracy of this transcription.'

He then wrote out the sixteen line 'lampoon':

Cordificis natus pastor Sarum titulatus
Auxilio Regis curam capiens sui gregis
Qui te cacabit te subdole adnichilabit
Anno bis sens morieris gutture pleno

En plenitudo agitur de presule nudo
Fio pastor Sarum curam gerens animarum
Victus eris certe si fiant prelia per te
Dant ob peccata contraria se tibi fata
Causa adest qui te privabit lumine vitae

Presul ventures dives et nominee durus
Grege tibi marcescet donec infamia cesset
Contentum solo te caste vivere colo
Sanguinis egregii fis praedo pastor olimpi
Boria nutritus precibus mitra redimitus
Morte repentina morieris facta ruina
Gratia divina liberaberis a libitina

Falkner continued,

'The division into groups of lines are as in the original. Underneath it is written in another hand:- Cantus magistri Johannis Morton..... in cista Chicheley anno domine Mcccc Lxxxiii die mensis Augusti et de una Biblia 2o. Fo 'qui aperit' et jacet (?) pr (? prope) 2 The reference 'qui aperit fo 2o' is the identification of this actual bible: and the 'et jacet' shows, I suppose, the case or shelf. The short word .. after Morton looks like 'exa' but is obliterated to some extent. If it were not for the gender it might stand for ex- cellentissima. In the verses 'dives et nominee Durus' must be a play on Richard. I think it is very likely the verses may be a common- place, and that you may know them.'

Although there are comments written to the side of the Latin, presumably in James' hand, no transcription has survived. A literal translation has been produced and, though the translator agreed that the 'dives et nominee durus' appeared to be a play on the name 'Richard', she thought the poem was more likely to be about a bishop of Salisbury – possibly Richard Beauchamp, bishop there from 1450 to 1481. However the verbs are future tense, so Morton might well have 'appropriated' it to use for Richard III.

Son of (a) roper, with the title Shepherd of Salisbury
Taking the care of your flock appointed by the king
Who will shit you will annihilate you deceitfully
You will die in twelve years with a full throat (of gluttony?)

See fullness is the question concerning the naked bishop
You become shepherd of Salisbury taking care of souls
You will certainly be conquered if battles happen through you
The fates present themselves against you because of (your) sins
The chance/fall is here which will deprive you of the light of life

Bishop (Richard) (rich and hard by name) (is) about to come
Your flock withers away until ill-fame may cease
I wish you to live chastely content with the soil

You, shepherd of Olympus, become the robber of noble blood
Nourished in the North, crowned with a mitre, with prayers
You will die by sudden death, ruin having been made,
By divine grace you will be set free by death*

(* Libitina was the goddess of corpses)

The chant (song) of Master John Morton... in the chest
Chicheley in the year of the lord 1483 on. The last day of the
month of August and from a Bible (of which the second volume
starts 'qui aperit', who opens, and it lies near (?) 2.

Further research suggests that the poem is about William
Aiscough, bishop of Salisbury from July 1438 to June 1450. He had
been a canon of Lincoln and one of the chaplains in Henry VI's
household, and had married Henry and Margaret of Anjou at
Titchfield on 21 April 1445. Well known to be a friend of the
unpopular duke of Suffolk (murdered on 3 May, 1450), Aiscough,
was dragged from the chancel of Edington Priory, Wiltshire where
he was saying mass on 29 June, and murdered on a nearby hill.
Hence 'You will die in twelve years (1438-1450) with a full throat'
(the Mass?)... 'You will die by sudden death'. On the day of his
death, the rebels associated with Jack Cade were marching to
rendezvous at Blackheath. Perhaps the phrase 'if battles happen
through you' refers to this. 'Nourished in the North' obviously
means Lincoln. Moreover 'Bishop Richard is about to come' also
makes sense – Aiscough's successor as bishop of Salisbury was
Richard Beauchamp.

One is tempted to identify John Morton with the Bishop of
Ely, a *bête noir* of Richard III. However, on the last day of August
1483, Richard III - on a royal progress - was settling in to his third
day at York, and **that** Morton was probably discoursing with the
duke of Buckingham at the latter's castle of Brecon on the
transmutability of power. It needs someone with greater access to
contemporary records than myself to root out another, more likely,
John Morton.

Falkner's Collection of Fine Illuminated and Other
Manuscripts, Rare Early Service Books, Incunables and other

valuable printed books, were sold by Sothebys in a three day sale, lasting between 12th and 14th December 1932. The Bible in question is Lot number 29 on the first day and is described as follows:

BIBLE. LATIN, MANUSCRIPT ON VELLUM, 501 ll. *Written in a minute gothic hand on thin vellum, a handsome painted initial with foliate decoration at the beginning of each book, small initials in red and blue with pen flourishes, panelled olive morocco, in padded case. (60 in. by 40 in.)* ENGLISH, XIII CENT.

Interestingly, there is a postscript:

On the fly-leaf at the end are some epigrams in Latin verse on fifteenth century Bishops of Salisbury. Notes on these by Canon Wordsworth are inserted loose.

Were the times so 'out of joint' for Falkner in 1915, that he caught a red herring over Richard III? One wonders where the little vellum Bible is now and what exactly Canon Christopher Wordsworth, who Falkner first corresponded with in September 1915 and who became a good friend*, actually said in his 'Notes'.

(* In probably what was his last letter to his 'dear friend', which was rather aptly misdated 'August 3rd. 1391', Falkner gratefully reminded Wordsworth that 'it was you who introduced me to liturgical books which have long been a life's pleasure'.)

N.B. The first two paragraphs owe much to Kenneth Warren's biography of John Meade Falkner.