

A Brazilian Adventure

“For the student of Falkner the novelist and poet, the man of broad learning and keen intellect, a churchman and encourager of choristers, generous host and good friend, it is a strange experience to spend time with Falkner the arms salesman. It is necessary to do so, for this too was part of the man”. Thus Kenneth Warren sums up his chapter on “Arms Salesman” in his invaluable biography on John Meade Falkner. (1)

One of the most interesting of his perambulations abroad – in fact, the only time he ventured beyond Europe – was to Brazil in 1906. In 1904 a Naval Commission from Brazil had visited England in order to place a large order for warships. During the summer of 1906 their Ministry of Marine telegraphed Elswick to ask them to send out a director with “authority to sign a contract for three battleships, and for an arsenal and dock”. Not only did Falkner agree to travel there but , unusually, he took his wife Evelyn with him.



**Central Avenue
Rio de Janeiro in 1908**

He wrote several letters from Rio de Janeiro, to Lord Rendel and to John Noble. The latter are more readable as they are to his closest friend and onetime pupil. At the top of this letter, sent on 31st August 1906, he had added *“This is a more or less personal letter – please see that it does not drift about or I may be run in for libel”*. Over a hundred years have now passed, with much water across the Atlantic, and Society members are known for their discretion.

My dear Johnny,

I owe you many apologies for not having written before: but I have been very, very busy – up to now I have not been off even for an afternoon, (festas and non festas included) and often have spent 5 or 6 hours in the

ministry at a stretch. By the evening, I am generally dead tired. Though the heat is not nearly so great (on the thermometer) as I have felt it at Athens or Constantinople – yet it is generally 85° to 90° during the day, and seldom below 75° at night. But in quality it is a very trying heat, because it is so damp. It is beginning to get hotter now every day, but up to the present both Evelyn and I have stood it well....

When I got here, I had to take the bull by the horns, and sign the contract en bloc. It was neck or nothing. The debate was to open in the Senate on the Tuesday. If the contract had not been signed on the Monday, the Opposition would have upset it, as, I think, they have upset the Arsenal. They meant to bring forward a motion to increase the size of the ships, and to call for new tenders on the score of the increase. There was great excitement at the ministry, but after many hours discussion, we actually signed the contract late that evening. So that the Opposition had a fait accompli, and not only a proposition to deal with.



To get this result, and to get the direct assurance of a heavy instalment within 8 days, I had to harden my heart and accept some propositions which I should have liked to alter....I am sure your father will make allowances for short-comings, in view of the exigencies of the circumstances. But in these last weeks, of course, the usual process of rubbing the gilt off the gingerbread has been going on, and I have had to face the music.....

The present moment is a bad one for tackling the Minister. He is terribly préoccupé with the political position. The Senate has thrown out the arsenal scheme, unceremoniously – by a 2/3 majority; and has taken the very strong step of cancelling that part of the last budget which provides £1,000.000 for arsenal purposes. The Senate has sent down this verdict to the Chamber of Deputies, for their approval. The question is whether the Deputies will approve. The debate begins on Saturday next September 1: and may last 10 days or 6 weeks. The Minister (a gaunt, tall, dyspeptic man, soured by bitter opposition, and permanently saddened by the loss of his favourite son on the Aquidaleau) is obstinately bent on fighting to the last; and thinks he will defeat the Senate...but the popular conviction is that the Chamber will endorse the Senate's verdict, by a great majority.

(Falkner then discusses what is in the best interests of Armstrong's with regard to the Arsenal contract and then goes on to deal with another problem..)

One point which I am afraid we shall all find a burden in the ship order – is that we must soigner (look after) the members of the Commission of Inspection, especially those quartered at Newcastle. No doubt it will mean some money outlay, as well as time and trouble – but it is very important as going to build up and maintain the good impression that "Armstrongs" already possesses here.

(1) The head of the Commission is Admiral Barbosa. He is ill – with heart and rheumatic troubles. He will go first to Homburg or Nauheim, or some such place: and it is supposed that he will not show himself unduly exigeant, or devote any unnecessary attention to business. He has a wife, and a daughter. The daughter speaks English very well, & is keen on Barbosa making London his head quarters. Madame Barbosa "understands" English, but wants to live at Paris. Barbosa himself speaks English well.

(2) Portella is the head of the Construction department. You will know him before. He married Admiral Brazil's daughter and has 4 young children. He will make Newcastle his headquarters. He "speaks" (spiiks) English badly, and French indifferently. He seldom shaves, and looks generally as if he had come out of Alice in Wonderland, and had usually slept in his uniform. He is a nice fellow; but we shall have to lay ourselves out to make him comfortable. He wants a house, in the Jesmond district, and knows Newcastle well.

His assistant is Lieutenant Rocha – young, married, three young children and very nice & well-intentioned. He also knows Newcastle, and will reside there.

(3) Captain Bartolomeu. Is the Chief inspector of Engines. He is married with a family: speaks English well, and has been at Newcastle. He will be quartered at Barrow, as will also be

(4) his assistant Lieutenant Jardim. He has always been supposed to be a Vickers man, and rather tricky. But he is now believed to be well-intentioned.

(5) Our old friend Espindola will probably have charge of the guns: but is not yet nominated. He is unmarried and very much a garcon. He will reside at Newcastle.

(6) One of the most important, and an exceedingly nice man is Gomez-Periera. He is the present minter's secretary: but when the minister goes out Gomez-Periera will come to England as Captain of one of the ships. He will have a general roving commission of supervision. He is a powerful man, and an excellent friend of ours. He is a widower with four young children. Three are girls – I think Walter will look after them and they will go to one of the Sacré-Coeur places near London. The boy is about 9, and we shall no doubt have to recommend him to a school.

(7) The Admiral in command will probably be our old friend Guedes: who will come later. He has bene meruit of us. He had the "Barroso" for 4 years, and has contrived to make a regular advertisement of it for us. It is in everybody's mouth, and is constantly referred to by the papers of all politics, as being the only ship that is any good in their navy.



The cruiser **Barroso**, launched on August 25, 1896, carried six 6-inch guns and four 4.8 inch quick-firing guns. She could reach 20.5 knots.

They say that it has been worked to death, is always ready, and is the best ship in South America.

Guedes is popular because he is modest and eminently "not self-seeking". This enables him to be put forward sometimes by very force of circumstance. When two or three firebrands, and wordy, partizans are trying for a place; and when either party finds itself unable to carry their own "man", then Guedes may be accepted (as at a Papal conclave) by both sides, as a non-extremist. It is possible, they say, that some day he may be Minister of marine; and it is probable that he will have command of the new squadron; as he now has of the First division of the existing fleet. I shall have a good deal to say about him when I get home: meanwhile you may rely upon his being strong in our interests.

(Falkner then discusses the candidates for the new Minister of Marine).

Relations seem distinctly strained between Brazil and Argentina. This has been made obvious in many ways during the Pan-American Congress; which held its meeting this month at Rio, and which is just over....there has been lately an interchange of highly-spiced amenities; some too long to explain, and others not to be put on paper, unless it were pink. The feeling of animosity is strong. This order of Brazil must bring an immediate answer from Argentina. I wonder how far our success here will cut us off from Argentine orders; and I wonder what news you have of Argentina affairs. Vickers fancy their own chances very strongly for Argentina, and it seems not unlikely that the vessels may go to them, unless they go to France. Another solution, excellent for us, would be that the ships should be built at genoa, and armed by us. I don't know whether we have suggested this, in case the Argentines would not care to build cheek by jowl with the Brazilians. In any case, I am sure you will have to reckon with a very strong "feeling" existing in Argentina against Brazil, and vice-versa....

Life out here is incredibly dear. If you take a carriage & make say a couple of calls, it is 30/-; a bottle of Apollinareis (small) is 3/-, and of native waters 2/6. A pot (small) of Crosse and Blackwell jam is 4/6, of native 3/3. Champagne, which is "de riguer" is 35/- a bottle. A day or two ago I had to buy a cachemire ordinary under vest sleeveless, and much too short for me. Of course I did not attempt to buy it myself, but one of Walter's Portuguese managers did his best. They would not sell less than three, and the three cost 22/- a piece. They were English; but native makes are very nearly as expensive, and not nearly so good. I enquired the cost of a two-mule carriage for the month, but Walter could get nothing under £125: so I gave up the idea. A carriage to take you out in the evening & fetch you back costs £4.10. When we arrived we took two carriages from the pier to the hotel and they were each 35/-. I don't know how people live here at all.

Clerks' commencing salaries are £400 a year, and I have a list of labour rates, which will take your breath away.

(Falkner ends his letter by describing two excursions and sends several photographs to accompany his letter).

The little photograph of the bay shows, by a red cross, the place where the Aquidabau went down. They took us out to the spot in a rowing boat – it is about $\frac{3}{4}$ of a mile from the shore. It was a sad, and strange thing, to see the ship there lying on her side. Of course it was a little dim, but it was easy enough to make her out, and the loom of the funnel over the light sand was most distinct.



At about 10.45 p.m., on 21 January 1906, when she was moored at Jacuacanga Bay, the powder magazines blew up, sinking the ship within 3 minutes. A total of 212 people were killed, including three admirals, and most of the officers; 98 survived.

The Aquidabau

The photograph of the building is a deserted and ruined monastery. Nossa Senhora da Trindade – a Carmelite house, deserted for some years. The men standing at the door are part of our escort. On the floor of one of the dormitories, are black stains of the size of a body. The last of the monks, lay there when he died; and was not found for 6 weeks, until his bones were bare and his body had rotted into the floor.

We had a full moon when we were there; and, as we lay about two miles out, in the long, mountainous, and deeply-wooded lagoon, with a silvery mist lying low down along the shores, it really seemed as if anything might happen. It brought back that garden-house episode in John Inglesant. The opposition have dubbed it the “Bay-of-death” – with a double association, of the loss of the Aquidabau, & its unhealthiness. They say it is a “nest of yellow fever”, but Statistics do not in the least support this....

*I shall be glad to get away when the time comes, and in the meantime
Ever am, affectionately yours J.M.F.*

On 19th September, Falkner wrote again to John Noble – this time to inform him of his departure from Rio “*I am hopeful about leaving by the*

Amazon - one week from today, on September 26. The Fates may always trip one by the heels, here as anywhere else, but I think I shall bring it off this time. She is due at Southampton on Saturday October 13....I shall be glad to get back to the wider atmosphere of England, and of Elswick. Out here, molehills in the foreground are apt to eclipse mountains behind but then the present order is after all something more perhaps than a molehill, even for us."



The Amazon

The Incoming Passenger List for the *Amazon* can still be viewed, but the arrival date at Southampton is 30th October, seventeen days later.

Name:	John Hoade Falkner
Birth Date:	abt 1858
Age:	48
Port of Departure:	Yokohama, Japan
Arrival Date:	30 Oct 1906
Port of Arrival:	Southampton, England
Ports of Voyage:	Shanghai [Colombo]
Ship Name:	Amazon

Name:	Evelyn Violet Falkner
Birth Date:	abt 1869
Age:	37
Port of Departure:	Yokohama, Japan
Arrival Date:	30 Oct 1906
Port of Arrival:	Southampton, England
Ports of Voyage:	Shanghai [Colombo]
Ship Name:	Amazon

Kenneth Warren details a "postscript" to the story of Brazil and its battleship orders. By 1908, the country was deep in financial troubles; it wanted to cut its order from three to two. Five years later, its economy was in a worse state. The second battle ship, the *Rio de Janeiro*, was being fitted out at Elswick, but its future was so uncertain that other countries were showing interest in purchasing it. On 9th January 1914, the battleship

was sold to Turkey, who renamed it the *Sultan Osman I*. At the point of completion, on August 3rd, it was commandeered by the British Admiralty. It finally sailed to join the Grand Fleet at Scapa Flow under yet another name – *HMS Agincourt*.



HMS Agincourt

It played a minor role in the Battle of Jutland but *“eight years later, having fired only a few broadsides in warfare, it was scrapped”*. (Warren)

A fascinating, but not really surprising, final point to make about Falkner’s travels (travails?) to Rio was that he had also found time to write to his friend Thomas Hardy.

Rio de Janeiro

August. 20. 1906

Dear Mr Hardy,

You will, of course, have seen the article on Thomas Hardy, in the July Revue de deux Mondes. It is on the whole, I think, a good and lucid analysis: however far short it falls of my own hero-worship of your style and manner. I have been here a few weeks on business; and hope to be leaving on the 29th of this month for England, to get down to Weymouth early in October. Perhaps – if fortune and your kindness serve – we might

get a ride through the Dorset hedge-rows, before the autumn colours are quite gone.

*Yours cordially,
J. Meade Falkner*

1. Kenneth Warren – John Meade Falkner 1858-1932: *A Paradoxical Life* (Studies in British History: Volume 32 The Edward Mellen Press, 1995) Especially Chapter 16 “Arms Salesman” pp.165-173

Thanks are due to member Ray Ion, for his help with some illustrations.



On the Beach