

“A Second-Rate War” A John Meade Falkner Discovery

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There is hardly room here to discuss the discovery of John Meade Falkner's fourth novel and its contents. No, alas, that is a trick sentence, and the entertainment on offer in place of that fugitive work might appear more dry-as-dust than the high-spirited adventure which was apparently in the vein of *Moonfleet*, but it has a certain compulsion of its own and resonates through the concerns and rivalries of Falkner's commercial life 100 years ago.

In the summer of 1900, salaries were once again under discussion at Elswick, where John Noble, when replying to one of Lord Rendel's myriad queries (19 August), made the point that *"Falkner's case is peculiar; but in spite of whatever may be said against him he has been most useful and I am convinced secured many foreign orders for us and though none of us are infallible I think his performance generally correct."* Long languishing on the library shelves has been a Falkner work which shows Falkner in the lucid and authoritative light which had made him well regarded at Armstrong's.

It appeared in the issue of Henry Newbolt's *Monthly Review* for December. As Newbolt recalled, the journal was first published by John Murray in October that year and set out to cover the arts, but was also concerned to survey *"Public Affairs and Politics when necessary, but from the library-window rather than from the drill-ground point of view."* That was not strictly true, for Falkner's contributions were more substantial than any view from the window and do not make for the severe reading that a glance might suggest. In between an article on *"The Love Episode of Will Pitt"* by the Earl of Rosebery and *"A Coming North African Problem"* by Henry Grey there is the first of two articles on *"Field Guns"* under the witty pseudonym of *Galeatus* (helmeted). The second followed in May, and, together, they offer a perspective upon the Boer War.

Here is no rabid exposition of Empire but one akin to Newbolt's view of the confrontation: *"the great majority of us saw no reason to disbelieve in the goodness of our cause, though our feelings drew a conscientious line between Chamberlain and Rhodes, the negotiator and the privateer... I remember my relief at finding that our admired friend Leslie Stephen had disappointed many of his circle by declaring that when his country was at war, an Englishman should no more attack her in public than he should*

hasten to give evidence against his mother in a court of law."

Falkner, however, began his article, as he continued, on an ironic note, almost regarding his country as a stepmother. *"In those blank midwinter days when South African misfortune had ceased to surprise us, and when the announcement of some fresh catastrophe was morning by morning expected as an unpalatable breakfast-dish, we were accustomed to hear much of the inferiority of our field-guns. It was a fashionable topic for the embroidery of newspaper correspondents. British 'reverses' (an ingenuous meiosis; for our enemies' mishaps were always plain defeats or routs) had to be accounted for on any supposition other than the incapacity of our leaders; and the correspondent found the inferiority of the field guns a convenient means of explaining facts otherwise inexplicable."* Matters had meanwhile changed, although the guns had not, and this apparent inferiority was no longer mentioned in the press - *"victory has restored our spirits as quickly as the mystic teaspoonful of vinegar revived the lyddite-stifled Boers."* It was lesson learned in the early stages of the war that these field-guns could be transported, and deployed, after some modification; moreover, a new gun was being manufactured *"and will, no doubt, be introduced into the service, with the conventional mixture of ill-considered haste and exasperating delay."* All of which was put in the most embarrassing light by the Government's *"scavenging Europe for any material it could pick up. Fortunately for our amour propre, some of the great Continental makers could not, and others would not, supply our demands; but an order for 18 batteries, or 108 guns, has actually been placed by our War Office with an unknown German firm, called the Rheinische Metallwaaren Fabrik! 'It is not an open enemy' as the Psalmist says, 'that has done us this dishonour.' It is not Krupp, 'for then we might have borne it,' and reflected that if we must go to Germany for guns, we were at least going to a world maker, and should get as good material as could be had. It is nothing of the kind. These subterranean orders have been given to a firm that has never made a field gun, or any other gun, for any power on earth; and invitations, we are told, are being issued by the makers to foreign officers to inspect at Diisseldorf the field-guns that Germany is supplying to England; when all other countries are making it a matter of life and death jealously to preserve the secrets of their materiel. Criticisms such as these will, no doubt, be met by the specious argument of English manufacturers being unable to respond to a sudden crisis."*

Galeatus denied this, and supplied an elaborate technical account of various guns' capabilities, a subject perhaps of greater

interest to readers fearful for their country's immediate honour than studying its history; readers of this issue nowadays might well turn instead to Roger Fry's essay on Giotto but, even so, it is a sign of Falkner's lucidity that he makes plain this crucial question of velocity. *"In estimating the value of initial velocity, it must not be forgotten that field guns rely upon the use of shrapnel for their fullest effect, and that high velocities diminish the value of shrapnell-shell. A shrapnell-shell is a thin steel case full of round bullets fired from a gun, and so arranged that at a point in its flight (which is determined by the fuse) the case opens and the bullets are released. Now a shell when it leaves the gun has two motions imparted to it: its forward velocity, and the spin given it by the rifling, whereby it rotates quickly round its own axis. The forward velocity lessens rapidly in flight, but the rotational velocity is not perceptibly diminished. It is this rotation that spins the shrapnell-bullets outwards when the explosion in the case releases them, and if the rotation (or, what comes to the same thing, the initial velocity) is too high, the bullets spin out too much in a right-angled direction to do their best work. The form which the shower of bullets takes, when spun from the shell and rapidly moving forward, is called 'the cone of dispersion'; and it has always been the object of artillerists to keep this cone as 'fine' as possible. In other words, the bullets should be sent skimming near the ground, and utilise the full effect of ricochets instead of being shot too straight down into the ground, or into the air, which is the tendency with a high velocity."*

The bullets' best work - one might almost overlook a phrase whose meaning prompts a shudder. Many more were needed, and English guns had to match the capabilities of the French and German, for, in an adaptation of Homer, *"there are many loose ends still to be wound up in South Africa."*

Now, after so long an account of weaponry, he drew attention to the human factor in South Africa, in particular, but not by name, to *"that great man [Field-Marshal Lord Roberts] who, at a time of personal mourning and public dismay [the death of his son at Colenso], took in hand a task of such critical difficulty and brought it to a triumphant issue, not by any isolated success or happy stroke of fortune, but by the irresistible force of genius, guided by sober and immovable discretion. When all technical discussion as to our artillery is forgotten (and who thinks of ballistics in remembering Trafalgar or Waterloo?), when the patterns of guns have been changed a hundred times, history will recall this heroic figure as a type of the soldierly skill and devotion, without which even the most perfect material is worthless."*

Shortly after Christmas 1900, on December 27th, Lord Armstrong died. Falkner's first letter of the twentieth century was on black-edged writing-paper. In this he told Rendel, in utmost confidence, that there would be a Board meeting in London later that week and that its first task was to appoint a Chairman and Vice-Chairman. As Sir Andrew had been *"our virtual and absolute Chief for so long, the mere change of title will come as a matter of course."* He had spoken the previous day with Sir Andrew about the other post, and it was their utmost hope that Rendel would accept it. He realised that Rendel's health was not all that it had been and that he was trying to divest himself of current responsibilities but Falkner felt that he should see it as a duty to himself as well a company in which he possessed so large a stake. Immediate interests were one thing, but even Sir Andrew, whose energy and determination were inexhaustible would one day fail, distant though one trusted that this would be. With this in mind and with Rendel as Vice-Chairman, *"you would move at least into the titular headship and help to bridge the gulf."* As far as Falkner saw it, nobody else was in that league. The ultimate head would be John Noble, who *"is not brilliant in any way. He does not pretend to be, but he is sound and diligent and endowed with much commonsense, the nicest of men, and a persona grata with foreigners."* At any rate, Saxton had *"neither the physique nor the inclination to carry him through."* Meanwhile, they must hope that Sir Andrew was hale enough to carry on.

Prescient, some might say scheming, Falkner was at the centre of things. To his surprise, he even found that he was one of Lord Armstrong's executors, a fact revealed to him the previous day when arriving at Cragside for the funeral. He was able to make his views known straightaway, for provision had been made to start a convalescent home there, but a clause said that this could be built in the village, and Falkner was certain advantage would be taken of this: *"the old scheme seemed always to me intolerable, one would never have known whether Bamburgh was one's house or a hospital."*

Back in Durham on March 8th after a few days in Manchester, he wrote to Rendel in the hope that the present situation could be prolonged as much as possible. He feared that the last meeting presaged a revolt, but this appears to have blown over. What remained a matter for concern was Sir Andrew's delicate health - *"pale and thin and a very little extra exertion puts him hors de combat."* Despite this, the Chairman was happy to arrange a trip to Greece and Bulgaria to conduct some field-gun trials at Easter. Falkner would probably go along.

His second article on field guns was now ready for *The Monthly Review*, to be published in the May issue (which also included Erskine Childers on "*Relations between Officers and Men on active service*"). Galeatus was particularly concerned with the Government's decision to buy such guns from Germany, something recognised as "*unpatriotic, humiliating, and illicit, for any first-class Power, so that it was natural that those responsible for them should have carefully concealed what had been done, and equally natural that comment should follow when the transaction became known.*" And, even then, there was no guarantee that the same would not be done again, whatever Germany's apparent neutrality. With some boldness, Galeatus asserted, "*now, we hold no brief for the English firms in question, and are no more inclined to find excuses for their shortcomings in the matter of delivery than we are to find excuses for the improvidence and supineness of the War Office which has brought the country to so necessitous a condition. But the suggestion by a responsible Minister that the resources of English manufacture had been exhausted by an order for some two hundred field guns seems to us so misleading, and under present circumstances so peculiarly mischievous, as to warrant a serious attempt to rebut it. Could anything be more damaging to our manufacturing reputation in the eyes of Europe than that the Secretary of State for War [St John Brodrick] should admit that after three months of a second-rate war he was at the end of his resources, and had to turn to Germany for help?*" A description of the war which appears to lessen Falkner's earlier praise of Roberts. In full flow, Falkner continued by observing that "*crises have been the politician's excuse for ill-advised and unconstitutional action ever since the world began; and if we refrain from saying that the present crisis has been intensified, if not brought about, by the improvidence of those who now use it as an excuse, we only do so on the broad principal of not flogging a dead horse.*" Comparisons of the German and English brands of gun are made in some detail, the upshot of which is that "*it is sad for Englishmen who have had the privilege of a residence in Germany to compare the progress of that country with the stagnation of our own; it is sad to see the snobbish 'made in Germany', that was meant for a warning and reproach, becoming gradually a trade-mark of excellence; and it is surely enough to give us pause when the Secretary of State for War of the country of Stephenson and Armstrong admits that he has to turn to unknown German makers for guns.*" Not that Brodrick was entirely culpable, for his "*brilliant exposition of army reform (quod Di Feliciter*

vortant), and his stalwart delivery in the House of Commons, on a more recent occasion, shows that when left to himself his views are wide and statesmanlike, and that he has the courage to hold them firmly. It is the more pity to see him so ill-advised on the question under discussion." It is with a Falknerian allusive flourish that the article ends. "*we remember once to have seen a ruined Temple at Isis, where there was a pedestal on which formerly stood an oracular image of the goddess. The figure had long been missing, but in the built-up base was pointed out a little pipe that led away by twists and turns to a secret chamber. Here used to hide a priest whose voice it was that gave fateful utterance through the idol's mouth. Real responsibility is not always easily traced.*"

By now, and all the more so as a result of the Boer War, that public obsession with Germany was deep-rooted, forcing its way to the surface in many a politician's statement and in newspaper articles. One of these, in *Black and White*, noted that there had been a time when "*the idea of an important German navy would have seemed as incongruous as would the notion of a great Swiss fleet.*" All of which was to fuel the demand for ships and fantastic tales of invasion, whose authors doubly benefited, as their work, after emended translation, found a market among the putative enemy. The best known of these was William Le Queux's 1906 yarn *The Invasion of 1910* which came with a introductory testimony to its accuracy by none other than Field-Marshal Earl Roberts, who counted for nothing when it came to serialisation in the Daily Mail: the carefully-planned invasion was radically re-routed so that it included many more of the towns in which the newspaper might expect a boost in sales. Such was the vogue for these tales that, a year before 1910 itself, the young P.G.Wodehouse gave it the satirical twist of *The Swoop*, a too-little-known novel in which, after the news of invasion is buried amid the stop-press cricket scores, competing armies from numerous nations vie with one another while Englishmen try to get on with their golf.

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