

Wanderings around Naples
Part 4 -The Villa de Angelis at Posilipo
Philip Weller

In this final article in the studies of the Italian locations of *The Lost Stradivarius* (TLS), I shall attempt to identify the real building and occupants, in the Naples area, which most influenced Falkner's description of the "Villa de Angelis at Posilipo". (1) There were many active and retired British diplomats, engineers and writers living on the Posilipo Peninsula in the last quarter of the 19th Century. Some were permanent residents, others mid-term, and some very temporary. Six residents in particular are relevant to this study, in varying degrees of importance. There were three maritime managers: Falkner, Nelson Foley, and George Rendel; and four popular writers: Norman Douglas, E. W. Hornung, Arthur Conan Doyle, and Falkner. Yes, the last was, of course, unique in being a member of both sub-groups! Our next consideration is to the sets of relevant dates, from the 1895 publication of TLS, to the two time periods of the novel – the 1840s and the 1750s – but, crucially, we also need to find dates for Falkner's visits to Naples. Fortunately, although we are still confronted by a paucity of dates in some areas of Falknerian chronology, we at least know that he definitely visited Naples in 1886. (2) Since he also became Secretary of Armstrong Mitchell in 1888-9, in effect a senior executive, it is highly likely that he would have visited the Pozzuoli plant and stayed in the Posilipo area, fairly soon after his appointment.

Having followed Sophia's route through Naples – see Part 1 of *Wanderings* in the JMF Journal for 2016 – she had reached the roads leading to the Posilipo Peninsula. She states that, after leaving the Festival crowds: "... we were climbing the steep slope leading up

to *Posilipo*". (3) This would have been the climb up to what was then known as the *Strada Sulla Collina* (the Road on the Hill Crest) - see map below - which ran along the crest of Posilipo Hill in a South-Westerly direction.



Near its maximum height, there is a left turn onto a narrower road, the *Dicesa di Gaiola* (the *Gaiola Descent*) dropping steeply down in a Southerly direction to a point where the carriage could not proceed ahead, because the road becomes a narrow stepped footpath, leading down to the sea. There is, however, a smaller road leading off to the right, which enters an area of vineyards and gardens, leading to the rear of a villa which is by far the best candidate for the '*Villa de Angelis*' – this is the real *Villa Bechi*. Incidentally, this small road also heads to the end of the underground grotto (tunnel) of *Sejanus* (see dotted line on the map) and the Roman palace. Note *Pozzuoli* to the left of the map.

As *Sophia* writes: "*After mounting steadily for a long time we began to rapidly descend, and just as the sun came up over the sea we arrived at the 'Villa de Angelis'.*" (4) Sadly, *Sophia's* geographical awareness is not always accurate, for she describes the villa as

being located “... just before coming to the Capo di Posilipo as you proceed from Naples”. (5) She (or rather Falkner!) fails to appreciate that there was no easy overland route between Naples, the Capo, and the Posilipo Peninsula, with the Strada Nuova, (see map) not fully completed until 1857, whilst Sophia’s journey was in August 1845. This ‘error’ was probably influenced by Falkner’s experiences of travelling along the coastline by boat, which in the 1880s-90s was the easiest way to go from Naples to Posilipo, and on to Pozzuoli.

Here we must refer to the testimony of both William Gaskell and Sir John Maltravers as evidence of the villa’s location being not at the Capo but rather on the Posilipo Peninsula tip. Sophia tells us, of her brother’s villa, that “*The earlier foundations were, I believe, originally Roman, and upon them a modern villa had been constructed in the eighteenth century...*” (6). Gaskell attributes this modern villa to Adrian Temple, “*On the Scoglio di Venere, near Naples, he built the Villa de Angelis*” (7), while Sir John himself refers to “*the ruined villa on the Scoglio di Venere*”.(8) Falkner seems to have conflated here the legendary Scoglio di Virgilio (School of Virgil) and the Tempio di Venere (Temple of Venus) both located, one to the land side and one sunken below the water, at the Southernmost edge of the mainland of the Posilipo Peninsula – see maps above and below.

It is here that our candidate villa, the Villa Bechi, is also located. Sophia continued, “*I sprang from the carriage, and passing through a trellis of vines, reached the house.*”(9) Upon entering her brother’s room Sophia described the view. “*The room looked directly on to the sea: the villa was, in fact, built upon rocks at the foot of which the waves lapped. Through two folding windows which opened on to a balcony the early light of the summer morning streamed in with a rosy flush.*”(10) The main part of the Villa Bechi is circular in plan,

with the Southern perspectives covering about 150° of the horizon from a large terrace. There are several floors to the building above the main house, with windows giving even wider views.

Villa Bechi as seen from the Pausilypon hill. Note Vesuvius to the left. (Photo Philip Weller)



The Villa Bechi is about 100 feet above sea level, indeed “*built upon rocks*”, and these rocks are formed into a series of ledges, rather like a stepped pyramid, to prevent them from collapsing into the sea, with soil on each ledge allowing flowers to blossom in the sun. At the bottom of the rocks, where the waves lap, there is a narrow beach, forming a headland. About 50 yards from the mainland, across a shallow passageway of sea, there is a group of small islands, with the area being known as La Gaiola (a derivative of the Neapolitan dialect for a cave).



Villa Bechi seen from the narrow beach (Photo Philip Weller)

The Villa Bechi took its name from the owner who, around 1820, purchased an existing building on the site and on additional land. He

was the Cavaliere Guglielmo Bechi and despite numerous changes

of ownership, following his death in 1852, the villa tended to retain his name, by default, until about 1897. Bechi was a well-known Neapolitan archaeologist, and he must have been in heaven to have discovered that he was surrounded by a massive area, still awaiting full excavation, containing the ruins of a classical Roman palace complex. This included a temple, an odeon (small amphitheatre), and the Villa of the notorious Vedius Pollio. It became the Imperial Palace of Pausilypon when acquired by Augustus Caesar. (11) The gradual discovery of this Palace occurred between the end of the 17th century and the middle of the 19th. In 1755, for example, the exact decade when Adrian Temple was living his dissolute life on the Posilipo peninsula, major finds were being excavated, while a mere 3 years before Sir John Maltravers arrived at the 'Villa de Angelis', "A more systematic search began in the property contiguous with Bechi's". By March 1842, the architect Pietro Bersani was able to state that "*The buildings of the complex were soon unearthed, so much so that he found the theatre, the odeon and the remains of a portico along the sea*". (12) The theatre was in fact a 2000-seat auditorium!

Bechi (like Sir John Maltravers), did make many alterations to the villa, and following his death, it passed through both individual and company hands (13) to the moment in the 1880s, when our next main resident purchased both the Villa Bechi on the mainland, and the adjacent Villa on the Islet of Gaiola opposite. This is our second Posilipo marine manager, Nelson Foley, who owned the Isola di Gaiola from the 1880s until 1909, and the Villa Bechi for separated parts of that same period. There are two larger Islets, known as Isola di Gaiola (Islet of Gaiola). It should be noted that this name is singular, in that the two islets were joined, until the late 19th Century. At the time of Sir John Maltravers' occupancy of the 'Villa

de Angelis' however, his view across the stretch of water would have shown that "...the two Gaiola islands were joined by a rocky arch".(14) Later occupants had, however, cut numerous artificial caves and tunnels through the bedrock (Tufa, which can easily be cut with a saw) to create storage areas and passageways, and during a storm a tunnel collapsed down the middle of the island. The two islets are joined now by a narrow, rail-less stone bridge.



Isola di Gaiola (Photo Philip Weller)

There is no name given to the villa on the Isola di Gaiola, but some of Robert T Günther's beautiful archaeological maps give it the name of "Mr Foley's House" for the period in which we are here concerned. It was almost certainly known as the Villa Foley, and I will accept this to simplify references. Foley developed the Villa Bechi and the Villa Foley, and their surrounds, considerably. To avoid the lengthy and time-consuming road journey from La Gaiola to his construction yards, Foley enlarged one of the artificial caves on the Eastern side of his island, so that he could dock his small

steamer therein, and thus be able to travel in a direct line to and from his shipbuilding yards on the other side of the Bay of Naples.

Incidentally, the reason why Foley set up his residence here, and why he is professionally linked to Falkner, was that, with the Unification of Italy many foreign companies attempted to benefit from the selling of goods to Italy, including naval ships and guns, and Britain played a leading rôle in this. Foley worked for the British company R & W Hawthorn, Leslie & Co, Ltd, which had been established in 1886 (and for its 'Italian' subsidiary the Societa Industriale Napolitana Hawthorne Guppy), on the East Coast of the Bay of Naples, near Mt Vesuvius. Another fellow professional, our third marine manager, George Rendel, joined the Armstrong company in 1888, in order to manage a new armaments factory, built as yet another Italian subsidiary, but at Pozzuoli. He would have been involved in arranging accommodation and transportation for visiting colleagues, undoubtedly including Falkner, and may even have invited them to stay at his villa. However, the Villa Rendel, acquired in 1883, is not a good model for the 'Villa de Angelis', having none of the features of the Maltravers villa, as it was in the wrong part of Posilipo, being well to the East of the Peninsula, was right on the shoreline and not built upon rocks!

We can now begin to bring together the other half of our grouping, those on the literary side connected with the Villa Bechi. In 1896 Foley sold the Villa Bechi to Norman Douglas, though he did not move in until 1897, after ordering some alterations. He is our most important witness, in many ways, although he is also our most disreputable character. Douglas had joined the British Diplomatic Service in 1894, but he was sent away from St Petersburg in disgrace after a scandal in 1896 involving two, or possibly, three concurrent affairs with society women!

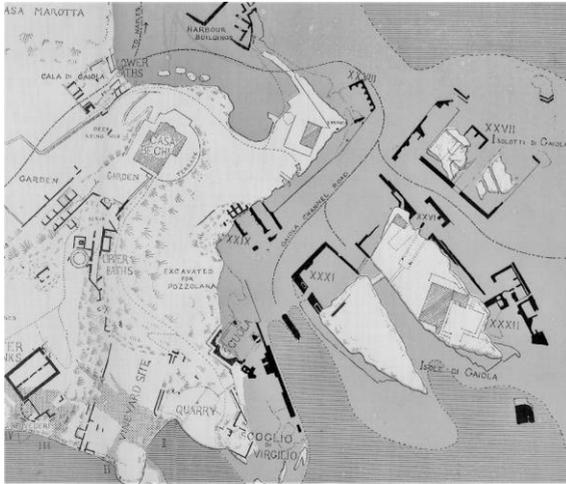
Norman Douglas boasted: *“Ever since 1888, when I went there for the first time, I had felt an affectionate longing for the Bay of Naples. Everybody admires the Bay of Naples. Not everybody buys a house and grounds there without having looked at them. In 1896, having some little money, I wrote from Petersburg to a German friend on the spot, Linden of the Zoological Station, and asked him to discover a villa on the Posilipo for me to buy. He found this place which then belonged to Filson (this is Foley, see below) who wanted to sell it. I sent the money. The thing was done.”* (15)

This is a typical piece of Douglas braggadocio, as he must, in fact, have previously seen the Villa Foley and the Villa Bechi, even if he did not explore either of them then. He wrote: *“Of course, like Shelley and a thousand other tourists, I had gone by boat long ago to a site near at hand, the Scoglio di Virgilio – a rocky point where the great Enchanter of mediæval days loved to linger. This is what Shelley writes about it: ‘Here are lofty rocks and craggy islets, with arches and portals of precipice standing in the sea, and enormous caverns which echoed faintly with the murmur of the languid tide. This is called La Scuola di Virgilio. The ‘enormous caverns’ have given the locality its name Gaiola – caveola. They are artificial. The sea level being then lower, the Romans excavated here the tufa-blocks required for the building of the vast Villa Pausilypon which covered all this district and has bestowed its name on the promontory”.* (16)

On a walk down by the sea, Sophia explores a series of some five such linked chambers, *“I ventured into one of the larger of these chambers”* and *“... so on until we had passed through no less than four chambers”.*(17) In having visited the School of Virgil, even then a crumbling building cut into the cliff, Douglas must have travelled into the narrow stretch of sea water between the Villa Foley and the Villa Bechi, for the remains of the so-called School of Virgil is located

at the Western exit from that stretch of water. In Roman times, this area formed the harbour of Pausilypon. In yet another indication that this is indeed the site of the “Villa de Angelis”, Sophia tells us that: *“Looking down upon the sea from the windows of the villa, one could on calm days easily discern the remains of Roman piers and moles lying below the surface of the transparent water; and the tufa-rock on which the house was built”*. (18) These are still visible today, but had been thoroughly explored by the end of the nineteenth century, with the effects of bradyseism showing the ruins of the submerged Roman villas and other buildings, ranging from the bottom of the Gaiola channel at about 8 feet to within 2 to 3 feet of the surface. Writing in 1903, Robert Günther rather points the finger of vandalism at Foley, and no doubt many other landowners similarly guilty, when he says that *“Since coming into possession (of the Isola di Gaiola) Mr. Nelson Foley has thrown out piers to protect his landing-place in stormy weather, and has made other improvements which unfortunately sometimes conceal the ancient remains.”* (19)

One of the first things that Norman Douglas did upon acquiring the Villa Bechi was to change its name to the Villa Maya, as he thought the original name *“objectionable”*. (20) *Looking Back* consisted of long and short notes, prompted by a collection of visiting cards. He altered some of the names, possibly to avoid litigation, but he writes *“Wrong name”* against those which he changes, but the real name is often obvious. Not so for Nelson Foley, who is recorded as ‘Mr. Nathaniel Filson’. (21) Douglas eventually tired of his Villa Maya and sold it back to Foley in 1903.



Günther's map showing the Villa (Casa) Bechi with Garden and Vineyard; the Villa Foley on Gaiola, the Roman submerged ruins, the Scoglio di Virgilio, and (top left) the road to Naples.

Foley promptly returned the name to Villa Bechi, which he had kept over the decades.

It is however in *Looking Back* that we have the quote that directly ties Falkner's book to the Villa Bechi, for Douglas writes: "*Several of the rooms in my villa, and all the capacious cellars, are of Roman construction. It can therefore boast of a long ancestry and has been much written about; it figures also in a modern novel called The Lost Stradivarius of which I remember nothing save the mention of a creaking arm-chair*". (22) Given that it seems unlikely that Douglas and Falkner ever met, with their respective Posilipo dates not obviously intersecting, this quote is a most interesting one. (23) From whom did Douglas derive the information that "*my villa*" figured in TLS? Presumably from the owner in the period before the novel was published, Nelson Foley!

You will recall Sophia's description of reaching the house by "*passing through a trellis of vines*". Douglas, too, mentions this...

"lunch in more intimate environment on the east side under a trellis of vines..." (24) Those vines were a part of the larger vineyard behind the villa, where another dwelling was located, nearer to the Roman Palace remains, in what was presumed to be the site of the house of Lucullus, the Roman General. Here, another of our writer residents stayed, with his wife, for six-months over the Winter of 1898/99. This was Ernest William Hornung, though he only used his initials as a writer, and he is best known as the creator of the Raffles stories. Hornung was the classic 'English' gentleman, despite his father being a Magyar Transylvanian! In giving directions to his villa, and so of course to the Villa Bechi, Hornung showed his love of cricket: *"Naples was long-leg, Vesuvius long-on (well-round), Nisida point, Procida cover-point, Ischia extra cover, and Capri 'in the deep', with a vengeance, some twenty miles over the bowler's head. Capo Posillipo is our square-leg umpire, but the bowler is a mere buoy."* (25)

He describes the descent from their villa: *"We have two ways down to the sea; and by one we pass the still standing walls of a villa of Virgil himself"* and *"...the Virgilian way is for the most part a gradual descent by a dusty pathway through the vines; the other is precipitous and even more romantic. It is a secret stair to the water's edge, three-parts subterranean, two hundred and fifteen steps in all. It has not yet been used in a novel, to my knowledge, but its time may come."* (26) Just past the School, as the boat-borne traveller turns right to enter the Trentaremi Bay, one can indeed enter the largest of the caves cut into the cliffs, with one of them leading to a staircase (now deliberately blocked for safety and security reasons) which leads up to the Imperial Palace area on the top of the cliffs. Hornung made good use of his personal knowledge of the area around the Villa Bechi, and in particular that cave and

staircase, to play a central rôle in one of his Raffles stories, *The Fate of Faustina*. “From the garden behind the house ... in a corner of this garden was the top of a subterranean stair down to the sea; at least, there were nearly two hundred steps tunnelled through the solid rock; then an iron gate, and another eighty steps in the open air; and last of all a cave fit for pirates a-penny-plain-and-twopence-coloured.” (27).

We come now to our last writer connected with the area, Arthur Conan Doyle (ACD) and to the fact that he had familial links to both Foley and Hornung, as both were his brothers-in-law through their marriages to the two Doyle sisters, Ida and Constance, respectively. He also met Norman Douglas, when the latter owned the Villa Bechi (sorry, Villa Maya!) (28). ACD’s Sherlock Holmes story, *The Adventure of the Red Circle* (published in the Strand magazine in 1911) is centred around Naples, but it does not specifically cover Posilipo nor make anything like the detailed descriptions of the villas in that area. However, what we do have is definite evidence that ACD stayed in both the Villa Foley and the Villa Bechi (‘Villa de Angelis’!) as the photo below shows. (29)



ACD on Villa Bechi terrace in 1907. The child is his nephew Innes Foley

ACD would almost certainly have read TLS – perhaps a copy was lying around the Villa Bechi in 1907! - and he would have found

the discussion of spirits and pagan rites fascinating, given his own increasing involvement with Spiritualism. Adding to this, though, would have been his awareness of the long-held local superstition

that evil spirits abounded in the Gaiola area. These included: the Casa degli Spiriti (House of Spirits) which, in 1903, Günther described as .." *the most perfectly preserved Roman house on Posilipo*" with "*a spectre robed in white*" (30); the legend of the Sirens; the Roman Vedius Pollio who fed his slaves to giant eels in his fishponds; and the cult of Isis. Many owners of the villas on La Gaiola and the mainland directly opposite have met with ill-luck, even into the 20th Century. Foley himself contracted tuberculosis in 1908 whilst living on Gaiola, and died the following year, aged only 58. In 1911 the Italian naval cruiser San Giorgio crashed into the island, supposedly while the Captain was 'entertaining' a lady guest! All the Companies who tried to set up there went bankrupt, whilst famous owners such as J. Paul Getty and Gianni Annelli suffered family tragedies. There were also several fatal accidents, suicides, and murders.

As was said at the start of this article, Falkner's known visits to Posilipo before 1895 are conjecturable, but at least we have him there in 1886, when he would have been able to explore the area and gain the sense of place that allowed him to truly evoke the mysticism and pagan history in TLS, to excellent effect. I hope I have also demonstrated that his setting for the 'Villa de Angelis' was in all probability, allowing for some poetic licence, the Villa Bechi, and I encourage all JMF Society members to make the trip to see this area for themselves.

Footnotes

1. J. M. Falkner, *The Lost Stradivarius*, (World Classics, OUP, 1991. p. 89)
2. Falkner and John Noble took a tour in 1886 covering Milan, Genoa, Spezia, Pisa, Naples, Pompeii, Pozzuoli, Rome, and Florence. (my thanks to the Kenneths – Warren and Hillier - for their help with Italy dates).
- 3 – 4. Falkner *op cit* p. 106. 5 – 6. Falkner *op cit* p. 110.
- 7 – 8. Falkner *op cit* pp. 142 and 160, respectively. Unusually, given his other excellent *Explanatory Notes*, Edward Wilson (see note 13) makes no comment on the fact that there is no Scoglio di Venere anywhere in the Naples bay area!
- 9 - 10. Falkner *op cit* p. 106.
11. The area is now a protected sub-aqua archaeological park, and you can book a guide-led walk through the Roman tunnel from the Pozzuoli side of the peninsula, to arrive at the Roman Palace area of Pausilypon.
12. R. T. Günther, *Posillipo romana*, (edited by D Viggiani), Electa Napoli, 1993. p. 83. (my translation)
13. Edward Wilson. *JMF Society Journal*, 2002. pp. 23-24.
14. R. T. Günther. *The Submerged Greek and Roman Foreshore Near Naples*. in Contributions to the study of earth-movements in the Bay of Naples, (Oxford, Parker & Sons, 1903. p. 524.)
- 15 - 16. Norman Douglas. *Looking Back: An Autobiographical Excursion*, (Chatto & Windus, 1933. p. 371.)
- 17 - 18. Falkner *op cit* p. 111.
19. R T Günther *op cit* (note 14) p. 523.
20. Douglas *op cit* p. 372. Perhaps ‘objectionable’ because, in colloquial Italian ‘becchi’ (plural of ‘becco’) means cuckolds! This is ironic since, although married during his stay in Posilipo, his divorce in 1904 was on the grounds of his wife’s adultery. By then, however, Douglas’s own predilection for young men and boys had become a major factor in his life.
- 21 - 22. Douglas *op cit* pp. 370 & 372, respectively.

23. Douglas *op cit* p. 50. He writes “...due to a slight personal acquaintance with successful writers like Conan Doyle, Marion Crawford, and Hornung”. ACD and Hornung were both encountered during the Villa Maya period, but there is no mention of Falkner.
24. Douglas *op cit* p. 372.
25. E.W. Hornung, ‘A Villa in a Vineyard’, the *Cornhill Magazine*, May 1899. pp. 662-665
26. Hornung *op cit*. More information is given in P. Rowland, *Raffles and his creator: the life and works of E. W. Hornung*, (Nekta, 1999. pp. 103-105.)
27. E. W. Hornung. *The Fate of Faustina. in The Black Mask*, (Grant Richards, 1901. p. 47).
28. Douglas *op cit*. pp. 374-375.
29. Philip Weller. *A Honeymoon over the Bay of Naples*. in *Viaggio in Italia - Italian Journey*, (ed. G. Salvatori & E. Solito), Uno Studio in Holmes, Bobi Bazlen edizioni, 2012. p. 93. (Photo courtesy and copyright of Richard Sveum.)
30. Günther *op cit* (note 14) p. 514.
- For a stunning aerial view of the La Gaiola area, with numerous close-ups of the Gaiola Islets and the Villa Bechi, watch:
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uLC4KLFuMO0> (La mia Napoli - La Gaiola). Don’t forget to switch to full screen.