

## Falkner All' Ombra del Vesuvio

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‘ “What a study for an antiquarian!” were the very words which fell from Mr. Pickwick’s mouth, as he applied his telescope to his eye’ on approaching Rochester [*Pickwick Papers*, chap. 2]. They are words which also frequently come to the minds of all students of John Meade Falkner. The present study arose when in the pursuit of another matter in the work of Norman Douglas [1868-1952] I serendipitously chanced upon a claim as to the model for the Villa de Angelis in *The Lost Stradivarius*, and thence found what looks like the prompt for the name of the young servant in the villa, Raffaele Carotenuto.

In his autobiographical work *Looking Back* [two volumes; London, 1933], organized into reminiscences suggested by his collection of calling-cards, Douglas states of his villa on the Posilipo:

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. Its then objectionable name I changed to Villa Maya -- Illusion ; as the letter ‘Y’ is uncommon in Italian it became known as Villa Maia : well, the mother of Hermes was quite a respectable dame. [ii. 372]

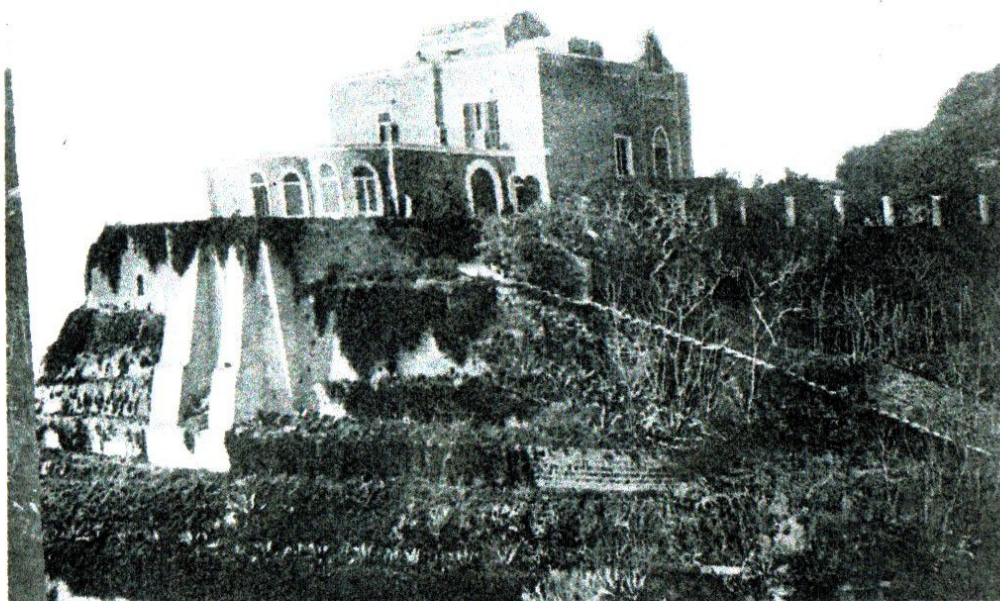
Falkner’s novel was published in 1895, but Douglas, whose first visit to Italy was in 1888 [*LB*, ii. 371], when he visited Naples and its environs, did not acquire the Villa Maya until 1896 [*LB*, ii. 371]. [1] In *Looking Back* he refers to the vendor, with deliberate error, as ‘Mr. Nathaniel Filson’ with the comment ‘Wrong Name’ [ii. 370].

For the villa’s earlier history we can turn to R.T. Günther, *Pausilypon: The Imperial Villa Near Naples* [Oxford, 1913] where it is stated that ‘about 1820 the southern portion of the property was purchased by a well-known Neapolitan archaeologist, Cavaliere Guglielmo Bechi, at public auction, and his name was associated with the Villa for more than half a century’ [p. 10]. Then ‘at the demise of Cavaliere Guglielmo Bechi the property passed to his



daughter, who sold it to a speculator named De Negri' [p. 11] around 1864/5, and it was in turn bought by the Marchese del Tufo [p. 12]. After that, 'the next change brought the property into the possession of the neighbouring landowner Signor Acampora, who afterwards parted with it to its late owner Mr. Nelson Foley [Douglas's Mr. Nathaniel Filson]. The Villa Bechi on the mainland, with a small part of the estate immediately contiguous, passed for a few years into the possession of Mr. Norman Douglas' [p. 12].

We can now annotate Douglas's comments a little. The name *Maya* is a Sanskrit word [= 'Illusion'] which according to the *Oxford English Dictionary* s.v. *maya*, sb., 1, is 'a prominent term of Hindu philosophy', first recorded in English writing in 1823; it acquired some currency in Europe in the later 19th and earlier 20th centuries. More puzzling is what Douglas calls the villa's former 'objectionable name'. My guess is that this was the Villa Bechi. It is what Günther still calls the villa in 1913 [see above and also his map, sv. Casa Bechi, following the Index; unsurprisingly, 'Villa Maya' did not last since Douglas sold it back to Nelson Foley in 1903: *LB*, ii. 375-7, and Holloway, op.cit., pp. 149-50]. Why 'Bechi', the name by which Falkner would have known it, should have been found 'objectionable' is uncertain, but my colleague Dr. Arnd Kerkhecker [to whom I am also indebted for elucidation of 'Maya'] has informed me that Sansoni's Italian Dictionary gives *beco*, plural *bechi*, as Tuscan for 'fool, fools', and Douglas may have known, and found embarrassing, this dialect term.



**The Villa Maya**                      photograph from  
Norman Douglas, *Looking Back*, II [London, 1933], facing p. 372.



Falkner's knowledge of the Villa Bechi in the time of Nelson Foley's ownership is not surprising. When the firm of Armstrong Mitchell, of which Falkner had become Secretary in 1888-9, set up a plant for manufacturing guns and gunboats at Pozzuoli, near Naples, in the late 1880s, Falkner would have been one of the senior executives who visited Pozzuoli, staying at the Villa Rendel on the Posilipo [see my World's Classics edition of *The Lost Stradivarius* [Oxford, 1991], p. 178, note to p. 89]. According to Douglas, Foley 'was an Irish, possibly Scotch-Irish, steam or marine engineer; a self-made man, I should say, who occupied the important post of Director [if I am not mistaken] of the big Patterson or Guppy works on the other side of Naples' [LB, ii. 370]. It would have been most surprising if two men in the same line of business had not met.

*Looking Back* also gives us the name which I believe Falkner had in mind when he was devising the name and to some extent the character of Raffaele Carotenuto, the 'boy' at the Villa de Angelis, of whom there is a suggestion of a homosexual relationship with Sir John Maltravers, [see my edition, *ibid.*, pp. xxii-xxiv]. When describing Naples at the time of his ownership of the Villa Maya, Douglas refers to Maupassant:

I heard him described as a 'bravo signore' by Raffaele Amoroso, who lived in Naples at 103 Via Chiaia [first floor] and pimped for the nobility and gentry, and also, on occasion, for royalty. The tales this bespectacled and mild-looking old gentleman could tell -- of the late Duke of E----, of the peculiarities of this or that Balkan sovereign, of what preparation had to be made when the British fleet called at Naples -- they were a liberal education. His memory, like that of many uneducated people, was prodigious; it went far back, a store-house of real personages and real facts; facts almost unbelievable, many of them. Here was a man who should have written his memoirs! He had pet names for all his regular clients, mine being 'Lo Sposo' [= 'The Bridegroom/The Husband'], which requires no commentary. Being affiliated with the *Camorra* [OED: 'a secret society of lawless malcontents in Naples and Neapolitan cities'] he was above the law and could satisfy the most freakish demands on the part of his clientèle; the word 'illegal' had no meaning for him. Once you begin to indulge in certain caprices, he used to say, there are



no limits to what can be done ; *la libidine non ha fine* [= 'desire has no boundary']; and he made it his business to cater genially and unscrupulously, and successfully, and rapaciously, for every taste. [i. 262]

The Christian name, *Raffael[l]e*, is the same, and there is a clear semantic connexion between the apt *Amoroso* and the equally appropriate *Carotenuto* [= 'the one held dearly/affectionately']. This is just the kind of alteration which Falkner makes when transmuting real-life names into fictional ones. Thus in *The Lost Stradivarius* George Hart becomes George Smart and James Goding becomes James Loding [see my edition, pp. 173 and 174, nn. to pp. 45 and 50]. Of especial significance in the present case are Douglas's references to Amoroso's willingness to 'satisfy the most freakish demands', his principle that '*la libidine non ha fine*', and his readiness to cater 'for every taste'. Carotenuto though, unlike Amoroso, neither old nor a pimp, was a 'youth' living in an area which attracted and cherished a homosexual colony from all over Europe, [2] and Falkner's depiction of his extravagant affection for Maltravers no doubt made the name Amoroso seem apt for conversion to Carotenuto.

As Douglas points out, Amoroso appears in a story by Maupassant, *Les Soeurs Rondoli*. This was first published serially in *L'Écho de Paris* from 29 May to 5 June 1884, and then in book-form in July of that year. [3] At the end of the first chapter the narrator says:

Quand je parlai à Paul de l'Italie, il refusa d'abord absolument de quitter Paris, mais je me mis à lui raconter des aventures de voyage, je lui dis comme les Italiennes passent pour charmantes; je lui fis espérer des plaisirs raffinés, à Naples, grâce à une recommandation que j'avais pour un certain Signore Michel Amoroso dont les relations sont fort utiles aux voyageurs; et il se laissa tenter.

Though Douglas says 'Raffaele should be printed for Michel' [*LB*, i. 263], this may not be an error but a deliberate alteration on Maupassant's part. Douglas is certainly wrong to say that this introductory chapter 'may have been written later' [*ibid.*, i. 263], for it appears in both the serialized and book-forms. Though it is true that Maupassant's great Italian journey was only in 1885, this



would indicate rather something of the notoriety of Amoroso in reaching Maupassant in France.

Of course, the search for real-life originals, whether places or people, has its perils. As Virginia Woolf long ago observed: 'A writer's country is a territory within his own brain; and we run the risk of disillusionment if we try to turn such phantom cities into tangible brick and mortar'. [4] None the less, if we know the point of factual departure we can appreciate more fully the terminus of imaginative arrival.

## NOTES

[1] For an account of Douglas's time at the Villa Maya see M. Holloway, *Norman Douglas: A Biography* [London, 1976], pp. 105-48.

[2] See besides my edition, p. xxiv, Holloway, *op. cit.*, p. 120; J. Money, *Capri: Island of Pleasure* [London, 1986], esp. pp. 51-71; J. Pemble, *The Mediterranean Passion: Victorians and Edwardians in the South* [Oxford, 1987]; R. Aldrich, *The Seduction of the Mediterranean: Writing, Art and Homosexual Fantasy* [London, 1993]; I. Littlewood, *Sultry Climates: Travel and Sex Since the Grand Tour* [London, 2001]. Pace Douglas, Amoroso's sobriquet for him, 'Lo Sposo', requires quite a bit of commentary. Douglas's first recorded homosexual encounter was with a 15 year-old boy in Naples around January 1897 [*LB*, i. 240-5; Holloway, *op. cit.*, pp. 115-16], and though he married Elsa FitzGibbon in June 1898 [Holloway, p. 124] the marriage was over by 1903 [Holloway, pp. 149ff.], leaving Douglas thereafter to pursue an untrammelled paedophilic course. One suspects that Amoroso's nickname was ironic not so much with regard to Douglas's marital as his heterosexual status.

[3] My text and all bibliographical information comes from the Pléiade edition of Maupassant, *Contes et nouvelles* vol. ii, ed. L. Forestier [1979].

[4] From a review, headed 'Literary Geography', of Lewis Melville's *The Thackeray Country* and F.G. Kitton's *The Dickens Country* [both 1905] in *The Times Literary Supplement* of 10 March 1905, p. 81, and reprinted in A. McNeillie [ed.], *The Essays of Virginia Woolf*, i. 1904-12 [London, 1986], pp. 32-6.