

## Did Lord Blandamer murder Sharnall?

John Meade Falkner

In his obituary on John Meade Falkner (*The Guardian* 5 August, 1932), C. L. Graves admitted that he once prided himself 'on the discovery that the name of the romantic and enigmatic hero, Lord Blandamer, was ingeniously compounded to express the mingled sweet and bitter elements in his character. But I was quite wrong: Blandamer, as he told me, is a genuine West-country name'. Graves went on to remark that 'a curious proof of the interest taken in this personage by readers of the book is to be found in the fact that he received nearly a hundred letters asking him whether Lord Blandamer really committed the murder or not! For himself he would not go further than to say that there were at least good grounds for holding that if Lord Blandamer had been tried on the capital charge he would not have been convicted'.

Letters from Meade Falkner to two inquirers appear to bear this out.

Feb. 26, 1904

The Divinity House  
Durham

Dear Sir,

First let me thank you very much for your kind - much too kind I fear - words about *The Nebuly Coat*. The interest which you express in the book gives me much pleasure and I am grateful. Next I will try and explain the various points which you mention though stories, I fear, are quite as hard to harmonise as the Gospels. Sophia Flannery was meant to be a happy-go-lucky, fleshy, blowsy woman - who got sick and tired of 'man after man' and loved a roving free life. She did not press her claims on old Lord Blandamer because she did not care a button for him, or for the life he would have offered her as Lady Blandamer. He gave her an annuity and she was glad enough to be quit of him yet she was not without sentiment, or a certain kind of romance. She took the picture, I think, in mere caprice and wantonness, partly as a souvenir of the past, partly from a notion that it might help her to establish claims, if the picture should ever change and if she should ever want to establish her claims - No, she had no spite. She was, I am sure, one of those easy going natures which cannot harbour spite.

Lord Blandamer married Anastasia, I think, with a sort of idea of winding up loose skeins. , as the Greeks would have it. He thought, I believe, that in marrying her he would (without legal results) have set things more at rest. He may have been influenced by some feelings of justice - of making things up to Anastasia, but I doubt it - I am inclined to think that such considerations would not have come within his horizon - I wish I could say whether he killed the organist: but I do not know. The facts are perhaps against him; but I do fancy somehow myself that he did not. In this I am supported by something that occurred to me on reading the book after it appeared in print. Westray when he went to St. Sepulchres just after midnight on the day that the organist died fancied that he saw in the shadow of the buttress a man lurking. Afterwards he connected this man in his mind with Sharnall's death. But if the man lurking between the buttresses killed Sharnall then Lord Blandamer was certainly innocent; because there was no doubt that just after midnight (12.7) that evening he was taking a ticket to London at Cullerne Road Station, 8 or 9 miles distant. Westray never had any doubt that it was Lord Blandamer who killed Sharnall; but then Westray was a poor milk-and-water impressionable creature, who might have believed anything. Generally one knows much more about the characters than transpires in a book, but Lord Blandamer was too deep for me, and I have never been able to get to the bottom of him, or to determine whether he did away with Sharnall or not. I do not think he did; but if not the coincidence was very remarkable.

Yours very truly,  
John Meade Falkner

Lancer Orde.

Nearly nine months later, Falkner was again having to defend Lord Blandamer.

November. 17. 1904

Elswick Works,  
Newcastle-on-Tyne.

Dear Sir

Please accept my sincere apologies for leaving so long without answer your kind and interesting letter. I was in the East all the summer without an address, and since my first return have had to go abroad again for a fortnight.

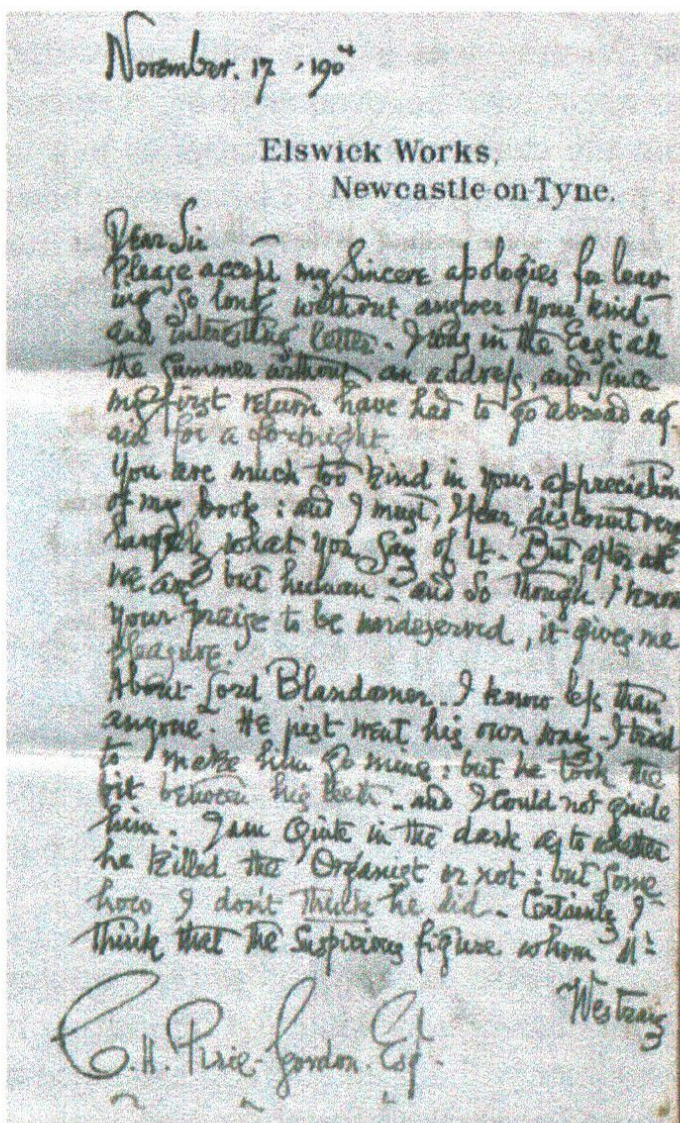
You are much too kind in your appreciation of my book: and I must, I fear, discount very largely what you say of it. But after all we are but human - and so though I know your praise to be undeserved, it gives me pleasure.

About Lord Blandamer. I know less than anyone. He just went his own way. I tried to make him go mine: but he took the bit between his teeth and I could not guide him. I am quite in the dark as to whether he killed the Organist or not: but somehow I don't think he did. Certainly I think that the suspicious figure whom Mr. Westray saw lurking between the buttresses on the night of the murder, could not have been Lord Blandamer - because Lord Blandamer was at Cullerne Road Station taking his ticket just at the time that Westray saw the figure. I wish I could tell you definitely but I do not know myself.

Do you know my other books? I am venturing to send you one of them - Moonfleet. If you will accept it you will give me great pleasure: and if you have children it may amuse them, it is to some extent a boys and girls book. With all kind regards I am very truly

Yours

J. Meade Falkner



The first page of  
the letter

Kenneth Warren, in his biography of Meade Falkner, quotes from this second letter and also mentions that over a decade later the author gave an autographed copy of *The Nebuly Coat* to Eric Dawson-Walker, the teenage son of the Canon Professor of Divinity in the University of Durham. Eric read the novel and subsequently asked Meade Falkner who had killed Sharnall. 'This time Falkner was even less forthcoming. Smiling, he replied, "Nobody ever knew".' (1)

(1) Kenneth Warren

*John Meade Falkner 1858-1932: A Paradoxical Life*  
(The Edwin Mellen Press. Lampeter, 1995) p.155

Peter Davey wrote an interesting article to accompany Newsletter No. 5 (3 January 2001) on this topic, entitled "*Accident or Foul Play?*" *The death of Mr. Sharnall in The Nebuly Coat*. Peter was not convinced by Falkner's attempt to shift the blame from Lord Blandamer.

