

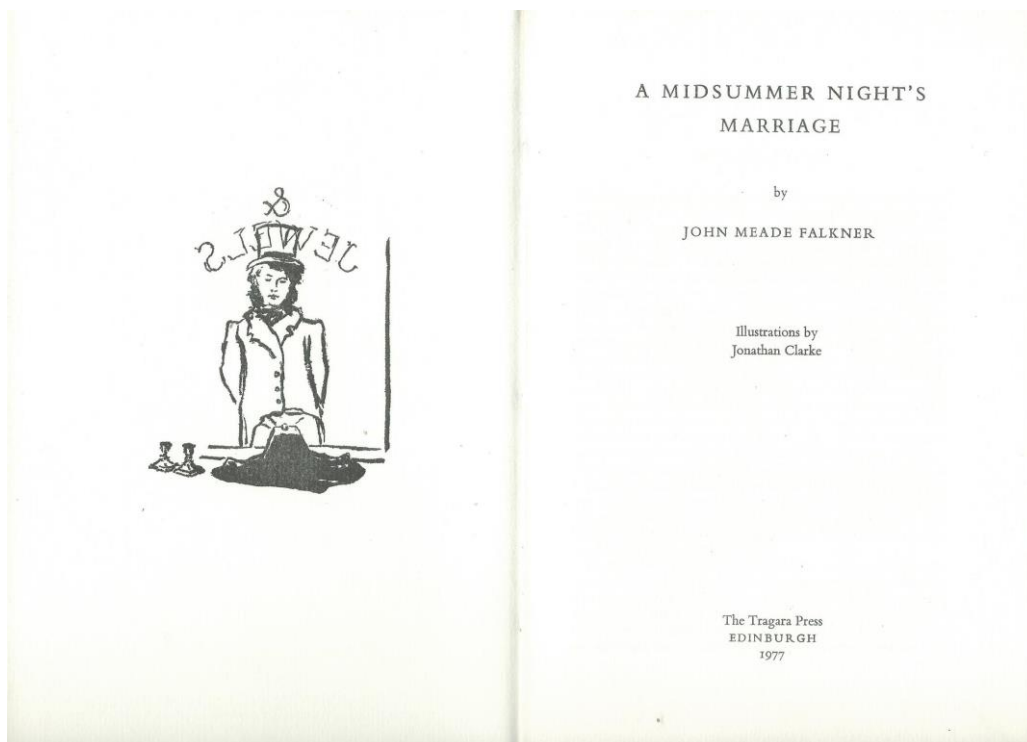
A Midsummer Night's Marriage

Some Reviews of *A Midsummer Night's Marriage*

Just after Meade Falkner had produced *The Lost Stradivarius*, the editor of the *National Review* magazine received a short story for publication. It appeared in the August 1896 issue. *A Midsummer Night's Marriage* was to be only one of two short stories ever published by Falkner, the other being *Charalampia*.

It is the adventure of a young man who, on St John's Eve, 1816, crosses the threshold of an old manor-house and steps into the same day 236 years earlier, attends the secret funeral Mass of its Roman Catholic owner in 1580, immediately afterwards marries the dead man's daughter, and then finds his life ruined after he returns to the present the following day.

In July 1977, The Tragara Press published the story in a limited edition of 160 copies, with an introduction by **Alan Bell**. The editor remarked that it was "*an interesting addition to the exiguous canon of John Meade Falkner's writings, characteristically antiquarian, ecclesiological, heraldic in tone. The text could all too easily be weighted with commentary – one would have liked to discuss with the author the coincidence that Minsteracres is also the name of an old Catholic family's estate in north Durham, or to have asked so careful a worker in words whence he took his usage 'Pascaret' – presumably for a heavy, rich Sherry wine – which seems to be wholly unrecorded elsewhere. But for discerning followers of Falkner's writings it should be enough to note that the coat of arms on the signet ring is nebuly.*"



William Haley used the publication of the new edition to review Falkner's canon under the heading "Between arms and letters". He had dealt with *A Midsummer Night's Marriage* in a lecture twenty years earlier and judged it then an "oddly wooden little tale". Now he felt he had been too harsh: he thought Falkner sought verisimilitude in the tale, and achieved it. "*The flat matter-of-factness of the telling casts its own spell. Walter de la Mare would have told it more obliquely. He would not have given it greater reality*".

Kenneth Warren, in his biography of Falkner in 1995, draws attention to the many features in the short story that are mirrored in *The Lost Stradivarius*: strong coincidences, the failing health of the central character and an all-pervading fatalism. Two of its themes are ones which Falkner's personal letters reveal were central to his own concerns – a romanticised view of marriage and leanings towards Roman Catholicism. Warren points out that a less tolerant critic than either Haley or Bell might suggest that "*contrived coincidence and the black hand of fate give it a starkness and artificiality which is unsatisfying*".

A Midsummer Night's Marriage was republished by the Tartarus Press in 2000, with *The Lost Stradivarius* and *Charalampia*. **Mark Valentine**, in his introduction, calls the story "very curious indeed. Its title, and its theme, would lead the reader to expect some account of a straying into the realm of faery, one of those encounters with the Little People from which no mortal emerges unchanged. The motif is the same, but instead of the imagery of faery, Falkner evokes the clandestine Roman Catholicism of the recusant age. The story is rich with the solemn and graceful ritual of a secret Mass, with all its candles and shadows, incense, sonorous Latin and ancient ceremonial....[it] was typical of the period, the Eighteen Nineties...It is inevitably tempting to see the story as an allegory, the secret marriage under Catholic auspices implying some echo of Falkner's own inner allegiances, perhaps not fully acknowledged even to himself."