

A Transplanted Hidalgo
Christopher Hawtree

Asked to contribute to a collection of essays about encounters with authors, I reflected that Falkner's friends often remarked upon his penchant for what would later be called metafiction, and here is the result of that.

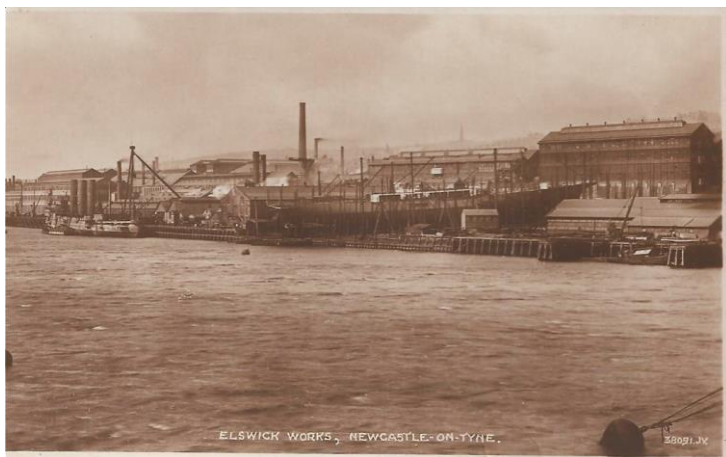
Falkner. Mention his name to anybody and chances are that there will be a remark of some kind about the author of *As I Lay Dying* and *The Sound and the Fury*. Gently cough and say no, in fact one is not referring to his creation of Yoknapatawpha County, Mississippi but to the diverse landscapes brought to life by John Meade Falkner, and there might well be that blank look which is the shock of non-recognition, but instantly eased by pointing out that he wrote *Moonfleet*. This is one of those books that exists independently of its author, almost as much as the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* he so esteemed.

First published in 1898, this smuggling tale - set over a hundred years earlier - mutated through the early twentieth century into a children's classic, familiar in every schoolroom (partly because its publisher, Edward Arnold, was strong in the educational market, more so than in general trade). It is, however, as much appreciated for its Stevensonian brio by those who relish his two other novels, also set at some point in the past: the pan-European ghost story *The Lost Stradivarius* (1895) and the seethingly Hardean small-town intrigue and passion of *The Nebuly Coat* (1903) are as different from each other as they are from *Moonfleet* but all are palpably the work of a man described by Hugh Walpole as "a real abnormal romantic" whose work, peopled by the quietly fraught, anticipates the "dissociation of sensibility" which was to characterise the early decades of the twentieth century.

As a boy Walpole had seen the gangling Falkner walk through Durham and, speaking with him once, felt in awe of somebody who, despite his abundant interests, described himself as "the eternal romancer" living in a medieval atmosphere of his own and given to teaching local people folklore of his own devising so that it might be duly recorded by diligent antiquarians.

There have been many such people, usually within a rectory, quadrangle or landed estate. Born in some rural poverty in 1858, Falkner had no such pecuniary advantage but, from Dorset childhood onwards, his ever-alert mind and charming nature fostered some remarkable luck which meant that on his death in 1932 he left around £250,000. Needless to say, only a tiny proportion of that derived from his writing, which also included small but richly detailed, anonymous guides to Oxfordshire and Berkshire, an even briefer one about Bath, a gathering of Psalters, and poetry which was almost as likely to be in Latin as English.

By the time of the Great War, Falkner occupied a considerable place in English life: a friend of Hardy and an acquaintance of Kipling, he was also somebody with whom eminent politicians consorted. He was soon to become Chairman of Armstrong-Whitworth. Based on the Tyne in Newcastle, it was the world's largest shipbuilding and armaments



manufacturer, on whose behalf he had spent the previous two decades travelling throughout Europe and part of Latin America as - in effect - a salesman for such products. All the while, on these journeys, he would combine business with sojourns in notable libraries, especially the Vatican's, there pursuing a lifelong interest in missals and incunabula which was as strong as his delight in touring by bicycle between churches high and low. No preoccupied scholar, his humour

also made light of the weaponry logged in the order-book. He even brought a smile to the Sultan's face when, in walking backwards from the ruler's presence, he inadvertently crushed against a pillar the top-hat which protocol also deemed he should carry behind him.

Time and again, not least in the twenty-first century, the most unlikely people have gained command of large companies, and been paid off handsomely after such stewardship has brought the enterprise close to the rocks. Now, over a century since Falkner's last novel, one can reasonably surmise that he may well have wished to create a larger haul of fiction, even if three enduring novels are better in posterity's eyes than the prolific output of Hugh Walpole which has largely dropped from sight.

Falkner did work on a fourth novel - lost, it seems, upon one of his many train journeys (his letters are often headed "in the train" and no less elegant in their calligraphy for such vehicles sometimes being described as "frisky"). Be that as it may, the example of others (T.E. Lawrence, Carlyle, Malcolm Lowry) means that the mislaying of a manuscript need not have dimmed creativity; there is also no doubt that Falkner, with a fine house in Durham, had acquired such tastes as a notable library which were beyond the reach even of a novelist whose last novel had gone through several printings in a year. At any rate, *The Nebuly Coat* has been praised by E. M. Forster, Graham Greene, V. S. Pritchett, Dorothy L. Sayers, John Betjeman, Thomas Hardy, A. N. Wilson, Wesley Stace, Anthony Powell; the film director Michael Powell so admired him that he used Chesil Beach as a location for his version of Nigel Balchin's *The Small Back Room*; and he has found a great enthusiast in Spanish novelist Javier Marias, who has remarked "you can only fully tell stories about what has never happened, the invented and imagined".

Falkner cannot have anticipated commercial and artistic eminence when, soon after his birth in Wiltshire, the family moved to Dorchester, his father there taking another post of curate, as he was also to do in Weymouth: Falkner, whose childhood suffuses his work, did manage to go to Marlborough College, from which he went - after a mysterious hiatus - to Hertford College, Oxford. His fate thereafter was at first similar to another product of that College: equally interested in more than his putative subject of History, Evelyn Waugh took a poor degree and, like Falkner before him, was obliged to avail himself of the

services of scholastic agents Gabbitas and Thring; in Falkner's case, school mastering had duly brought the recommendation that he become tutor to the children of Sir Andrew Noble, a partner in Armstrong-Whitworth; in particular, so formidable a self-made man as Noble had been disappointed by one son, John's progress at Eton. The boy and Falkner were to become particularly close, Falkner a more than frequent companion at the family's various homes, including a congenial one in Newcastle's Jesmond district. It was only natural that, before long, Falkner's ready grasp of any subject brought him a junior position with the firm, where he would later be joined by John, whose last words, when dying a few years after his friend, were apparently, "Falkner!"

Some eight years into the twentieth century, events had led to the Board at Armstrong's falling into two factions, and at times Falkner found himself acting as a self-appointed go-between, well-nigh obsequiously communicating with Lord Rendel who was not at all happy with the others' management of a firm in which he had a considerable stake; such indeed was Rendel's concern that, despite often being in Brighton or France, he took steps to investigate its financial conduct; exactly how he did so remains unclear but the result was that certain matters, including an alternate account book, were put in better order and efforts made to bring "new blood" into the firm.

Falkner's life is rich in paradox, not the least being that his travels about the world, sometimes coinciding with representatives from Krupp and others, contributed to that simmering situation which would set Europe in conflagration, and so change his world. By the end of 1915, with a dramatic symmetry at which a novelist might balk, Lord Rendel had been followed to the grave by Sir Andrew - and Falkner found that the Chairmanship was his.



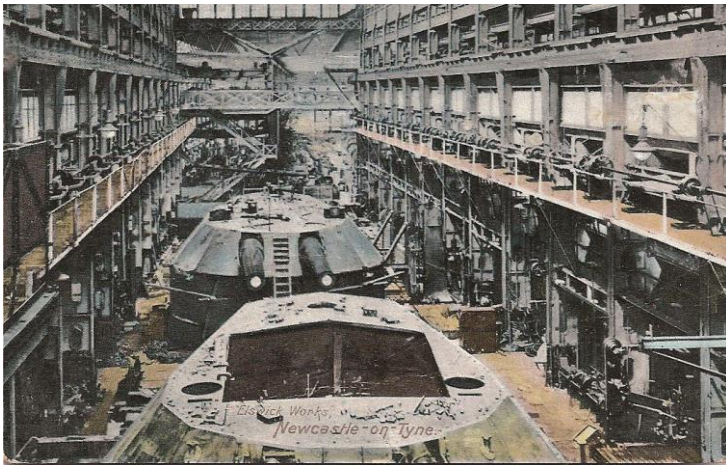
Violet Asquith

to visit Armstrong's great munitions works at Elswick. We walked for

In the spring of that year, the firm was visited by the Prime Minister, Asquith who brought along his daughter, Violet, who had accompanied him on many political campaigns and was, with studies in Europe and Egypt, equally steeped in literature. The future Lady Violet Bonham Carter was to write: "I went with my father to Newcastle

hours through a bewildering maze of machinery, in which fiery furnaces roared, gigantic hammers rose and fell and men seemed a mere incident. At the end of our tour of inspection we were taken on a launch up the Tyne, to look at the shipping. I found myself beside one of the directors, whose name I had not caught, and somehow for a few minutes the War and its horrors dropped away and we began to talk about books. 'There is one book you must read,' I said to him; 'I cannot tell you why, because its quality is indescribable - it is called *The Nebuly Coat*.' 'I wrote it,' he said.'"

One of literary history's drollest moments, that is something which she recalled a few months before the next war, in *John O' London's Weekly*. The magazine would not have been able to publish the conversation which she had later that day with *Falkner* when her father was otherwise occupied at the *Station Hotel* with such things as several letters to his close friend *Venetia Stanley*. In one of these *Asquith* told her, "they are making shells as fast as they can turn them out in a lot of



huge sheds, almost all of which have been built where there were green fields at the beginning of the war, and where they now employ 13,000 instead of 1,300 men & women... There were masses of girls who looked quite healthy & alert, working the neatest and prettiest little machines, which they learn if they are at all clever in three days and if they're stupid in not more than a fortnight. The 15 inch gun like those

in the Queen Elizabeth is a terrific fellow to look at, when you see him just after birth, as it were in his cradle. But I won't bore you with further description. Perhaps the most noteworthy man there was Meade Falkner... better known to us as the author of those excellent novels Nebuly Coat, Moonfleet, &c &c. You know them? He is about 6'6" in height, with a rather melancholy face & voice, and the general air of a transplanted hidalgo".

As revealed in a manuscript recently found folded into a novel in a Sussex bookshop, Violet accepted Falkner's offer of some tea which, was followed, as the sun set over the river, by a glass of sherry, and she recalled that "it was with a distinct twinkle in his eye that he said, 'I do not think that we need to take seriously the King's banning of alcoholic drink from his premises for the duration of this War, do we?'"

She noted that she had "looked from the window of his office, across the array of sheds in which so many toiled upon the machinery, the



**Meade Falkner (white arrow) at launch of Brazilian Scout 'Bahia'
January 20th 1909**

weaponry, and then I took the glass which he offered me. There was not time to suggest that the King's gesture, announced a fortnight earlier, may have appeared to chime with the stricter licensing laws which tried to ensure that his subjects carried out unimpaired such work as all this which was around us today. Mr Falkner - as I cannot help but call him - now gave a smile, and held his own glass upwards

before saying, ‘after all, it is only proper that we should celebrate your birthday, isn’t it?’ I was surprised at this, for it had indeed been my twenty-eighth birthday just five days earlier. How he could have known of this was beyond me, for I feel sure that my father had no reason to mention it. He bade me to sit down in one of the chairs which made his office into a sitting room as much as anything; there were on the shelves books which certainly had no bearing upon shipbuilding, and through a doorway I glimpsed the bed - to which he so often had recourse, spending many nights at the Works rather than return home by train to Durham. I wondered whether this curiously intuitive man - who had seemed during the day so much more a part of proceedings for being a little distant from them - knew that I was engaged to be married later in the year, but I did not broach that subject. Instead I remarked, ‘can you have envisaged that our country would have reached this state, that a Director, indeed Vice-Chairman of such a firm should have to camp out by night while all this work goes on around the clock?’ Before he could reply, I added, from I know not what instinct, as I had no idea about his domestic life - other than that his house contained a fine library, as he had told my father in more modest words than those - but, there it is, I said to him: ‘did your wife realise that the War would bring you this recurrent exile within this part of Northumberland?’ By the slightest parting of the mouth and a raising of the eyebrows, that magnificently set face evinced a certain surprise. It was as if he were not accustomed to mentioning her, but he simply replied, ‘we have a quiet and old fashioned house, and I find my wife the easiest of women to be got on with - she is thank God neither affected nor fashionable, but a sober-minded and yet mirthful person, she takes pleasure in simple things. I think that one can call the marriage ceremony rather like writing the end of volume one of a two-volume novel.’”

Violet Asquith felt that, on reflection, she was not to infer from his choice of words that she herself displayed any unduly affected or fashionable characteristics. “Indeed, he continued by telling me that they had been married some fifteen years, but known each other for another ten, she being daughter of another Director and a dozen years Mr Falkner’s junior - twenty-eight, indeed, when she married him. Only afterwards did I realise that he had not mentioned her name.

“For all the well-drawn women in his novels, I felt that Mr Falkner was not likely to be much exercised by the Woman question, that he felt it

sufficient to display that unostentatious gallantry which would never satisfy such Suffragettes as those who assailed my father and myself with whips when we drove past them a few years earlier. Instead I said to Mr Falkner that despite all this machinery, the noise on the air around us, I felt it difficult to realise that its horrible purpose was to reduce the human race in large numbers. I could not fathom how many guns had to be produced to ensure each enemy fatality but I had been haunted by the thought of death since the age of four, when my mother succumbed to typhoid fever. That had spurred me to live each day as much as possible, perhaps too much so. Mr Falkner's face showed a certain animation, if not surprise. He must have known that my father had since remarried, but I was startled when he said, 'typhoid fever, yes, I know it all too well. I often feel as if death has haunted my life. I had a brother, Robert, who died before I was born. That was from a misguided attempt to cure croup. There is a photograph of him in his coffin which I have seen, and of course people said that he looked peaceful. I am not convinced of that, and I continue to find it very hard to believe that another brother, William, should have died from pneumonia in 1902, so soon after my sister Mary died the previous Christmas. I made many tours of the countryside with him, and for years Mary was my closest intellectual companion. She was a woman of quite extraordinary refinement and literary taste, and I relied more on her judgement in literary matters than on that of anyone else. It was typhoid fever, however, which killed my mother. That was in 1871 when I was twelve. There was on the table a glass water-bottle, cylindrical, as I recall, and one of us noticed that there was something, rather like a thick black piece of string coiled round the bottom of it, inside, and it was fished out with a good old silver fork, and from that fine implement hung what turned out to be a tail fallen from a decomposed rat. Although Weymouth's water is some of the best, the clearest in England, there was also in our house a tap in the servants' quarters which was fitted up to a rain-water cistern and used for washing purposes because it was softer. I believe but am not sure that there had been a warning given that this was not to be used for drinking.'"

Violet Asquith was able to hold back a choking sensation at the very image of the rat's tail and Falkner's calm explanation that it had belonged to a typhoid rat. All of the children fell ill, and he was certain that, with hindsight, his mother's condition worsened by dint of looking after them. Mindful of her own mother's end, Violet Asquith

admitted that she “had to blink back tears as he coolly but movingly described how he obeyed her request that he go to see her, and he said that ‘the room was dark though there was a low fire burning in the grate, everything was very hushed. She was not in bed but sitting in an armchair near the bed. She was wrapped in blankets and had her face to the fire. The feeling, even then, of being in some other world was very strong with me and it seemed as if my mother was remote from me, no longer the mother I knew. I wanted to kiss her, but she waved me back from doing so, she put her hand on my sleeve, and looked at me, and I doubt that she really recognised me, and I do not remember that she was able to say anything. She died about thirty hours later.’”

The room in which Falkner and his young visitor were talking had also darkened, and for a moment Violet Asquith could not say anything but looked across at the man who, with Sir Andrew Noble now ailing, had in effect taken charge of such an enterprise. At the time, she could not quite describe it, and only later did it occur to her that, “in the minutes that it took Mr Falkner to describe the terrible incident, it was as though everything around them had again dropped from sight and sound, and that, what’s more, he were the ghost of the man he would otherwise have been: misfortune can spur a man to high achievement but that never seems compensation enough for early distress.”

Violet Asquith remarked that such terrible events - deaths in swift succession - belie the sneers that fiction can appear preposterous, and she then said to Falkner, “you wrote three novels in seven years, as well as working here, but since then we have had nothing - is there any prospect of more novels from you?” Falkner had looked into the distance, and then said, “writing is a great refuge and consolation in times of fretfulness and depression. The death of a brother and a sister lay behind my work on *The Nebuly Coat*, but I don’t think I could under any circumstances rise to any considerable flight. It is to me a great relaxation, a recuperative, and a mental refuge from surroundings that are sometimes uncongenial. But all my doings have been tendencies merely - just what I could not help doing even if they had brought poverty and ruin. And yet, yes I think that if Mary had lived she would have insisted I write more. I know that but I cannot say to myself what she would have wanted to tell me”. Violet Asquith had heard that Mr Falkner was once asked, and even been tempted to stand for Parliament, but he laughed, dismissing that prospect: “Politics later than 1745 are thoroughly without interest, and, without offence, even

thoroughly distasteful to me - even to set about canvassing for votes would strike me as setting up advertisements for pills on a cowslip bed”.

She laughed at this, and said that she would bear it in mind but feared that she would not yet be dissuaded from the campaign trail. It occurred to her that Falkner had something in common with Kipling, that they were both public men but there was a deeper, private concern behind their work, and she asked whether they met. He replied that they saw one another from time to time in London, but he did not elaborate, instead remarking that it puzzled him that Kipling should allow his publishers to print the Indian symbols both ways round on the pages of his books. “There is a great deal of interest for me in the Svastika because I am fond of Homer,” said Falkner, ‘and the Svastika is very frequent in the excavations at Troy. There were six or seven cities built on top of one another. When one city was burnt or saced or razed to the ground they went to work at once and built a new one on the old site. But the Svastika is only found at one level. I haven’t got Heinrich Schliemann’s great book here to hand about his diggings, and so I can’t make sure which one, but there were many found at Troy. There is the Svastika when the handles of the cross-sticks turn all to the right and there is the other form of the Sauvastika when the handles all turn to the left. The Svastika was the most favoured though I daresay there was not much to choose between them, so perhaps Kipling is not much troubled by his publisher’s behaviour. It was an emblem of fire and abundance. It is supposed to represent the original wooden machine by which they produced fire by making one piece of wood spin sharply against another. It has a little wooden support nailed into the ground in the middle of which the wooden stick was spun round by a bow-cord until it caught fire. The little dots you see on the Svastika are supposed to represent the wooden pins which nailed it to the ground.”

As he spoke, Violet Asquith found herself - she recalled - beguiled by his way with conveying a fact: she could well imagine that he must have been the most extraordinary salesman, with that unforced ability to make each listener feel as if the person of greatest interest to him. “Here we were in Newcastle but also, for a moment, in Troy, and I was aware of more books that I should seek out, and I felt sure that, as he spoke, he was as aware as I was that the spinning pieces of wood had turned, through thousands of years, into the fiery machinery all around

us which was intent upon destroying abundance. Perhaps some might say that this was simply Troy being sacked again, but now, as we stand on the edge of another war, I can only wonder at the horror with which Mr Falkner would have greeted the Germans' appropriation of that symbol. He would have understood that, a year after his death in 1932, Kipling told his publishers not to use the symbol upon his books anymore. As I left Mr Falkner that day, it was as if I knew that we were not to coincide again, but he had been the presence in my life that he would remain - it takes the living, not a ghost, to make the past bear upon the present and all that comes after, and I felt sure that there was a great deal more to the singular Mr Falkner than he had allowed me to glimpse. I later found out that I had more about him than others knew. Some people did not even know that he was married. But once again I read that indescribable novel *The Nebuly Coat*, and lingered over the section which describes the mind as being 'an impregnable fortress which can be held against all comers, the mind is a sanctuary open day or night to the pursued, the mind is a flowery pleasance where shade refreshes even in summer droughts. To some trusted friend we try to give the clue of the labyrinth, but the ball of silk is too short to guide any but ourselves along the way'. I shall always be glad of the length of silk extended to me that day, and I feel sure that if he had wanted to do so, Mr Falkner could have drawn from people's minds even more than Dr Freud has done - but he was too much of a gentleman for that."