

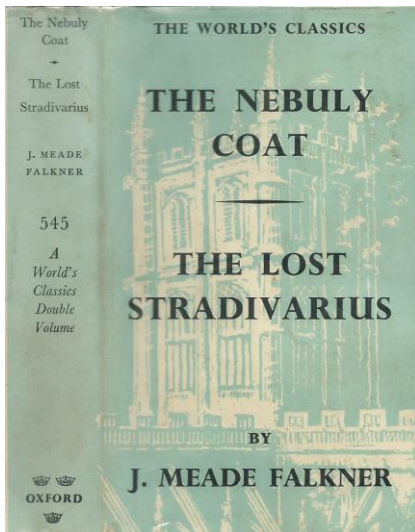
Meade Falkner: Purpose and Achievement
Sir William Haley *

CORNHILL	
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To avoid disappointment, readers of the 'Cornhill Magazine' are advised to order early in the month.

Readers of the *Cornhill* magazine for December 1916, found, sandwiched in between “Tales of a Flying Patrol B.E.F.” and “With the Anzacs in London”, a seemingly artless tale “Charalampia”. Its opening sentence must have made many readers wonder if the editor of the *Cornhill* had lost his judgement. “*Charalampia was born on Wednesday, October 15, A.D. 581. It seems a long time ago, but, after all, it is not so long ago as if it had been 581 B.C.*” But as they read on and the tale turned into an allegory for the times, telling of the princess who twice could not bring herself to cut her hair “*which was as if one had beaten gold and copper together*” and found salvation in the moral “*Make the most of the occasion. Drink of the brook in the way*” they must have come to perceive the author’s very individual art. Ostensibly “from the Greek of Trachlyides”, the real author’s name will have explained much to others. It was J. Meade Falkner, who, thirteen years earlier, had written *The Nebuly Coat*. Sixteen more years passed before Falkner died in 1932, but he published nothing more.

Few modern authors have achieved as sure a reputation as Meade Falkner with so little output. It is true his story was an unusual one, the donnish lover of music, architecture and heraldry who, almost accidentally became Chairman of Armstrong Whitworth's. But it was not the kind of personal history like William De Morgan's to arouse real interest and affection, nor were the books Falkner wrote directly and enchantingly autobiographical as De Morgan's were. Leaving on one side his handbooks on Oxfordshire and Berkshire (though all his enthusiasms are in them and make them live in a way few guide books can), his histories of Oxfordshire and Bath, and his poems, Falkner's books are *The Lost Stradivarius* (1895), *Moonfleet* (1898), and *The Nebuly Coat* (1903).



Yet, given the established scope of the World's Classics, he was undoubtedly worth including in the series, and Mr. Geoffrey Cumberlege, for the newest "double volume" (a description more apt on this occasion than on some others) has chosen the best of Falkner in marrying *The Lost Stradivarius* and *The Nebuly Coat*.

In saying that, it is necessary to get *Moonfleet* – and its adherents out of the way. It is the most popular of Falkner's works. Edward Arnold has had it continuously in print since it first appeared fifty-six years ago and has so far published thirty-two impressions. It was also one of the Nelson's sevenpennies of our childhood, in Cape's Traveller's Library twenty years ago, has been printed in the United State of America, has been abridged for African and is shortly to appear as a film. Yet a re-reading of all Falkner's books leaves one satisfied with the old

impression that while it is one of a remarkable trio, and is one of the most readable adventure stories of its day, even if you stretch the day to include Stevenson, Masfield and Quiller-Couch, it has not the force or art of the two others.

Read in childhood it left one strong impact which never failed to have physical effect through the years. Always, whenever *Moonfleet* was recalled, one had a queasy feeling at the thought of Elzevir Block's and John Trenchard's climb up the cliff face. Once again, the wrinkled sea far below came back to the mind's eye, the paralysing terror on the ledge of the boy with the broken leg because he had nothing to hold on to, the very contortions (so vividly portrayed and seen) whereby Elzevir at last got the lad on his back; these live again and again and do not fade. The final scene of all, when Elzevir gives his life to bring John Trenchard safely through the surf, also retains its vividness. But the rest is not distinguished; Grace Maskew is a tick; and while Falkner prefaced *Moonfleet* with the motto "to be boy eternal" there is no real indication that John Trenchard ever was a boy.

But it is pointless to criticise *Moonfleet* for what it does not contain. Falkner's great strength was a clarity of purpose. In all his three major stories he knew precisely what he was setting out to do; and in all three he just as precisely did it. *Moonfleet* is a straightforward tale of adventure; there is no mystification or, except in the most elementary sense, delineation of character. *The Lost Stradivarius* depends on both. It gains considerably by a re-reading. The skill of its narrative, the process of disclosure, the fitful decline of the ill-fated John Maltravers are seen to be well contrived. What was remembered merely as a Victorian ghost story involving a violin become a study of at least three characters. One notices such little touches (so beloved of Falkner) as:

The light of the single candle burning on the table was scarcely sufficient to illumine the page; the shadows hung in the

creases of the leaves, which had grown into those wavy folds sometimes observable in books made of thick paper and remaining long shut; and it was with difficulty he could read what he was playing.

For a first work, leaving on one side the Oxfordshire hand-book, *The Lost Stradivarius* is accomplished; for a story written in 1895 it seems modern.

It says much for *The Lost Stradivarius* that it can sit comfortably alongside *The Nebuly Coat*. For while *Moonfleet* is one facet of Falkner and *The Lost Stradivarius* another, *The Nebuly Coat* is the whole man. Here again the years could not weaken one strong impression. One had come to know Cullerne Minster as one can know few fictional places; if it were ever encountered in reality it would have been at once recognised; and from young Westray's intuitive warning "The arch never sleeps" to the final collapse and destruction of the great tower the place lives more strongly than any of the characters. Than any except, perhaps, one. For Lord Blandamer is one of the most single-minded, most likable and most ruthless villains in fiction. The murder he commits seems of little moment against the personality of the man himself. As its victim is the one endearing character in the story it is to be deplored. But it does not outrage. Blandamer is one in all things. He married Anastasia in the same spirit as he killed Sharnall. He would have had it fall otherwise; but given his lights it had to be done.

He saw her distress but made as if he saw nothing and pitied her for the agitation which he caused. For the past six months Anastasia had concealed her feelings so very well that he had read them like a book. He had watched the development of the plot without pride, or pleasure of success, without sardonic amusement, without remorse; with some dislike of a rule which force of circumstances had forced upon him, but with an unwavering resolve to walk the way which he had set before him. He knew the exact

point which the action of the play had reached, he knew that Anastasia would grant what he asked of her...

He was sorry for the feelings which he had aroused, sorry for the affection he had stirred, sorry for the very love of himself that he saw written in her face. He took her hand in his, and his touch filled her with an exquisite content; her hand lay in his neither lifelessly nor entirely passively, yet only lightly returning the light pressure of his fingers. To her the situation was the supreme moment of a life; to him it was passionless as the betrothal piece in a Flemish window.

In the same cold passionless way, he finally died to save Westray; it was the only possible, if ironical, retort after Westray had, in a far different way, saved him. The scene between Blandamer and Westray in which Westray forgoes the secret of the title is evidence of how Falkner seemed able to bring off whatever he had a mind to. It is a first effort; it is a piece of precision work.

The Nebuly Coat reintroduces itself, however, as more even than Cullerne Minster and Blandamer. Canon Parkyn may owe something to Trollope and Sharnall much to Turgenev, but Miss Euphemia Joliffe is all Falkner's own, and so are the townfolk of Cullerne as a whole. The wild Sophia is a dashing *dea ex machina* and Mr. G.M. Young in his introduction is not far-fetched in coupling Anastasia's name with that of Miranda. "We may believe", as he says, "that wife, maid or mistress, she would never have awakened from the spell which Blandamer had cast on her proud and passionate spirit". Mr. Young points out that the plot has slips which could bring the story down in ruins; but such is the force of the characters involved, such, in truth, is the force of the plot itself, such is the life of the setting, that they fade upon the page. Falkner could have lived *The Nebuly Coat*. "Here all his interests, music, architecture, heraldry, genealogy, and – one may add – mystification, come together".

Bowle, in a letter which you published on November 5, has high praise for *Moonfleet* and suggests that I might be “persuaded” to publish the proposed companion volume in the World’s Classics.

I need to be neither tempted nor persuaded. It would give me the greatest pleasure to publish such a volume, and I made inquiries to that end a long time ago. *Moonfleet* is, however, published in two editions by Messrs Edward Arnold.

GEOFFREY CUMBERLEGE.

The Society is grateful to *The Times Literary Supplement* – in particular, Catharine Morris and Eleanor Stokes – for permission to reprint the original article.