

The John Meade Falkner Society

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SUBSCRIPTION RENEWALS

Yes, I am afraid they are due again. I do hope that you still feel that you get good value – three Newsletters and one Journal each year – for just £10. I would be delighted if you could return the slips as soon as possible. It saves those slightly embarrassing reminders. One member, who shall be nameless (thank you New York), has already sent his sub. If you do **NOT** have a **renewal form** with this Newsletter, you are at least a year in hand.

A LETTER AND A REVIEW

I mentioned in the last Newsletter that there would be two interesting contributions to look forward to in this January edition.

When **Celia Grover** wrote to me in May, she enclosed a copy of a **letter** typed by JMF to his nephew John Falkner. Dated Valentine's Day 1931, JMF had decided to give his nephew a mixture of "avuncular platitude [and] superlative pijaw". **John Sandes Falkner** (1905-83) was the second son of JMF's younger brother Charles (1864-1932). He married Ruth Halls (1909-2012) in 1935 – Celia is their daughter.

Mark Valentine has his own Wikipedia page, where he is described as an 'English author, biographer and editor'. Much more importantly for us, he has been a member of the JMF Society since October 2000. Mark wrote regularly about neglected authors for **Book and Magazine Collector** magazine from 1995 until its closure in 2010, and has provided introductions for various books, including editions of work by Walter de la Mare, Robert Louis Stevenson, Saki, as well as JMF. He also edits **Wormwood**, a journal dedicated to fantastic, supernatural and decadent literature. I mention all this as – supernaturally? – Mark appears to have unearthed an exciting collection of short stories which he has kindly reviewed for us. Certainly, from the brief synopsis of each tale, they are eminently Falknerian. I wonder if we will ever be able to track them down – on *ViaLibri*, *AddAll*, *Ebay* perhaps; or must we hope that a second-hand copy is even now languishing in an antiquarian bookshop and that we might luckily stumble across it one day? *Vincit qui patitur*.

COLLECTED POEMS ON KINDLE

You may remember that our newest member, **John-Lloyd Hagger**, is producing a Kindle version of the Society's '**Collected Poems**' of JMF. John emailed me in November to say that the 'conversion' proceeds apace. Once it is done and proof-read he has promised to send me a complete copy in PDF format to have a look through before it goes live. I am confident that JMF will find a new readership as a result.

GOOD VIBRATIONS

In *The Daily Telegraph* for 2nd August 2012, a short editorial piece appeared under the above heading.

*It was great good fortune, as we report today, for a Stradivarius to be reunited with a violinist via the lost property office at Bern station. For the instrument to have been left accidentally on a train in the first place might seem even more remarkable, except that it seems to happen all the time. Old violins can have bad vibes, for all the virtuosity of their physical vibrations. Remember how the violinist David Garrett tripped and smashed his million-dollar instrument after a Barbican concert, or how not so long ago the owner of a Venetian violin of 1698 took it to London for valuation and left it on the luggage rack on his return to Bedwyn. It is enough to make one think that John Meade Falkner was right in his novel **The Lost Stradivarius** to suggest that an object from the past can be haunted. The ghosts of Bern lost property office, though, must be more benign.*

(Thanks to **George Robson** for sending this snippet.)

JMF AND CHRISTOPHER WALL – ANY LINK?

In mid-July I received an email from **Peter Cormack**, MBE FSA, who was researching the life and work of C.W. Whall (1849-1924) as part of a book about the stained glass of the Arts & Crafts Movement. Whall was a prominent and influential member.

JMF asked Whall to design and make the large south transept window at **St. John the Baptist Church, Burford** – it illustrates the Revelation of St. John the Divine. It dates from 1908 and has an inscription asking the viewer to pray for 'three Johns who loved this church'. There are three shields at the base of the glass, the third being Falkner's. In a note that Whall wrote for the V & A Museum, which has the original design for the Burford window, the artist described JMF as "a man with very strong views and very right views about stained glass, of which he was a great lover, and with a wide knowledge of the subject". JMF wanted Whall's design for the window to have the same colouring – essentially just tints of white/colourless glass with touches of gold – as a 15th-century window in Childrey Church. Whall had to point out that the Childrey window was on the church's north side, whereas at Burford the large window was on the south, so it would require more colouring to take into account the much brighter light. According to Whall, Falkner thought the resulting window 'more or less satisfactory'.

Peter Cormack wondered if any member of this Society knew of any further references concerning the 1908 Burford window. If so, perhaps they could get in touch with him through me.

THE MAGIC OF MOONFLEET

Those of you lucky enough to live in Dorset may well have seen the latest edition of the monthly county magazine – called, unsurprisingly, *Dorset*.

The subtitle - ‘**Thomas Hardy maybe Dorset’s most famous writer but Jon Desborough wants you to try another, especially if you like a thrilling plot with a spot of smuggling**’ – was followed by ‘Photos courtesy of The John Meade Falkner Society’.

Jon had been in touch with me many months ago and had used four illustrations (the JMF portrait which tops our Newsletters; the sepia postcards of the Old Cottages in Butter Street and JMF’s home along West Walks; and one of Old Fleet Church) I subsequently sent on to him.

The whole tone is laudatory about JMF and his most famous novel. The article also gives several ‘plugs’ for the Society, pointing readers in the direction of our website and my address.

(Thanks to **Dianne Gardner** for sending me a copy.)

FRIENDS OF BURFORD CHURCH

The Friends kindly sent me their October Newsletter. I was particularly interested to read the **Bellringers’ Report**. Visiting bellringers were to attempt a Christmas Peal on Saturday, 15th December. I hope it went well.

It made me look again at JMF’s letter to John Noble, dated **1st January 1890**, when he reported that he had cycled over to Burford from Oxford with his friend Charles Lynam on New Year’s Eve.

After billiards in the *Bull Inn* (three exhibition matches), he went down to Burford Church alone “*about 11.50. I found the whole church in darkness, so I walked round by the river...just then I heard a sound of voices & found it was the ringers going to ring the year in. I went up to the belfry with them. They rang a ¼ peal of Grandsire triples of 1260 changes. The whole peal is 5040.*

I sat on the sill of one of the Belfry windows – and I had no idea of how much a tower rocks with the bells before – It really seemed as if it must come down every second. It was just like a rocking chair. After the ¼ peal choir was finished, they rang a ½ muffle & then a few more changes....”

Perhaps this summer, when we revisit Burford, we might think of supporting this aspect of the church’s annual ‘repair’ bill. I know the rector of St Nicholas, Buckland Ripers, and those who look after Old Fleet church were very grateful for your generosity after our visits in July 2011.

OUR SOCIETY IN THE BOOK COLLECTOR?

The John Meade Falkner Society has been proposed for inclusion in the Author Societies series running in *The Book Collector*. (Thank you member **George Ramsden**). James Ferguson, the magazine’s Deputy Editor, contacted me in November, wondering if we would like to be included. I jumped at the offer.

The Book Collector, is a quarterly, founded by Ian Fleming in 1952, and is unusual in drawing its readership equally from collectors, librarians and antiquarian booksellers, predominantly in the UK and the US. Societies which have run in the series so far are the Siegfried Sassoon Fellowship, the Powys Society, the Sydney Smith Association, the Anthony Powell Society,

the John Buchan Society, the Beckford Society, the Friends of the Dymock Poets, the Kenneth Grahame Society, the George Borrow Society, the Housman Society, the Shaw Society, the Edward Thomas Fellowship, the Arnold Bennett Society, the Dickens Fellowship, the Betjeman Society and the Parson Woodforde Society.

I have a copy of the Autumn 2012 edition, which features **The Betjeman Society** (strangely enough, I had just finished reading A.N. Wilson’s biography of the poet), which boasts c.650 members. It was pleasing to be told by James Ferguson that “size does not matter”.

FIFTH FALKNER SOCIETY WEEKEND

I have started to plan our fifth Society gathering, which will move between **Burford and Oxford**. It will be held in **July**. Further details will follow in the May Newsletter, but here is my first draft.

Friday: meet in Burford (B & Bs still to research; JMF stayed at *The Bull*, which I popped into in late December. It has recently been done up and looks very appetising. More details when I know who are coming.) afternoon visit to the Church; evening talk or similar

Saturday: to Oxford – visits to **Hertford College** (JMF’s alma mater); **the Bodleian** (hopefully to view JMF’s letters to Christopher Wordsworth); lunch (the **Randolph?**) where we will meet up with **Jon Whiteley**, who played John Mohune (not Trenchard) in the 1955 Film. Jon has written to say he “would be honoured to attend as someone who likes Meade Falkner’s writing”.

Sunday: Service in Burford Church? Visits to one or two places ‘written up’ by JMF in his Murray’s Handbook, e.g. Minster Lovell.

When you send in your Sub, it would be useful if you could write on the slip whether you are likely to attend the weekend. I will choose which one once I have contacted the Bodleian/Hertford to see if there are any clashes with other bodies.

JMF RELATED MATERIAL

I am most grateful to members who send in material about JMF or related people/events. **Ray Ion** and **George Robson** regularly keep me furnished with nuggets they have found. I now have a copy of the Incoming **Passenger List on the ‘Amazon’**, which docked at Southampton on 30th October 1906 carrying, among others, JMF and his wife Evelyn Violet. They were travelling First Class from Rio de Janeiro. Another photo is of a list of **Great Western Railway Shareholders**, listing JMF as owning shares at least between 1901 and 1930. I hadn’t realised that JMF was a Member of **The Botanical Society and Exchange Club of the British Isles** – well, he still was in 1926, having joined in 1917-18. Keep up the flow of information – the archive is getting larger and larger.

JULY 2013 JOURNAL

I am hopeful of an article on *Charalampia* and one linking new information on Jesmond Dene House, South Street in Durham, and Fleet. It is not too late to submit an article yourself (i.e. any reader of this Newsletter). I am keen to reflect all members’ interests and views. “*Neither do men light a candle, and put it under a bushel, but on a candlestick, and it lighteth all them which are in the house*”. (Tyndale’s translation).

AN AVUNCULAR LETTER

Valentine's Day 1931

My Dear Nephew,

This seems a great opportunity for avuncular platitude, superlative pijaw, because you are going away and we shall certainly not meet for some time, and if natural probabilities are taken into account, perhaps never again. But my advice will be as short as seems respectable, because I know how extraordinarily ignorant I am of modern life in general, and of military life in particular, and should only be discovered as 'teaching the dolphin to swim'.

One autumn day in 1878 your grandfather came down to the little old wooden station at Weymouth to 'see off' his eldest son to Oxford. My father was a fine scholar classical, Oriental and Hebrew, modern German, French, Spanish, Italian. He was Oxford of Oxford, as I am now in affection and spirit. Yet though I was just off to Oxford, he had never spoken of Oxford to me. He never had given one word of advice. I think that it is no exaggeration to say that never through all my life had he given one word of advice upon Life's vicissitudes. On that morning we got a window-seat for me in a third-class carriage in the old 10 o'clock morning South Western train, and as we were early and there was still quarter of an hour before we said goodbye, we walked up and down the rough platform made of old sleepers, talking about wind and weather, the sea and other commonplace topics. Then, as I took my place, he slipped into my hand a £5 old Weymouth note (with a view of Weymouth Bay printed in blue on the Face) and said "Jack, I haven't over-done it with advice, have I? You are just entering on a part of your life which must remain with you as your sweetest memory to the end, and the best motto which you can take with you as a 'leading light' is *Noblesse Oblige*". I have never forgotten the words, and there is nothing that I can say better to you, my dear John, than '*Noblesse Oblige*'. Rightly understood it covers the Law and the Prophets. Of course it did not appeal to me then, as it should have appealed. I was selfish, idle, extravagant, never repaying my father's wonderful and inexhaustible affection, a never equalled dauntless unmovable devotion: it was only much later that I realised what *Noblesse Oblige* meant, not till after all three of us had been at the University.

You will leave many behind you to watch your career when the Somersetshire gets hull-down and vanishes over the edge of the world. You may count me as one with great expectations. I think that I have already explained to you my theory of the 'Conversion to Work', but you will bear with me if I expatiate further upon it, because it is just that which has interested me in you during your time in the Army. Conversion is a well understood phrase in matters religious; but to me there is also a 'Conversion to Work'. No-one can explain to you how it comes or when or why; you only recognize it by its fruits: at a certain point 'work' turns from being a toil to a pleasure, and in most cases when once converted, you cannot stop working, there is no backsliding, you may change your work but you can never sit with your hands before you or merely reading an evening-paper. That is what has struck me very much in you. You never seem to me to be able to slack; and it gives me infinite, perhaps quite childish, pleasure, to see you tackling another new Course, and to feel sure that you will make

good and come out a success at the end of it. I suppose that you will find other 'Courses' in India, which in due course you will tackle; and, to my utterly ignorant mind which knows absolutely nothing of military matters, it seems likely that some necessary or useful language will be one of them. If this is so, I hope that you will at once set about it in the best way, and make yourself a real interpreter, with ample margin, and no mere scrape-through sort of student, whom no-one is forced to admit, whether he likes it or not, as being thoroughly competent.

I am so very pleased to think both my nephews have got the conversion to work, as both their uncles and their grandfather, and their father got it early before them. What I wanted to say when I began this rigmarole was that if you want native help, get it to the utmost, and I will foot the bill. But see you do get something more than a scrape-through acquaintance, if military rules and exigencies permit of. I know not a single Eastern language, yet I cannot help thinking that Thomas is going ahead with his Urdhu. Rudyard Kipling has been 3 weeks in this hotel, but I have not seen so much of him as usual, for he never uses the Athenaeum in London, and here he is hampered much by a sick wife, who never appears in public.

John, I have much to say, but must stop now. In talking to Kipling, one of his famous tags was often in my mind about not treating the Sun with insufficient respect "If he finds you uncovered, He'll knock you down dead; and an end to the young British Soldier". I hope you have a sane outfit, especially overhead. Good-bye and be sure that you are always in my thoughts, and keep *Noblesse Oblige* always in yours. God go with you.

J.M.F.

REVIEWS OF UNWRITTEN BOOKS

MR MEADE FALKNER'S LAST TALES – *THE WEST DOOR & OTHER STORIES* (Arnold).

Mr Meade Falkner is the author of three previous fictions that have many admirers. *Moonfleet*, that tale of smuggling in Dorset, is already a favourite for children but also appeals to the child of wonder in all of us. *The Lost Stradivarius* is a masterly exercise in the macabre, just such a book as Dr James might have given us had he favoured the longer story form. And as for *The Nebuly Coat* – why, it is quite indescribable a romance. To say it concerns an inheritance makes it sound like so many of the more contrived mysteries of the last century: and to say that it has also a crumbling minister church may suggest some gothic extravaganza. It is neither of those, but a subtle, humane, delicate study of impoverished visionaries sustained by forlorn hopes in the little town where they live: with a distinguished villain too, whom we almost cannot help ourselves from admiring, despite his sins; and a quite enough satisfying enigma at its heart, a curious painting, with strange heraldry. We must content ourselves with remarking that many of those who read Mr Meade Falkner's third and best book feel compelled at once to tell others about it: and that is a recommendation any author should cherish.

Mr Meade Falkner died in 1932 without, it seemed, leaving us any more of his splendid tales. A tale was told that the author's fourth romance, well-advanced in manuscript, had been lost upon a train; that the author,

with too modest an estimation of his story-telling, had made no close enquiry about it; and that, busy as he was on the board of a major industrial enterprise, he had decided against reconstructing the work. Mr Meade Falkner's followers, when they heard all these rumours, repined greatly amongst themselves. Some even went so far as to make enquiries of the railway authorities, in case in some dusty corner of a lost property office there might still be, some many years later, an attaché case holding the mislaid manuscript; but in vain.

However, though it must seem that we will never see again another full length romance from so seasoned, so piquant a pen, we are now presented with what must certainly be the very next best thing: a collection of shorter pieces from his hand. These, it seems, were found tied up in a bundle among his manuscripts by one of the devoted friends Falkner so firmly made: they were evidently written for the author's private recreation, and never seem to have been sent to any editor, though there would have been many very glad to have them. They seem, says the anonymous editor, to be quite finished in form: a verdict with which this reviewer would readily agree. And, although it would not be reasonable to expect the stories to soar to the heights of the three fine novels, they all evince the distinguished mind, the fastidious vocabularist, the delicate and indulgent commentator upon human vanities, that we know so well from these.

Five stories only have survived: our introducer to them says there may have been more, but, if so, diligent search has not uncovered them. Three of them reflect the writer's keen interest in the antiquarian and in ecclesiology, such as we might easily discern from his novels. "*St Sylvester's Eve*" is perhaps the slightest. The editor tells us that this feast held an especial attraction for Falkner: readers who do not have the saints' calendar at their fingertips may know it better as New Year's Eve. The saint was the 4th century Pope who secured official recognition of the faith from the Emperor: his emblem is a chained dragon. The author makes a whimsical fancy of the appearance of a (fairly benign) such creature in the pale, salamander clouds of an English winter's eve. "*Painted Autumn*" is perhaps appreciated best as a mood piece. Falkner conveys the melancholy joy of the season with finesse: "the citron patches on the elms,"; "the chrysanthemums dripping in the garden lane"; "the snow-cloud on the downs" hardly able to hold back winter's head. His traveller stops to admire the blazing red and gold of creepers upon the wall of a ruined house: in the dim light they seem to form a shape, a design, like some escutcheon of old. He makes a quick sketch. Later, among the drowsy papers and books of his study, he finds just such a blazon, belonging to an extinct family connected with some tragedy. The plot need hardly detain us: everything is in the sorcery of the author's telling. Few have evoked Autumn in England so well.

All of Mr Falkner's novels had their main scene in this country, and a great part of their attraction rests in his ability to evoke the local scene so that it seems familiar to us, as if we had ourselves walked the shores, the city squares, or the streets of the dreaming minster town. It will come as a surprise, therefore, to find that two of his tales are set much further afield. "*The Spices of Hadramaut*" introduces us to the keen mind of an explorer from the days of adventure, when maps still showed great blank spaces. He has been out beyond

Yemen, into the furnace of noon and the nights of cold purple, out a thousand miles from Aden. All the while he knows that his quest is not for the sake of study, of geography or archaeology, but a search for something else, which he can only name "the outer silence". Just as in the burnt air he at times thinks he senses the spices from the bazaar, and his tongue tastes iced fruit, so at moments he feels the nearness of this rarer goal, this elusive vision. Dwelling upon it, he does not heed the difficult route to the few green oases. The story is notable for the acuteness of Mr Falkner's insight into the minds of such men; the more remarkable since all that we know of his own life bespeaks the study and the library.

The best of the stories, perhaps, also goes far from England's shores, indeed to Constantinople. Two men, merchants, are hurrying through the ill-lit streets of what was once, they remember, the capital of Christendom, known to men then simply as "the City", a place of purple and gold. But now it is reduced: "the ways were deep in freezing slush, the bitter north wind racked the street, and our feet were muffled with the hush of falling snow." They are prosperous – well fed, well clothed in furs and cloaks – and expect soon to find their hotel, their opulent caravanserai for the night. And yet the way seems long – and shadows like spectres seem to rise on either side. I shall say no more of "*Obols for Belisarius*" or the reader will be indignant with me, but just this: that Falkner achieves a fine contrast between the imperial past of Byzantium, and its condition now, and awakens in his characters too a long-buried sense that they must seek for other things than just prosperity if they are to be fully men.

Something of the same atmosphere, but if possible even more delicately limned, may be seen in "*The West Door*". For many years a couple of university men have spent their holidays church-hunting, seeking out the noblest fanes in all the shires that they can find: and not noblest only, but also the most humble and unregarded. They have their specialisms; one is an amateur of heraldry in churches (we may suppose we know his original); the other of carven wood, in choir-stalls and screens, pulpits and benches. Both are in the autumn of their years. They have had a good day, with much to interest them, when they espy over a hill a spire they do not know, where no church is shown. Of course, to this they must make their way, though the dews of evening are falling and the red sunset fading. The echo of summer owls accompanies their footsteps as they pass through the darkening glades to their goal. The lich-gate is open; the west door seems to have retained something of the sunset's last light; they enter in. And there this reviewer must leave them, yet I feel certain the reader will not.

Mark Valentine

I look forward to meeting up with some of you again later in the year. You are always welcome to drop in at Kings Newton for a 'cuppa' and chat. I would be delighted to show you the JMF 'Library' – all his first editions and other writings by and about him.

Best Wishes,

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