The World of Jeffery Farnol

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BY E. S. TURNER

JEFFERY FARNOL was a brass-founder's son who made a spanking £40,000 from his first romantic novel, written in a rat-ridden studio in New York, and published in Britain in 1910. *The Broad Highway* was brash, flamboyant and as honest as the pound sterling of those days. Reviewing this 'picaresque' tale in *The Times*, a critic observed that Farnol had 'taken hints' from Le Sage, Fielding, Smollett and Borrow, but had failed because he had tried to revive a dead convention. For the next forty years the author of this triumphant failure exploited the dead convention for all he was worth, turning out such runaway successes as *The Amateur Gentleman, The Honourable Mr Tawnish, Sir John Dering* and *Black Bartlemy's Treasure.*

Between the world wars Farnol was a household name, to the occasional embarrassment of others who bore it. Some authors are read, others are devoured; and Farnol was devoured with equal relish by school children and adults. In the main, reviewers took him no more seriously than he took himself, being content to throw overboard their critical faculties and cling on for an exciting ride; yet from time to time, to show their scholarship, they traced his 'influences' not only to the masters already mentioned but also to Bunyan, Cervantes, Defoe, Dickens and Thackeray.

When Jeffery Farnol died in 1952 *The Times* was still wary of over-praise. His books had 'endeared themselves to a happily more innocent younger generation than the present'. He had been 'a genuine enough storyteller' in 'a pulsing, youthful way', wearing his heart on his sleeve but writing with his tongue in his cheek. Today, Farnol's romances are still in demand at libraries and quite a few of his forty-odd titles have recently been re-printed. It is likely that his borrowers include a high proportion of those whom he first captured in youth.

John Jeffery Farnol was born in Birmingham in 1878. When he
as about ten the family moved south and lived for some years
: Lee, near Lewisham, whence he explored and fell in love with
ıe Kent countryside. According to a memoir by his younger
:other Edward, he was a vigorous member of a 'purity squad',
ɔnsisting of a dozen young fist fighters, who discouraged the
ıuts of Deptford from surrounding girls on the pavement and
.sulting them (the nineties were naughty at all levels). His
ıother thought Jeffery had literary talent, but his father sent
im to work in a brass foundry in Birmingham. There he had
.numerable punch-ups. Eventually (or so his book jackets used
› proclaim) he was sacked for knocking down a foreman who
ılled him a liar. It is hard to believe that he was never the one
› give offence.

At twenty, without bothering to tell his parents of his plans,
ırnol married an American girl. Then, in 1902, after quarrelling
ith his father, he went with his wife to America, where he
uarrelled with his father-in-law. He was selling a few short
ories, but found it necessary to work for two years as a scene
ainter for the Astor Theatre, New York. At night, homesick in
ıe theatre's squalid studio, he wrote *The Broad Highway*. Two
.merican publishers rejected it outright; a third pronounced it
oo long and too English'. An actor friend of Farnol offered to
ıow the manuscript to a Boston publisher, but 'forgot' to do so,
nd it was eventually recovered from the bottom of his trunk.
ı some disgust Farnol sent it to his wife to destroy (something
e could surely have done for himself); instead, she packed it off
ɔ a family friend in England, Shirley Byron Jevons, then editor
f *The Sportsman*. The enthusiastic Jevons kindled the interest of
ampson, Low and Marston, who sought the opinion of the
uthor-critic Clement K. Shorter, chiefly because he was an
uthority on George Borrow. Shorter's opinion was more than
ıvourable. After a slow start, the book went like a hurricane,
ut had the staying power that a hurricane lacks; by 1914 it had
ɔld about 600,000 copies. The American rights were bought by
ıe Boston firm on which the absent-minded actor had failed to
all; and a high proportion of the profits came from the country
'here it had been judged 'too English'.

The basic idea of *The Broad Highway*, which is set, like so many of Farnol's novels, in Regency England, may well have been borrowed from George Borrow; but there was a flourishing 'open road' cult to which Stevenson, Whitman, Bliss Carman and many others had contributed. 'I felt some desire,' says Lavengro, 'to meet with one of those adventures which, upon the roads of England, are as plentiful as blackberries in autumn.' In *The Broad Highway* these sentiments are echoed by the well-born scholar-adventurer, Peter Vibart, who takes to the road to study Man and find high adventure.

This book, like Farnol's others, shows the same love of fisticuffs that marks *Lavengro*, and something too of distaste for over-refined society. If it is picaresque, at least the leading picaroon is vastly more virtuous than his literary predecessors. Strictly, such a novel needs no plot, relying for excitements on chance encounters; but Farnol, though much indebted to 'hedge taverns' and strange wayfarers, encompasses his tales within the favourite nineteenth-century plot; that is, there is always a great inheritance to be earned, fought for, or restored to the rightful heir. It was the plot for which millions had an inextinguishable affection, and Farnol was not one to deprive them of it.

In *The Broad Highway*, before Peter Vibart sets off to see the world on ten guineas, he rejects the terms of an uncle's will under which £500,000 will be payable either to himself or to his rascally cousin, Sir Maurice, depending on which of them woos and wins the reigning toast, Lady Sophia Sefton. Priggish Peter shrinks from the idea of marrying some trull whose name is on everybody's lips, and who is credited with having ridden her horse up the steps of St Paul's and down again. Hardly has he set off before he is robbed of his ten guineas; then, in quick time, he challenges a champion pugilist, watches a fatal duel, is shot at by a madman and rescues an oppressed lady (spurning a Daemon who urges him to kiss her in a dark wood). The broad highway turns out to be peopled, even infested, with literary tinkers, one-legged heroes, Scots fiddlers, garrulous Ancients, preachers and epileptics. In due course Peter becomes a village blacksmith, a trade much esteemed by the author, perhaps as a result of having worked in a foundry.

Since old Tubal Cain first taught man how to work in brass and iron, who ever heard of a sneaking, mean-spirited, cowardly blacksmith? To find such a one were as hard a matter as to discover the Fourth Dimension, or the carcass of a dead donkey.

Farnol's blacksmiths tend to be men who did well at Trafalgar or Waterloo, which is more than can be said for his footmen and moneylenders.

It is while clouting the anvil that Peter succours another mettlesome lady, improbably calling herself Charmian Brown. To shield her from molestation it is necessary to give her a room in his cottage; an arrangement which, since there is no question of a chaperone, he would have censured most strongly had it been proposed by any other man in England. Indeed, no other man in England would have believed in the innocence of his motives. In case he is again tempted by Daemons, he hands Charmian a sharp knife to use against anyone who enters her bedroom. A man of high standards expects equally high standards in his women. When Peter finds that Charmian has been meeting an unexplained stranger he accuses her of being 'a Messalina, a Julia, a Joan of Naples – beautiful as they, and as wanton'. The lady does not care for such talk from a classically educated blacksmith, rescuer though he may be. Who is Charmian, anyway? The reader will readily guess, but Peter, despite all the clues, has to be told. Farnol heroes are not very quick on the uptake.

Indeed, the Farnol hero, that one-man purity squad, is a fairly rum case (Peter Vibart differs from the others only in his ability to bandy Epictetus with wayfarers). Half-champ, half-chump, the brawny paladin despises fancy manners and conversation. Like his creator, he is a shade over-ready to let fly with the 'naked mauleys'. Friendship between males is scarcely valid until the two parties have knocked each other dizzy, or 'tapped the claret'. It is probably the Borrow influence again: 'There's the wind on the heath, brother; if I could only feel that I would gladly live for ever. . . . We'll now go to the tents and put on the gloves, and I'll try to make you feel what a sweet thing it is to be alive, brother.' In *The High Adventure* Jeremy says to an exhausted aristocrat, 'My dear fellow, you need fresh air, exercise and a friend to pummel you heartily.' Jeremy also has a near-concussive bout with Jessamy Todd, a prize-fighter who, having killed an adversary, has turned to God. There are no hard feelings, rather the reverse:

Clasping sudden arms about the ex-champion, Jeremy squeezed him impulsively and mightily; whereupon Jessamy squeezed back and flushed immediately and stared up at the blue heaven, while Jeremy scowled down at the sparkling water again, and both sat mumchance like the very Britons they were.

If it comes to a rough-and-tumble against a gang of villains, there is another permitted weapon besides naked mauleys. 'My lads, good fellows all,' cries a character in *Murder by Nail*, 'I want no murderous steel or pistol work. Trust to honest sticks.' In *Heritage Perilous* the hero, forced reluctantly into a duel, chooses honest cutlasses (and severs his opponent's right hand).

As a lover, the Farnol hero is a dire blunderer. Having put the high-born damsel in his debt, he loses no time in rubbing her the wrong way. The dialogue is mostly sparring and recrimination; but who would wish pages of endearments? Women are hard put to civilize these surly, possessive, mumchance fellows who hate to see them speaking a civil word to anyone else. In the main, Farnol heroines are assembled in a Photofit manner: their throats are soft creamy columns, their chins have fugitive dimples, their lips are scarlet, their nostrils delicate, their voices contralto, their fingers slim and imperious; they are light of foot and, though God-fearing, they are not above sly bewitchments. Constitutionally, despite slim waists, they are astonishingly robust; for when their rescuers find them swept ashore half-drowned they are required to dry their clothes on their persons. Any other proposal would bring a 'warm, crimson tide' to the cheeks of both parties. In *Black Bartlemy's Treasure* Lady Joan Brandon, aged twenty-six, and Martin Conisby, aged twenty-seven, both in full possession of their faculties, spend upwards of two months sleeping platonically beside a camp fire on a Caribbean isle, addressing each other as 'Comrade'. Inhibiting their relationship is Conisby's consuming desire for vengeance on those of Lady Joan's family who made him a galley slave; she will not give her heart to one obsessed by such an evil passion.

One day, however, Martin is carried away, 'pinning her arms in a cruel embrace' and kissing her until 'sun and trees and green grass seemed to spin and whirl dizzily'. The lady will for ever remember this as the night 'the beast broke loose'. Her rebuke is as follows: 'Where hate is, true love can never be, and love howsoever vehement is gentle and reverent, and, being of God, a very holy thing! But you have made it a thing of passion, merciless and cruel – 'tis love debased.' The shamed Martin withdraws to another part of the island so that she may sleep safe from one beast at least; but he leaves her a gun to discharge in emergency. It does not stay long undischarged.

Farnol's second big success was *The Amateur Gentleman*, in which he turned round the idea of his first book. Barnabas, son of a prize-fighting innkeeper, inherits £700,000 and sets off to London ('Oho for youth and life and the joy of it!') to storm the polite world, only to be disgraced for his humble origins. He is the first, but not the last, hero to be saddled with the task of reclaiming the fair one's wastrel brother; a delicate business, because if he pays off the debts he risks being accused of trying to buy the lady. *The Amateur Gentleman* introduces that curious detective Jasper Shrig, the iron-hatted Bow Street Runner. 'Vell, sir, I'm vot they call a bashaw of the pigs,' says Shrig, who is Dickensian in name and speech. His duty is to 'circumwent and conflummerate' by any means 'Wiciousness' and 'Windictiveness'. As a youth he was 'a champion buzman . . . a prime rook at queering the gulls', but he now lives only to keep the gallows tree well draped with rogues. His official terms of reference are not stated. He just wanders the country entering in his little book the names of those whose faces stamp them as Capital Coves; and then, in tabular form, he notes date when spotted, date on which the coves commit murder and date of execution. He is capable of playing Gothic tricks with skulls, in order to trap those with bad consciences. From time to time he recruits to his service urchins whose wits have been sharpened by living rough, as did many other fictional sleuths, notably Sexton Blake. How the handful of detectives on the strength of the Bow Street Runners really operated is knowledge not to be gained from the pages of Farnol.

From time to time Farnol strayed into the Middle Ages, as in

Beltane The Smith and *The Geste of Duke Jocelyn*. Two seventeenth-century stories are *Black Bartlemy's Treasure* and *Martin Conisby's Vengeance*; for these pirate tales, he seems to have 'taken hints' from Bunyan rather than Borrow ('Who art thou,' cries Flesh, 'to adventure things so great and above thy puny strength to perform? Who art thou?' 'I am God!' answers Man-soul, 'since finite man am I only by reason of thee, base, coward Flesh.') In *Over The Hill* Farnol turned to the 1715 Rebellion.

Like so many romantic novelists, Farnol was happiest in the Regency of bucks and bruisers. It is necessary to say, however, that one can learn more about the Regency from a single newspaper of 1815 than from the whole corpus of Farnol. We hear nothing of Luddites, peasant unrest, Reform agitation, child slavery; we simply get costumed derring-do in the traditional romantic setting. As for Farnol's Kent, so often featured, it could as easily be Sussex or Shropshire. It is an idealized, idyllic land, bird-haunted, with ringing hammers, taverns with glorious kitchens, dogs which growl instinctively at villains, and glorious, hospitable aunts who believe in subordination and the gallows.

Popular romance calls inexorably for an inflated way of speech. Farnol's works have their share of tushery and fustian; the wind on the heath could be the wind of flatulence. 'Almost every speech begins with Ay, Yea, Nay, Ha, Ho, Aha, Oho or Verily', noted a critic of *The King Liveth*. Another reviewing tease was to illustrate the author's monstrous piling up of adjectives. Thus, a single page of *Murder By Nail* will yield slimy, haunting, nerve-racking, ghastly, brutal, awful, terrible, merciless, despairing, frightful, blinding, remorseless, rank, black, fetid, appalling, noisome, whimpering, shuddering, breathless, sickening, despairing, passionate and fearful (twice); among nouns, terror, despair, loathing, torment, maniac, frenzy, corruption, loathsomeness, swoon, horror and Death-in-Life; and among verbs, overwhelmed, prisoned, dreaded, wounded, writhed, nauseate and stupefy. When possible, Farnol would work in archaic words like mumchance, hugeous, baresark (for berserk), day-spring, trixy (for tricksy?) and maugre (for despite). He awarded capital letters lavishly, to Flesh, Sin, Ignorance, Circumstance and the Essential Feminine. His characters passed from the

Valley of Dreadful Night over the Hill of Blessed Hope into the Land of Heart's Delight. He never funked an accent or a style of speech; his pages are a treasure-house of Egad, Damme, Zounds, Hist, Losh, Hoot-toot, Indade, Bad Cess, Haw, Yassuh, Yah-Boo, Avast, Sink Me, Mark'ee, Pish, *Tiens*, *Pardieu*, *Sapristi* and a score of other old favourites. Women are 'the sex' and married men are Benedicts. In common with his eighteenth-century predecessors Farnol was addicted to chapter headings like 'Of Storm, and Tempest, and of the Coming of Charmian' and 'Of an Ethical Discussion which the Reader is Advised to Skip'.

There was a bare-faced innocence, and even impudence, about the world of Jeffery Farnol, which was as artificial as the world of Wodehouse. He existed to entertain, not to teach history by stealth. He loved lovers. Romance was virtually all, and its conventions, shamelessly invoked, enabled him to get away with preposterous situations; though undoubtedly his gusto and buoyancy as a storyteller, his mastery of plot and counter-plot, his springing of constant surprises all helped to prevent the reader from querying what was going on. There was no message, other than that manliness and honesty are to be admired. Some will say he helped to constrain the Englishman's love-making, confirming him in his tendency to put women on pedestals or pinnacles; but that reproach must be spread over a great many of his contemporaries. Possibly he helped to make English girls more patient with brawny clods.

Farnol's early books are generally regarded as his best, despite a certain self-indulgence which passed for philosophy. He enjoyed his success, entertaining his fellow writers and wintering in Italy, but quarrelling, alas, with his younger brother. His last book, *Justice by Midnight*, was completed after his death by his second wife. The basic secret of his triumph was set out, simply but adequately, by Clement Shorter, writing in 1915: 'The great reading public of any age will not be bullied into reading the authors who have reached the dignity of classics. The writer who can catch some element of the spirit of the "masters" and modernize it is destined to win the favour of the crowd. And thus Mr Jeffery Farnol has entered into his kingdom.'