

Cheap Rates, Good Refs – and a Cracking Smile: Introducing M D Falco

In a rare interview, exclusive to the Toronto Bouchercon Programme, the Imperial Private Eye tells it like it is, and like it was in AD70...

Marcus Didius Falco makes his entrance like a film star. The women stop talking, and try not to look as interested as they undoubtedly are. The men cease to be comfortable, though they may not immediately notice why.

Something is different. Where a normal celeb would be checking the room for cameras, this guy is making sure he won't be jumped by a sneak thief in disguise as a war veteran (Gaul, Judaea, Britain – the usual grim trouble-spots) and relieved of his denarii.

There is no fuss, but the level stare says, *Don't even think about it!* He makes no song and dance about fitness, but nor does he need a printed tee-shirt to advertise that he works out at Glaucus' gym; Glaucus himself has him on a special training programme, the programme he only provides for favoured clients – the few clients Glaucus respects. Falco can handle himself in anything from a winebar brawl to a full scale ambush by gangsters; besides, he has plenty of backup. First, there's the hidden dagger down his boot. Then as like as not, somewhere nearby will be one of his assistants, or his old mate Petronius Longus, supported by vigiles heavies. Like all men who make a habit of venturing into unknown places and dangerous situations, Didius Falco goes prepared. He is longterm-friends with risk. If he didn't know how to handle trouble, he wouldn't be here today. He would have been dead years ago, heaved off a bridge into the Tiber to float down to Ostia with the sewage and the catfish.

Falco has breezed into town for the Bouchercon. According to rumour, he is staying at the Metro Convention Center, along with an entourage of uncertain size and quality, including the female scribe who regularly takes dictation of his memoirs. Security is tight. You *may* see him, or you may have to be satisfied with the scribe. She's a Briton, oddly enough, given that he has hated Britain ever since the great Boudiccan Revolt warped his young spirit and left him bitter with hang-ups for the next ten years. The scribe is docile and reserved (or so she says),

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and good at her job you can be sure. Falco is a man who will either hire quality or do it himself. He writes. It is his best-known relaxation; he acknowledges an ambition to be published and have his slim scrolls of poetry sold, like those of Horace, at the Vicus Tuscus bookstore just behind the Forum Romanum. Maybe he would outsell Horace. You can assume that if he lets this Briton draft his stuff, she knows how to deploy the subjunctive, to shun tautology, to vary vocabulary, to pose a question expecting the answer yes - or when the hero gets too self-admiring, to tell him no. She can tackle Rome too. The Med may be a long way from Londinium, but Brits can do sun.

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Interviews with Falco are a rarity. Preparing for our encounter, I could only find one aged press cutting where he had spoken out directly; normally others interpret for him, often getting it wrong. Clichés abound: “the togaed ’tec”, “Phillip Marlowe in a toga”, “Sam Spade ditto”... Actually, he hates wearing a toga, as all good Romans do. He is a man of the streets and besides, he could not do his job if he were encumbered by those heavy folds of wool. Over and over, the media miss the point. If he has lost by that, he never says.

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He is on time for our appointment. This man is accustomed to meeting nervous contacts. Witnesses and suspects do not stick around. Journalists will always hang on patiently for a good quote, (“especially if they are being patient in a bar”, I can hear him thinking) but the witnesses and suspects have set his habits.

The brown eyes work the room. The man himself is very still.

At this point the film star analogy works all too well. Like Cruise or Gibson, or the Emperor Augustus, in real life he is slightly smaller than you may expect. But like Tom, Mel or Gus, he looks good. Maybe not such a stunner as his memoirs imply, but none of the women in the room are complaining. (Presumably, the men are.)

The packaging is simple: white tunic, sturdy brown boots, decent belt with a nielloed Celtic buckle. (It has a certain style; try getting niello at your average fashion show.) The dark curls could use a comb, the Etruscan nose runs straight as a die, the stubborn chin has been shaved by a Roman barber in an inferior part of the city with a

blunt razor. The eyes hold mischief, intelligence and stealth. If he gives with the grin, half the women will swoon. His mother once described it: “a smile that can crack nuts”. He keeps his expression neutral, luckily. He does that a lot. He is listening, observing, letting information come to him.

He crosses the room. He walks easily, on legs that have done their share of pounding pavements. The Roman legions famously fought with their feet; I make sure he has plenty of legroom.

He brings a small entourage, who hang back, especially the tall woman, more striking than outright beautiful, demurely dressed but with good jewellery. She seats herself within earshot and appears to be reading, but it is understood that later, he and she will minutely discuss our interview.

Before he sits, Falco shakes hands. Very Roman. He has no truck with the modern habit of kissing complete strangers. He deliberately sits, before being asked; he is imposing his status: in Rome the big men have the chairs, the minions stand. Falco might once have been subservient, not nowadays. I take out my notepad and tape recorder; he glances with interest at the recording device, but dismisses it. He too has note-taking equipment at the ready: bound waxed tablets and a stylus, unobtrusively at rest on one knee as if to reassure me that he is professional. I remember that he is more accustomed to the role of interviewer, not subject. He is charming and relaxing; I am off-guard in moments. He, of course, lets nothing slip.

We run through his bio, courteously provided in advance: the hard former life and the growing catalogue of recent triumphs. Falco was one of seven children – “seven surviving”, he corrects laconically – brought up by a single mother in the mean backstreets of an Aventine slum. I have been warned not to ask about his father (an auctioneer, Didius Geminus, still on the scene occasionally). Did his background make him hard? “What do you think? Of course it did – hard, determined to escape, determined no child of mine should have that life.” Did escape seem possible back then? “No. Nothing seemed possible. But in that situation you go on; there is nothing else to do.”

Going on took him into the legions, who trained him to be self-reliant and to fight and to kill where necessary, but endearingly failed to teach him to swim; then they

took him to Britain. His outfit, the Second Augusta, were famous – for the wrong reasons. When Boudicca rebelled, they were the legion whose acting commander “misunderstood” the summons to face the hordes who had murdered and burned their way across the province, intent on driving Rome out. The Second stayed in camp, to be disgraced where others were honoured. Falco came out of it alive, but hating all commanders on principle. He had been twenty one; the massacres and mutilations he witnessed shocked his system. You get the feeling that incompetence in his superiors shocked him even more. Maybe this legacy of bitterness was what he needed for his next move, a return to Rome and life as a solo “informer”. Did his own mental scars make him better at the job? He smiles sardonically. I leave it.

We discuss informing. He defines it as the obtaining and sale of information. Traditionally this can be done by lowlifes in the streets, or by patricians in the lawcourts. Most notorious were informers working for bad Emperors, unprincipled senators who earned revulsion for the profession, taking innocent men to court on trumped up charges. Compensation is paid to successful prosecutors; fortunes can be made. Caligula and Nero used this method to remove political opponents and to enrich themselves; Vespasian claims to hate it. Falco himself has appeared in the Basilica, pleading with a rhetorical skill that surprised many. He has no plans to repeat the performance; being known as an informer makes him too vulnerable. Instead, he claims his work is “adultery and business fraud – strolling about in the sunshine, assisting tradesmen with their business tiffs”; obviously he does more than that for the Emperor.

I ask Falco about his missions for Vespasian. He declines to comment. Clearly he respects the security conventions. By my calculation, imperial tasks have taken him all over the Empire: to Syria, Libya, Gaul, Germany, Spain, and of course his bugbear Britain. There are now rumours of an assignment in Greece; “a purely private visit”, he demurs. Wherever he goes, death has either preceded him or it follows fast on his hobnailed heels. Corruption, whether in its commercial form and in government, appears to be eliminated by a Falco visit. Is he proud of his reputation for rooting out social evils? “Yes.” Does he enjoy travel? “My wife does.” He is dodging the issue, but he makes it seem polite.

He and Helena Justina have been together now for seven years, producing two daughters. They have a home in Rome, and other properties. The match was viewed as unlikely to last; she is a senator's daughter, who when they met had recently divorced from a high-up official with imperial pretensions. There were hints that even Titus Caesar cast his eyes on her. "She makes her own choices", Falco says, sounding amused and perhaps even startled that she chose him. Is he tempted to wander? Every man is tempted, he says; choosing to remain faithful is the mark of a good man. Does he think the same applies to women? Actually, yes. He manages to imply that in his opinion there are few good women. It goes without saying Helena is one of them; his loyalty to her is absolute.

Do they work together? All the time, apparently. Convention prevents a respectable woman from operating as he does; Helena cannot knock on strangers' doors, meet contacts in bars, or conduct solo interviews. Nor is the life safe. Yet she will frequently attend a meeting alongside Falco, and when people visit their home she expects to be present at any discussion. She asks tough questions. Does she solve his cases? Falco lets out a rare, full-bodied laugh. Of course, he says.

I risk suggesting that he himself is often seen as something of a clown. "It helps if people think that!" Reviewing his past caseload, the charge fails to stick. He has pursued some of Rome's most slippery domestic murderers, not to mention vicious gangsters. He helped track down a long-term serial killer who had preyed on women for decades, dumping mutilated body parts in the city water-supply. Helena Justina may help pinpoint the right suspect, but it is Falco who prowls the streets tracing the no-goods, Falco who fights off multiple henchmen, Falco who goes single-handed into perilous locations to apprehend psychopaths. If he has to, he kills them; he refuses to discuss this.

He has one or two breathtaking stunts to his name: a near-death experience in disguise as a slave in a leadmine; tackling a mad axe-man; the horrific claustrophobia of descending a well upside down on a frail rope to rescue a child. He makes light of these efforts, pretending it was just as bad to be hiding in a sedan chair with a rather-too-friendly Vestal Virgin. He is correct: if caught, he would have suffered the death penalty; so would she.

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Age and old wounds may be slowing him down. Have marriage and fatherhood helped make him more staid? “Sadly, we all become sensible!” That twinkle belies it. He is working with assistants now. He always used his own young relatives as runners; these days Helena’s two brothers regularly share the workload of his agency. They bring class, keenness - “And unfortunately total inexperience!” Previous attempts to work with his old friend Petronius and another colleague ended badly. He speaks with real warmth of Petronius Longus; male friendship is an important Roman quality. When solving cases together, each brings his own methods and talent. “But we irritated all Hades out of each other as a formal team!” Falco admits lightly.

His face darkens when we mention the other colleague – Anacrites, the Chief Spy. Some have called him Falco’s nemesis. For a brief period, they worked together brilliantly on the Census, exposing tax-avoidance for the Treasury. Ironically, they made a hugely successful audit duo; both were rewarded by Vespasian. That aside, they have a dark history. Falco makes it very clear that Rome is too small to hold both for much longer. But intimate probing of this tricky subject is discouraged with the same easy grace that deflected other unwelcome questions.

Instead, I ask what special qualities he thinks he brings to the job. He answers as if it is an old tune: “Brain, bodyweight, and a gripping business sense.” Sensitivity? He owns up to feelings of remorse in the presence of death; he never forgets that a corpse once lived and had expectations, that relatives and friends survive to grieve and suffer. His standard professional advertisement offers “all discreet enquiries, legal or domestic”, boasting of good references and cheap rates; clearly, there is far more involved. Whether it is checking out prospective bridegrooms for financial and moral probity, assisting widows to claim their inheritance, searching for stolen artworks, doing the Emperor’s dirty work or the brutal business of tracking down killers, Falco is the man for it.

I mention that forensic specialists will be speaking at the Bouchercon. He is polite, but prefers to rely on his own old-style skills. “Murder is a simple game. People are stabbed, drowned, strangled, suffocated or poisoned. To solve it, I use eyes, ears, nose, intelligence, occasionally scrolls in a library, *very* occasionally –” He laughs. “And where it seems appropriate, I can consult the best experts – not much is missing

in Rome, believe me.” He is an unshakeable sceptic, but his belief in the Golden City as the centre of civilisation is fixed. Falco’s Rome may be full of unscrupulous hustlers, devious women and vicious men, but for him it has no equal.

I ask what the future holds. He concedes – carefully, because this is treason – that Vespasian may not live much longer, and that his own relationships with the heirs, Titus and Domitian, have their problems. But human nature never changes – especially the bad side of it – so Didius Falco should always to have work, “asking questions of villains, cheats and bullies”. From past experience, he paints a word portrait of his expectations; it is hands-on, no-nonsense, risky but dogged: “watching an extremely nasty doss-house in the worst area of a heartless city... stuck on surveillance for four hours, in a street that is short, narrow and stinking - an easy option for comparisons with life!” He says informers hate such moments, “sitting in pitch darkness, waiting for a problem...” Yet he is sure of his competence to deal with problems, so you sense he welcomes them.

Courteously but firmly, he ends the interview. The tall girl who came with him is greeted with a formal kiss as if they have been apart for a long while, then they walk out together. Just before he goes, he turns back as if to wave farewell and the brown eyes scan the room again. He knows who has entered during our conversation and who left; he probably knows who ordered a new drink, who was flirting with the waiter, who pocketed the tip another customer had left. I feel as if he knows exactly how many peanuts from the snack-bowl I ate without thinking while I talked to him.

After he has gone, a buzz remains. Move over Mel and Tom and Gus. Marcus Didius Falco is in town for the Bouchercon. Catch him if you can.