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**Lord Lexden's fascinating study of an extraordinary scoundrel is well-researched and elegantly written**

## Horace Farquhar

### A Bad Man Befriended by Kings

By **Alistair Lexden**  
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**B**eneath a neglected gravestone in an obscure corner of a cemetery in Bromley rests a man who mixed with the highest in society, among whom he made (that is, conned, defrauded and leeched) millions. Horace Farquhar was lavished with honours and lived a life of grandeur but he died, a century ago, leaving just IOUs.

None were more surprised by his empty coffers in 1923 than the Conservative Party he had served as treasurer since 1911.

Before the snap election the previous year, he had boasted of a war chest of £1m; after it, he refused to settle an expenses request for even £20,000.

Some of the missing money had gone to David Lloyd George, whose enthusiasm for selling honours Farquhar shared, while much had been frittered on luxuries. The rest may never have existed: Farquhar talked a rich

game but the party bafflingly let him keep donations in his own bank accounts.

"He possessed ability, charm and massive self-confidence," writes Lord Lexden in an engaging – if slim – biography. "Few scoundrels succeed without them." His great-grandfather, the son of a manse near Aberdeen, was the most sought-after doctor of his day. Physician to the Prince of Wales, later George IV, and Pitt the Younger, he was said to have taken the pulse of every duchess in the land.

Horace combined his social climbing with the lack

of financial scruples of his grandfather, a reckless investor who died in penury. Having wormed his way into a lucrative banking job, he befriended the immensely wealthy Earl of Fife, with whom he may have had a sexual relationship, and rapidly began investing his friend's money for him, largely in himself.

Through Fife, who married Edward VII's eldest daughter, Farquhar got entry into the loftiest circles. He rented a home near Sandringham and threw grand parties. Farquhar's wealth, some earned by taking a cut from helping Edward VII to declutter his palaces, some from an

advantageous late marriage, drew the cream

of society. The future George VI met Elizabeth Bowes-Lyon in his ballroom.

They may have called him Farquhar when he was alive, but those he duped and robbed probably used a coarser homophone when his crimes emerged.

The owners of the Norfolk house, for instance, found that their paintings had been swapped for modern copies, while he regularly sent his wife's pearls to be restrung, each time removing a couple to sell and replacing them with imitations.

In 1898, after years of begging and a brief spell as an MP, in which he made only one brief speech to promote his dubious interests in South Africa, Farquhar was given a peerage. He then, with Lloyd George, helped to create many more peers, for which he received a cut as well as a viscountcy and then an earldom.

"No one else in modern times has risen so high while contributing so little to ... the good of the nation," Lexden writes.

The fascinating tale is well-researched and elegantly written. The only pity for the historian is that Farquhar left few of his own primary sources. His personal papers, like his wealth, have simply vanished. 🏰

