

*“Crazy Vessel”*  
*Falkner’s Bath Inheritance*

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Falkner’s three novels are set in the past, which befits somebody who carried a medieval world about him amidst cataclysmic segments of the nineteenth- and twentieth-century world. His family history also suffused a man who delineated small-town life so well in *The Nebuly Coat*. His father Tom’s relish of the countryside was a palpable influence; less known is that this arose while Tom’s own father, Robert, a doctor, endured less- than-robust health not helped by a hypochondria and melancholia which were also to be Falkner’s genetic inheritance.

In 1918 Falkner was to write of Bath in the late eighteenth century: *“while the theatre and the rooms, the gaming and the balls, the great company, the beauty and the splendid dresses, sparkled like fireworks in the ‘upper town’, the life of the ‘lower town’, of Horse Street or Stall Street, went on much as it does today with humdrum business and comfortable religion”*. This brought *“the equally quiet life of a somewhat superior residential class”* neither Quality nor Trade.

Born in 1788, Robert was - five years after his father’s death - apprenticed in 1803 to Dr Thursfield of Broseley. As Falkner said, Robert was not *“a ‘Bath doctor’ in the way that Anstey used the expression, for he never lived to wear a bag-wig or dance attendance upon dowagers”*. Meanwhile, an elder brother, Frederic, was in London, there encountering publishers John Taylor and J.A. Hessey who, via a schoolfellow of Robert and Frederic’s, met a new author, John Keats. Taylor described Frederic as resembling *“the portraits of Sterne as he sits with one finger applied to his temple. His countenance at these times is not at its most engaging form. When he is alive to what is passing around him and happy, oh, what a different character he is: the smile of benevolence itself”*.

Perhaps a Falkner trait. Robert later visited, meeting Keats, but meanwhile contended with such patients as one suffering *“a very severe attack of erysipelas, or St. Anthony’s Fire, which has extended over her face as well as the whole of her head”*; a sign to him that *“the frailty of our nature is daily and hourly exposed to our view, and we see people cut off by disease or accident continually”*.

*“Less concerned with prolonging his life than with the making of a good death,”* as Falkner said, this was an unlikely choice of career. In 1811 Robert became the Bristol Infirmary’s dispenser, and was soon ill. Two years on, health precarious, he set up his plate in Henrietta Street, Bath, work there promised by Dr. Cruttwell, whose family duly included the Oxford don derided in Evelyn Waugh’s early novels.

*“Robert is rather poorly, he took an emetic last Monday evening... Since that he seems rather better but looks thin and yellow,”* wrote an aunt. Depressed, impervious to events national and personal, he had so recovered by 1818 that, surprisingly, he became engaged to the spirited Lucy Alexander of Manningford Bruce in Wiltshire. How the families met is uncertain but the county was to have as strong a hold upon Falkner as Dorset.

The *“pleasant and roomy old-fashioned”* Henrietta Street building, as Falkner described it, was in a Bath now dominated by retired clergymen and officers while the Continent could again be visited and *“the Regent set up a counterblast of his own in Brighton; the seaside cult and fashion grew amazingly, and became the most potent of all the influences which were marshalled against the Queen of the West.”*

Robert’s mother and two of his sisters left for Wiltshire while, in 1820, with Tom, a six-month-old baby, Robert and Lucy decided that *“out of doors there is certainly not much to love”*. They moved to remote Huish, between Marlborough and Pewsey but in 1823, with a second child (also Robert), they went to Widcombe Hill, near Bath. Another son - James - was born that November, and Robert was ill again but sufficiently recovered by 1827 to sire a fourth son, John, whose birth exhausted Lucy. She fell ill, went to Manningford, and died at thirty-three, soon followed by the baby. Grief-stricken, fretting Robert took a different house outside Bath, and put his other sons in relations’ care but, come May 1831, young *“Robert is very ill, and has been for nearly a week”*; Robert was soon dead. James stayed while Tom went to a Kilvert cousin, Robert, whose Oriel career had ended with such depression that he fell from his chair and became a curate and teacher.

Before long, James’s suspected measles turned worse; his father found *“his breath is frequently too quick, and at present he is very excitable, I scarcely know what to do with him - and so decided to have some waistcoats made for [him], if I can find any person to make them as I was not satisfied with the woman I employed some*

time ago". James was never to wear them, dying on December 2nd.

A year later Robert said that "*I continue to feel very unwell from frequent repetition of my cold and cough... prevented from attending Divine Service grieved me very much*". Desultory, no longer a dispenser, reluctant to visit, he was cheered by Tom's return after the Kilvert cousin lost his curacy and suffered another black period. These nine months proved a joy to father and son, whose ad hoc education continued at home and with a French and drawing master. All the while attended by a fat dog Flora, they tended the garden, enjoyed visits from Kilverts and played chess and back-gammon - all anticipating Tom's own widowhood with Falkner.

In summer 1833 Tom returned to a recovered Robert Kilvert in Wiltshire. Robert soon found that "*the very fluctuating, I may say indeed weakened state of my health for the last nine months, prevents me from taking any active or decided step and particularly in matters of moment*"; he even called himself "*a crazy vessel*" whom hosts only had only themselves to blame for inviting.

He continually reminded Tom to dress against the cold. It was on these well-wrapped walks, thought Falkner's sister Anne, that "*for the first time in his life consciously... Tom seems to have taken possession of the Hills, as of an inheritance. The short, springy turf, the down scents, the smell of the crushed thyme, the milkworts and our Lady's bed straw came to him as a great joy*".

Lamentations, however, were Robert's lot in 1834. Although Flora was "*very well, very fat, and very idle*", he himself "*cannot but write a very few lines to you, from a severe headache, to which I have for some time been liable... I am compelled to live very low, being liable to fever continually, both combined reduce me very much and make me feel very weak*". Another Kilvert cousin, a struggling doctor, saw that "*the abscess, which had been so long forming under my jaw, has not yet broken, but I hope it will not now be so many days before it discharges itself*".

He slowly improved (although Flora's habits were such that she was "*certainly not advanced in my favour*"). Hopes were dashed by fever and "*these continued strong and cold easterly winds affect me very much*". With Tom's next return, Robert cheered up.

Accustomed to his complaints, nobody realised the severity of the illness until he was “*extremely reduced, with a constant tendency to more or less excitement, frequently of a febrile character, want of appetite, especially for animal food (most unusual for me) and a variety of symptoms indicating a total derangement of the animal functions*”.

By July his sister Mary came as nurse, and said “*his situation seemed turned from surrounding objects and fixed on things not seen though sometimes his knowledge of medicine would make him look with anxiety on the different symptoms of his complaint but it was always followed by a self-reproof and an observation that it was wrong.*”

After ten days he rallied but a relapse prevented country convalescence: “*he got upstairs with the aid of my arm, and after an hour of agitation and exhaustion went to bed*”. Ever sweating, he talked of Tom, recited collects and prayers; salts were held to his nose, he was fanned, and “*he often stretched out his hands to ours and drew them to his lips and said we were a comfort to him and never failed to thank us every time we performed any of these little offices of kindness*”. Worldly matters arranged, he awaited a last struggle but “*I must not, it is impatient and sinful, Thy Will, oh Lord, not mine, will be done*”. When asked whether, despite the pain, there was peace within, he replied, “*Oh, yes!*”

Relations gathered but Tom was kept away. Pain meant that Robert could only mouth prayers. Relieved by an opiate, however, he whistled a song one evening. “*Dear me! I quite forgot the awful situation in which I stand and have been humming a tune.*” A newspaper’s earthly concerns soon dropped from his hands, but it took laudanum to ease sixty hours without sleep, after which he was brought beef-tea and wine; before he could eat and drink, agonised breathlessness made his eyes roll open, and he whispered, “*I am afraid I shall wear you out*” then chanted “*oh, come, lord, come*”.

There was no self-reproach now. Later, on the evening of Saturday August 9th, Mary thought him capable only of some toast and water, but he replied, “*No, I shall take nothing more*”. A good death, which came within an hour, twelve days short of forty-six - and a quarter-century before a remarkable grandson’s birth.