

## *In Correct Society: of Falkner and Women* Christopher Hawtree

Kipling. That might sound an unlikely way to open a discussion of Falkner and women but it highlights that late-Victorian/Edwardian clubbably male world of which he was very much a part. Tantalisingly, he refers in passing to the fact that he will discuss something with Kipling, but details of their acquaintance are elusive.

That can be said of much of his life. Falkner relished being a man of mystery. This is the very spirit of his novels, of events and people which shimmer beyond the narrative's curtilage. Falkner assumed masks, according to his audience. In a leap across time, it was something to meet Veronica, Lady Gainsford who had known him in her youth - and, at that time, was unaware of his being married. That marriage was something of which he wrote to Edward Stone a week before the ceremony, which he was anticipating by a sojourn in Baden-Baden to build up his strength. Falkner even wondered aloud to Stone whether it is presumptuous to mention that he is getting married.



Such a relationship is perhaps symbolised by Evelyn opting for her name to be on a small plaque on the ground at the side of his splendid Burford tomb. For all this, he had an affinity with women - especially his sisters Anne and

Mary (whose death he much lamented) and he wrote tender letters to a god-daughter. Amidst his long correspondence with John Noble there are glimpses of his relish for some of the women in that family.

From the start, in that brisk decade which was his career as a novelist, he chose to narrate *The Lost Stradivarius* mainly from a female perspective. That method means, of course, that Sophia Maltravers's point of view brings with it more detail - especially long conversations - than she witnessed. That said, such is Falkner's assumption of her in his narrative that he immediately fosters the reader's suspension of disbelief. Halfway through, for example, one finds Sophia note: "*The picture of Adrian Temple exerted a curious fascination over me, and I constantly took an opportunity*

*of studying it. It was, indeed, a beautiful work; and perhaps because John's recovery gave a more cheerful tone to my thoughts, or perhaps from the power of custom to dull even the keenest antipathies, I gradually got to lose much of the feeling of aversion which it had at first inspired. In time the unpleasant look grew less unpleasing, and I noticed more the beautiful oval of the face, the brown eyes, and the fine chiselling of the features. Sometimes, too, I felt a deep pity for so clever a gentleman who had died young, and whose life, were it ever so wicked, must have been also lonely and bitter. More than once I had been discovered by Mrs. Temple or Constance sitting looking at the picture, and they had gently laughed at me, saying that I had fallen in love with Adrian Temple."*

Soon after, the novel turns to the last night of John's undergraduate life, at which Sophia was not present but she describes in some detail the last meeting between John and Mr. Gaskell: "he held out his hand frankly, and his voice trembled a little as he spoke - partly perhaps from real emotion, but more probably from the feeling of reluctance which I have noticed men always exhibit to discovering any sentiment deeper than those usually deemed conventional in correct society".

That Sophia could not have known about this nuance of behaviour - John would not have told her of it - does not lessen the scene but, somehow, her observation adds to that unspoken world of suppressed feelings which forms a great part of Falkner's fiction. The closer one studies this novel, the more one realises that its antiquarian aspects work so well because they are at the service of something eternal.

What experience buttresses her observation soon after? "*Constance was entirely devoted to her lover; her life seemed wrapped up in his; she appeared to have no existence except in his presence. I can scarcely enumerate the reasons which prompted such thoughts, but during these months I sometimes found myself wondering if John still returned her affection as ardently as I knew had once been the case. I can certainly call to mind no single circumstance which could justify me in such a suspicion. He performed punctiliously all those thousand little acts of devotion which are expected of an accepted lover; he seemed to take pleasure in perfecting any scheme of enjoyment to amuse her; and yet the impressions grew in my mind that he no longer felt the same heart-whole love to her that she bore him, and that he had himself shown six months earlier."*

Short as it is, *The Lost Stradivarius* comprises a large number of scenes, many told in a few words (such as journeys across Europe). It has a continually revealing edge, a succession of physical and emotional precipices. The same might be said - literally - of Falkner's next, best-known novel *Moonfleet*. On publication in 1898, the *Spectator* remarked, "in *Moonfleet* Mr. Falkner has given us what in the present writer's opinion is the best tale of fantastic adventure since Stevenson's pen was prematurely laid aside". There is no doubt that on sea and land (and beneath the latter) it has fine, even chilling scenes (the crumbling coffins, the devilish jeweller); aha! a semi-colon heralds a condition, and in opting this time for an adventure novel, Falkner set himself the hardest of narrative methods: a series of events, one swift upon another, made all the more by his again opting for the first person. On the face of it, that might be the easiest point of view to adopt, one which he was able to mask in *The Lost Stradivarius*, but it can all too easily become limiting, suspense undermined by the inherent fact of survival, of a narrator needing to reach the final page.

In the case of *Moonfleet*, on a latest reading, this brings to the fore a distinct lack of women in a tale perforce taking place amidst that most incorrect of societies: smugglers. John's aunt is scarcely glimpsed, and much of his feelings for Grace have to be taken on trust. Only when he visits her in necessary disguise and she suggests that they take brief sanctuary in the garden is there a frisson which gives the scene such enduring forces that it hangs over John's protracted incarceration, a reason for him not to give up in despair at such moments as by that wall when Elzevir "put his hand upon my shoulder gently, and spoke with such an earnestness and pleading in his voice that one would have thought it was a woman rather than a great rough giant".

To be up against the odds is a theme, perhaps the dominant one, in Falkner's fiction. This is most finely wrought in *The Nebuly Coat*. The splendid opening chapter itself evokes Cullerne in such a way that its outward sleepiness is couched upon hints of the trouble ahead.

In approaching *The Nebuly Coat* from the perspective of the women within it is to bring a distinctly new vista upon a novel which yields so much upon every reading. Falkner's mind contains so much that others' cannot absorb

all of it at a single sitting. With this, his longest novel (and again set in the past), he finally embraces a third-person, omniscient, even meditative narrator; what's more, women - alone, in a pair, or a group - occupy a significant proportion of its scenes; so much so that relations between the sexes, with all that entails, gain that generative aspect of the narrative previously lacking.

A satirical tone has also awoken, as one would expect from a writer whose life brought a bemused a view of everything around him. What better place to start than with this, a quarter of the way through the novel, when readers have met so many of Cullerne's inhabitants, and been given close descriptions of eighteen-year-old Anastasia and her aunt. The latter again takes herself off to the putatively worthy Dorcas Society, which in fact, in our contemporary demotic would be known as "stitch and bitch": *"Most of the members greeted her with a kind word, for even in a place where envy, hatred,*



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*and malice walked the streets arm in arm from sunrise to sunset, Miss Euphemia had few enemies. Lying and slandering, and speaking evil of their fellows, formed a staple occupation of the ladies of Cullerne, as of many another small town; and to Miss Joliffe, who was foolish and old-fashioned enough to think evil of no one, it had seemed at first the only drawback of these delightful meetings that a great deal of such highly-spiced talk was to be heard at them. But even this fly was afterwards removed from the amber; for Mrs. Bulteel - the brewer's lady - who wore London dresses, and was the most fashionable person in Cullerne, proposed that some edifying book should be read aloud on Dorcas afternoons to the assembled workers. It was true that Mrs. Flint said she only did so because she thought she had a fine voice; but however that might be, she proposed it, and no one cared to run counter to her. So Mrs Bulteel read properly religious stories, of so touching a nature that an afternoon seldom passed without being herself dissolved in tears, and evoking sympathetic sniffs and sobs from such as wished to stand in her good books. If Miss Joliffe was not herself so easily moved by imaginary sorrow, she set it down to some lack of loving-*

*kindness in her own disposition, and mentally congratulated the others on their superior sensitiveness."*

To sit back after writing that paragraph, some 250 words, would bring any writer delight at having brought together - with so finely judged a rhythm whose conditions buttress assertions, its semi-colons dextrously deployed - a diverse bunch whose members are each given, simultaneously, to derision and sycophancy (as in their attitude towards Mrs. Bulteel). Here, sufficiently detailed as to provide a persuasive conspectus upon the small town, is the backdrop against which Anastasia and her aunt act out a drama, much of whose origins lie in the-days-gone-by behaviour of another Sophia.

Come the mid-century of *The Nebuly Coat's* main narrative, there is in play three generations of women's attitudes. A paradox of which is that the youngest of them, Anastasia, despite her education and savvy, is in thrall to the Romance of an earlier era. (And, himself adroit at punctuation, Falkner has sport with her *"sigh of relief when the letter was finished, and read through it carefully, putting in commas and semicolons and colons at what she thought appropriate places. Such punctillo pleased her; it was, she considered, due from one who aspired to a literary style, and aimed at making a living by the pen. Though this was the first answer to a proposal that she had written on her own account, she was not altogether without practice in such matters, as she had composed others for her heroines who had found themselves in like position".*)

Turn the page from the Dorcas Society's meeting and, in contrast with that crowded room, one finds Anastasia alone, with *Northanger Abbey* - and, in an instant, *"such is the quickness of woman's wit"*, she is able to judge that the stranger who has knocked upon the door of the lodging house is a gentleman, for all that *"there was about him a complete absence of personal adornment"*.

Her calm in learning that the visitor is Lord Blandamer is in fine contrast with the account of his foreign exploits as imagined by the townsfolk; and, what's more, different from the seething relations between her and the hapless organist, Sharnall, who had, early on, exclaimed to her of fellow-lodger Westray, *"why, you're as red as a turkey-cock. I believe he's been making love to you."*

Levels of society, and the gradations within them, recur, such as the prolonged reminiscence which Miss Joliffe delivers before the Bishop's lunchtime visit (a subject which, naturally, gives vent to women's townwide speculation unfettered by the decorum of a Dorcas meeting). *The Nebuly Coat* is a novel of abundance, written in, as the narrator terms it, "*the dark gorge of middle age*": a gorge which in fact sheds so much light upon human behaviour, a novel written at something of a clip, amidst much else, after his marriage. To posit biographical parallels is always a risk (think of the fool that Michael Shelden made of himself by suggesting that Graham Greene was the Brighton Trunk Murderer) but one cannot help but feel that this is a novel of wider experience than its predecessors. It was appreciated as such by E. M. Forster, who shared both of Faulkner's publishers, and, equally steeped in Jane Austen, was brilliant at conveying women's point of view - and towards the end of his life again referred to *The Nebuly Coat* with reverence.

One might wonder what he - who depicted a clash between business and artistic life in *Howards End* - would have said had he and Faulkner met. Women are to the fore in that novel, as is music, but it is his most schematic. *The Nebuly Coat* is more subtle. If Forster had written this paragraph, then it would have excited wider debate across a century and more: "*there are women who put marriage in the forefront of life, whose thoughts revolve constantly about it as a centre, and with whom an advantageous match, or, failing that, a match of some sort, is the primary object. There are others who regard marriage as an eventuality, to be contemplated without either eagerness or avoidance, to be accepted or declined as its circumstances may be favourable or unfavourable. Again, there are some who seem, even from youth, to resolutely eliminate wedlock from their thoughts, to permit themselves no mental discussion upon this subject. Though a man profess that he will never marry, experience has shown that his resolve is often subject to reconsideration. But with unmarried women the case is different, and unmarried for the most part they remain, for man is often so weak-kneed a creature in matters of the heart, that he refrains from pursuing where where an unsympathetic attitude discourages pursuit. It may be that some of these women, also, would wish to reconsider their verdict, but find that they have reached an age when there is no place for repentance; yet, for the most part, woman's resolve upon such matters is more stable than man's, and*

*that because the interests at stake in marriage are for her more vital than can ever be the case with man."*

There is the stuff of many a novel, something written in an era when the Suffrage movement was gaining force, but which, for all its success, would find women taking a knock after the Great War, whose advent and course troubled Falkner: the millions of men lost made for a generation of single women, some of whom might look askance at this paragraph: *"the gambits of the great game of love are strangely limited, and there is little variation in the after-play. If it were not for the personal share we take, such doings, would lack interest by reason of their monotony, by their too close resemblance to their primeval type. This is why the game seems dull enough to onlookers; they shock us with the callousness with which they are apt to regard our ecstasies. This is why the straightforward game palls sometimes on the players themselves after a while; and why they are led to to take refuge from dulness in solving problems, in the tangled irregularities of the knight's move."*

The fascination of this paragraph is in the turns it takes. At the outset, those gambits are studied from without, by onlookers; and then comes that semi-colon which, unlike Anastasia's, is exactly placed, for we find ourselves in the position of those being observed, amidst "our ecstasies". It is a startling moment, perhaps Falkner's most candid - and, as such, immediately backs away, to be followed by that advocacy of other diversions.

The success of this novel cannot be reduced to any one, or even several factors; the human force of its intricacy, of its intimacy, is that even a beloved risks arousing irritation by interrupting one reading of it with a reminder of what passes for real life.

Such tension passes, of course, but it is always rewardingly there in this remarkable novel.