

John Meade Falkner's Impressions of Death
Christopher Hawtree

In any bout of word association the name John Meade Falkner could prompt a reply of either “amazing energy” - three classic novels written during seven variedly busy years which included other books - or “hopeless valetudinarian” - pluck one of his letters at random for tales of physical woe, despair. The title of this talk might make it sound as if it will take the latter tendency, and that we should all then need a jog round the Green to recover any human spirit. In fact, it might be that these twin forces overlapped. When asked to give a talk on Falkner, this subject somehow came to mind, and I was not sure what form it would take. That is, an essay in the original meaning of the word; something that could prompt more.

His work is suffused with death. It is the very essence of the novel with which he first came to the attention of a then select audience, *The Lost Stradivarius* in 1895. Who can resist this passage?

“A fortnight after John’s departure, we left Royston and removed to Worth, wishing to get some sea-air, and to enjoy the late summer of the south coast. Your mother seemed entirely to have recovered from her confinement, and to be enjoying as good health as could be reasonably expected under the circumstances of her husband’s indisposition. But suddenly one of those insidious maladies which are incidental to women in her condition seized upon her. We had hoped and believed that all such period of danger was already happily past; but, alas! it was not so, and within a few hours of her first seizure all realised how serious was her case. Everything that human skill can do under such conditions was done, but without avail. Symptoms of blood-poisoning showed themselves, accompanied with high fever, and within a week she was in her coffin.”

Bom! It is a superb piece of prose - which, perhaps like all good prose, reads aloud well. It is a small masterpiece of despatch, that paragraph, which would certainly have been the envy of E. M. Forster - who, as we know, much admired *The Nebuly Coat* and was himself given to summary execution: “Gerald died that afternoon. He was broken up in the football match”.

Moonfleet of course is steeped in graveyards and vaults, and who can forget that brush with a beard, but, later in the novel,

Falkner creates superb vertigo: “the parapet wall was very low, and caught the turnkey behind the knee as he staggered, tripping him over into the well-mouth. He gave a bitter cry, and there was a wrench on his face when he knew he was come, and ‘twas then Elzevir caught him by the belt. For a moment I thought he was saved, seeing Elzevir setting his body low back with heels pressed firm against the parapet wall to stand the strain. Then the belt gave way at the fastening, and Elzevir fell sprawling on the floor. But the other went backwards down the well.

“I got to the parapet just as he fell first into that black abyss. There was a second of silence, then a dreadful noise like a cocoa-nut being broken on a pavement - for we once had cocoa-nuts in plenty at *Moonfleet*, when the Batavian came on the beach, - then a deep echoing blow, where he rebounded and struck the wall again and last of all, the thud and thundering splash, when he reached the water at the bottom. I held my breath for sheer horror, and listened to see if he would cry, though I knew at heart he would never cry again, after that first sickening smash; but there was no sound or voice, except the moaning voices of the water eddies that I had heard before.”

Falkner’s grandfather, Robert had spent much of his life in hopes of making “a good death”, but it is unlikely that this - a very good death indeed - was quite what he had in mind. Nobody has perhaps remarked on that image of the cocoa-nut, as Falkner always carries the reader along, so often leaving no time to pause, but, in now lingering on it, one feels that it would not have been out of place on the lips of Philip Marlowe. And, as we shall see, one might wonder whether Hitchcock read Falkner.

However well one knows an author, his work cannot all be brought into mind of an instant. All the more so with somebody such as Falkner. Every reading of him yields more. Perhaps because the reader changes, perhaps because there is so much to find, and he is an author whom one can pick up and read again in sections as well as straight through. At any rate, the process makes one all the more aware of how much Death permeated Victorian life.

I, for one, first felt this subject assume a significance, a creative force in Falkner’s life, when in Dorchester and looking through a box of unsorted material. Although sitting down I was stopped in my tracks by a photograph of his elder brother Robert in his coffin - a picture taken just before Falkner’s birth when that unknown sibling was two months short of his fourth birthday. Startling as that image remains to us, and haunted by it as Falkner

was later to be as he was by the deaths of his brother William and sister Mary (two people whom one would like to know better), it was no morbid keepsake of the Falkners but part of a custom. (It is startling to find, as Pat Jalland notes in her substantial 1995 study of *Death in the Victorian Family*, that 100,000 infants died annually before the age of one, the figure only beginning to drop in the Edwardian era.) Robin, as Robert was known, and “Robin’s things” became both a legend and a presence in the other children’s lives, a cult was made of him. As Falkner’s sister Anne said, it was strange that her parents “could have wished or borne to perpetuate him thus, his worn little face and sunken eyes bound round with a white band and a few early flowers from the garden in his hand”.

Death - in the abstract - might be said to form Falkner’s first memory. His father Tom had in 1861 “brought me a wooden pistol which fired shots by means of a watch-spring” while Anne recalled their country rambles and the “thrilling discovery!” that was the far-gone carcass of a sheep in a great clump of speedwell from which there rose in alarm two carrion crows as the children approached. “The evil smell and the partly bare bones had an unholy attraction for us all.” They were also given, as Anne recalls, to tipping hot water on insects in the sty. “Sudden death overtook them and I looked on solemnly with the wonder and unholy glee of childhood, watching the living shrivel into nothing as the boiling stream overtook them.”

Perhaps children are less innocent, less sentimentally given than their elders. Around this time, in the summer of 1866 there died the uncle of Falkner’s father, John Grant. At eighty, he had gone off on one of his walks over the Ridgway north of Weymouth; this time, however, he was too little dressed and caught bronchitis. After a strong fight, he died. His last words were those - from Deuteronomy - which had sustained him in earlier years: “the eternal God is thy refuge and underneath are the everlasting arms.” The Falkners did not shirk that vogue for the “contemplation of death”, which was easier to sustain if there were some ever-present phrase in mind, something along the lines of Uncle John’s last words. (It was a popular text - in his 1971 study of *Death, Heaven and the Victorians* John Morley mentions it as appearing in a book of sermons given in Brighton for children.) And so illuminated copies of this were made, to various standards, depending upon where it was to be hung, all painted for a fee by a Major’s daughter in Weymouth who had fallen on hard times.

Between the realism of the festering sheep and the

mawkishness of the decorated admonition, we have the twin poles of an era in which, perforce, death could not be masked; it was as palpable a part of the daily round as it has ever been, and yet was simultaneously acquiring a veil some think tawdry. Presumably John Grant's last words were indeed his last words but many pious, Heaven-bound utterances can read as, well, ghost-written, so implausibly pious are they. Gladstone left a long account of his father's death at which one doctor recommended that the patient could cope with the whites of thirteen eggs and some brandy. As it turned out, his last audible words were "get me the porridge!" Perhaps not the best phrase with which to greet St Peter and Gladstone duly noted, come the event itself, that "it was a striking symbol for us, the finger of a dying father pointing up to heaven"

Naturally, we are here preoccupied with Falkner and so I think I need hardly spell out those terrible events of March 1871, which were vividly recalled by Falkner himself fifty-five years later when writing his memoirs in a Newcastle hospital. He transports the readers to that dark room where he last saw his mother, Grace who was dying from typhoid poisoning, something caught from a rat's tail in the water jug; Falkner wasn't sure if she really knew who he was in that room... What one might not immediately recall is that year the Prince of Wales almost died from typhoid, indeed on the tenth anniversary, in December, when his father, Prince Albert was popularly supposed to have been a victim of it in 1861 - some nine months after the death of Victoria's mother.

Which brings us again to that first full decade of Falkner's life. Before then a Royal death had been somewhat remote - although, as John Wolfe has shown in *Great Deaths* (2000), Wellington's was another matter. Albert's funeral itself was to be a private affair, but it was echoed across the country at the very same hour with sermons and so on (it would be interesting to find out what happened in Dorchester that day, shortly before Christmas). As we know, Victoria's grief was considerable - perhaps it excused a desire for retreat - and she was pictured several times beside a bust of him. In that great cult of Albert there were many depictions of his death bed, some more populous than others - and this found itself but part of a host of bric-a-brac, that extraordinary plethora of such things as a black teapot used after a death. As John Morley shows in the pictures at the core of his book which grew from a notable exhibition in Brighton, there was even a vogue for a black mourning ear-trumpet. Survivors often painted over seventeenth-century mirrors' wooden frames with the black which collectors now

carefully remove - to their financial advantage. It was all something which Morley neatly terms “congealed Romanticism”, and, in turn, this fuelled the taste later in the century for tales of the supernatural. It was also in 1880 that Jules Cotard set out the syndrome, now named after him, in which its sufferers believe themselves dead.

The world of Robin’s things was certainly the one in which Falkner grew up. He was inherently good-natured but cannot fail to have imbued this. And if one can say such a thing, that death pales beside 1856 and Carlisle, where a scarlet fever epidemic had killed five of the seven children of Dean Tait, the future Archbishop of Canterbury, whose own mother had died when he was two.

At the same time as all this, it is as well to think that it acts in counterpoint to a country which had made an instant best-seller of *On the Origin of Species* in 1859. While Darwin may have seemed the very man to reckon upon each generation simply succeeding the other, he would not have been among the human of the species if that work had not been prompted by grief. As Adam Gopnick has pointed out in his recent book *Angels and Ages* which turns upon the coincidence that Darwin and Lincoln were born on the same day 200 years ago. Despite their different immediate origins - moneyed family, humble cabin - “both men were shaped in crucial ways by the worst of nineteenth-century woes, the death of children at the height of their charm and wisdom. the nineteenth century was cruel in that it gave children a chance at a long life and often took it from them - the full force of exceptional grief set against the background of increasing hope for a long life”. Darwin’s mother had died when he was eight, and his father, Robert lived on to his eighties, often depressed, and died in 1848, by which time two of Charles Darwin’s children had died at eighteen months and at three weeks. And now, in 1851, Darwin’s favourite daughter, Annie died at ten from tuberculosis, after a futile ever-hopeful struggle, and he wrote a touching memorial of her which included the note that “she had one singular habit, which, I presume would ultimately have turned into some pursuit; namely a strong pleasure in looking out words or names in dictionaries.”

Her death was a force in making him settle to working upon the *Origin* through that decade. Like Lincoln, he was of a depressive tendency, but productively so, and this Victorian tendency I find an undertow in Falkner’s poems. Such as “*Christmas Day*”

They have passed one after the other;

Father and mother died,
Brother and sister and brother
Taken and sanctified.
I am left along in the sitting,
With none to sit beside.

Falkner is sitting in the church fifty-three years after he last did so with his mother, which was presumably in 1870, and, a couple of verses on, gives a glum summary of his life:

The pillars are twisted with holly,
And the font is wreathed with yew;
Christ forgive me for folly,
Youth's lapses - not a few,
For the hardness of my middle life,
For age's fretful view.

It has only recently struck me, Falkner's well-nigh unforgiving view of "the hardness of my middle life" - that period when he was at a creative peak, perhaps it is acknowledgement that he wanted to do more than be forever "in the train"? He was also to take an even longer view of life and death in his archaeological forays, sometimes with Hardy, and one would like to have more on this side of his life; something very much of the era, one which led to world-wide digs and the inference of tribal customs that were distinctly unVictorian, and the writing of such works as *The Golden Bough* which have been a Modernist influence. Time and again in thinking of Falkner, one feels as if living in two eras, but perhaps this a point at which to mention his poem "*Selibra Cineris Coacta Cani*" which is partly an evocative account of a burial, a resting place which lasted eighteen hundred years. (How many years make the difference between defilement and research?) Perhaps the title might be idiomatically translated as that made popular by another Hertford graduate: *A Handful of Dust*. The tool strikes a stone, and then

... eager hands are stretched to reach
The lid of the sarcophagus.

A moment's space we gaze upon
The ruins of a Celtic bust,
The white limbs of the skeleton,
And then they crumble into dust.

Poor chief! and so his frame was spared
The last indignity of death,
To lie with bones set fair and squared,
With glass above, and cloth beneath,

In some museum hall, a prize
Of fallen faiths and people gone,
For rustic loons with open eyes
To gape and gaze and laugh upon.

Yes, politically correct he wasn't! And how touching that in fact, as Falkner then writes, that all there is in the museum case are those three arrow heads and amulet... it's a tremendous narrative poem.

Falkner could tell a story, as so many testify. (His voice could have been recorded, would that more had left accounts of his talk, would that we could magic back to life his lost letters to Hardy and find those to Vassal.) Anyway, narrative. You might think it a surprise that I've not mentioned *The Nebuly Coat*, which indeed is set in what appears to be emerging as that pivotal decade of the 1860s. It contains another unfortunate birth, briskly told: "it was his good appearance, even at five-and-forty, which induced Miss Hunter of the Grove to run away with him, though Colonel Hunter had promised to disown her if she ever married so far beneath her. She did not, it is true, live long to endure her father's displeasure, but died in giving birth to her first child. Even this sad result had failed to melt the Colonel's heart."

In fact, on reading *The Nebuly Coat* yet again, one is struck by things anew - how long, even post-modern, is the section about Anastasia living among fictional characters and wanting to write a novel herself (it could be the material of Falkner's lost one), and how extraordinary that brief one about the unfortunate tendencies of clergy among the lower orders. But more than ever, it is a novel in which those no longer present are a force: recently gone, Martin is very much so, and the Minster seems to speak with the voices of the aristocratic dead while, in a phrase that had not fully registered with me before about Sharnall's departure from this world. "Then the nine days' wonder ceased, and Mr Sharnall passed into the great oblivion of middle-class dead". It's not likely to spoil the anybody's suspense if I quote a certain passage. "Westray gave a step forward into the loft, and then his foot struck against something, and he nearly fell. It was something soft and yielding that he had struck,

something of which the mere touch filled him with horrible surmise. He bent down to see what it was, and a white object met his eyes. It was the white face of a man turned up towards the vaulting; he had stumbled over the body of Mr Sharnall, who lay on the floor with the back of his head on the pedal-note. Westray had bent low down, and he looked full in the eyes of the organist, but they were fixed and glazing.

“The moonlight that shone on the dead face seemed to fall on it through that brighter spot in the head of the middle light; it was as if the nebuly coat had blighted the very life out of the man who lay so still upon the floor.”

It is almost as if in writing that - perhaps the finest death in Falkner - he had anticipated a film, and what is also surprising is that it takes up four pages of the novel, but does not hinder it, and what's more adds to the atmosphere of the subsequent pages. Sharnall is as present as he ever was. (One might wonder if there is something of Horace Moule's sad suicide in Falkner's creation of Sharnall as well as the set-up he witnessed at a church in Richmond, Yorkshire, where the rector and organist were in evident conflict.) Far from being the climax of *The Nebuly Coat*, as one sometimes recalls it, Sharnall's death takes place just over halfway through. And this is perhaps why the novel is Falkner's most successful. He has accommodated death within the narrative. There is a steady progress through the rest of it - even if some have alleged that the plot is at times as tricky as Graham Greene often alleged of Hitchcock's. Hitchcock! Did he know of Sharnall's sad end when turning Maugham's *Ashenden* into *Secret Agent*? Peter Lorre and John Gielgud have a similar, organ-sounding encounter in a Swiss church. One might wonder what he - who depicted small-town life so well with Thornton Wilder in *Shadow of a Doubt* - might have made of this novel but perhaps better would have been the Truffaut of *La Chambre Verte*, that death-haunted variant upon Henry James.

In *The Nebuly Coat* Falkner has overcome the tendency of the first two, shorter novels to telescope events in the last third. (Blackwood thanked Falkner for revising the last section of *The Lost Stradivarius*, and it would be fascinating to find the earlier version.) Perhaps it sounds harsh but it is as if the first two novels are wrapped up a little too quickly. Or perhaps one simply relishes so much the Romanticism which Falkner made of congealed Romanticism in *The Nebuly Coat* that anything else pales.

Some six years later he discussed with Hardy his poetry and pessimism, and made the point that anybody as productive as

Hardy could not be labelled a pessimist. One is reminded is Robert Lowell of telling Elizabeth Bishop how pleased he was by her present of Sydney Smith's letters in 1963: "a continual air of enthusiasm blows through them - they are free from everything so extravagant as pessimism".

Did Falkner become pessimistic, so much so that sustained writing eluded him? He had made Death a character in *The Nebuly Coat*. Of course, in a sense, he traded daily in death, supplying the wherewithal to bring it about - or stave it off. One can over-emphasise that, perhaps; such work was a part of the national life, and many a career brings its contradictions. His letters remain enjoyable, even funny, but through the years after *The Nebuly Coat* I sense a growing despair, a man caught up in something from which he cannot free himself - and there is some of that spirit throughout the novel. His despatches from around the world have a pell-mell spirit, and end up with those nights camped out at Elswick high above the Tyne during the Great War.

Looked at a century on, is it not possible to regard these as part of a society which - for all its technological advances - was none the less caught up in what Freud soon after that war labelled the "death instinct"? Was society so suffused with it that it drew the worst misfortune upon itself? (Freud's dates almost match Falkner's, two men who straddled contrasting eras. Unlike Falkner, Freud, however, had a phobia of trains - perhaps it was all those tunnels.) Something which equally applied across the Channel. George Clare, who died recently, grew up in post Great-War Vienna amidst those who had been immersed in a very different, seemingly solid Vienna, and in describing that lost world so well, in *Last Waltz in Vienna*, Clare quoted a 1914 passage by Thomas Mann: "This world of peace which has now collapsed with such shattering thundering - did we not all of us have enough of it? Was it not foul with all its comfort? Did it not foster and stink with the decomposition of civilisation? Morally and psychologically I fear the necessity of this catastrophe and that feeling of cleansing, of elevation and liberation which filled me, when what one had thought impossible really happened".

Of course, that cleansing, as Falkner found, was only to make things worse all round. We are perhaps still living with that twentieth-century legacy. But any reading of *The Nebuly Coat* makes it easier to bear that grief. Death is at its heart, fortifyingly so.