The Vicar of Bullhampton

Chapters 1-14
Introduction for BIG READ meeting on 6 January 2025

Gilly Wilford

Trollope wrote this novel in 1868, although it was not published until 1870 and then not in the format that had been agreed with his publisher. Trollope writes about the reasons for this in his autobiography (imaginatively titled 'An autobiography'). Although he tells the story rather drily, it also comes across as quite amusing: it turns out that the story was not published in 'Once a Week' as originally planned because the magazine was also due to publish an English translation of 'L'Homme Qui Rit' by Victor Hugo and this was not delivered on time. Poor Trollope had to miss his spot due to 'a sententious, radical (and unpunctual) Frenchman' and his story was published in monthly numbers instead, which had a deleterious effect on sales. The book was also not a great success partly because his readers wanted a return to the sunny uplands of Barsetshire and found the Vicar a little too bleak. Trollope took a step, unusual for him, of writing an explanatory preface saying that the book was written in order to highlight the fate of fallen women, through the story of Carry Brattle. This must have seemed daunting indeed to readers and they waited in their droves for another two years until they could read about a really bad woman – Lizzie Eustace – who lied her way through life but nevertheless kept her 'virtue' intact. Now that was the sort of wickedness that really appealed to Victorian readers.

I found the book intriguing when I first read it and have hugely enjoyed returning to it after a few years. The characters are real and, thrilling to relate, the child of one of them lives in Fordingbridge, where I grew up!

As usual, there are several strands to the story and the majority have been introduced before the end of chapter 14, although a very important part of the book, directly related to the eponymous vicar, is still waiting in the wings at the close of tonight's section.

1. **The love story**

Of course there's a love story! And, almost equally of course, it does not run smooth. The local squire, Harry Gilmore, is introduced as the hero of the book but I think this is a red herring. At best he is the supporting role and, of course, Frank Fenwick the vicar is the real hero of the novel. Frank Fenwick is very happily married to Janet and she has a friend, Mary Lowther, who is staying with them for the summer. Mary is a tall and beautiful girl, with expressive eyes and a dimple in her chin – always a sign of favour with Trollope. Everything about the description marks her out as the heroine, perhaps more especially because she is an orphan with very little money. Harry Gilmore, who has reached his thirties without finding anyone with whom he wants to share his good income and estate, falls in love with her and wants to marry her. His friends, the Fenwicks, think this is an excellent plan that will make both their friends very happy and encourage Harry Gilmore. Janet is perhaps a little too keen to encourage her friend to accept the proposal and tries various strategems to leave them alone together. We soon see that Mary is a spirited girl because she falls in the river while reaching for a ball but, being a heroine, makes little of it. Of course, Harry Gilmore is extremely concerned and makes all sorts of fuss about the ducking. Janet recognises the depth of his love in all this concern and again encourages Mary to say yes. She, however, can't bring herself to the point of thinking that she loves him enough to marry him, even though she can recognise his many good qualities. In trying not

to hurt him she almost makes things worse because she asks him to wait a while rather than refusing him outright. Harry Gilmore comes the day after the incident with the ball to ask her again to marry him and Mary makes him an honest and courageous answer: 'I have no right to keep you in suspense, and I will not do it. I respect and esteem you most honestly. I have so much liking for you that I do not mind owning that I wish that it were more. Mr Gilmore, I like you so much that I would make a great sacrifice for you; but I cannot sacrifice my own honesty or your happiness by making believe that I love you'. Poor Harry Gilmore is so distressed that he convinces himself that it is worth his while to wait for three months and then ask again. Mary has told him that there is no-one else so he still feels that he has a chance. Mary's friend Janet still clings to this hope as well and tries to persuade Mary that she will fall in love with Harry after they are married. Poor Mary knows that she will not fall in love with Harry Gilmore but is under so much pressure both from him and their mutual friends that she is unable to do the one thing that she knows would be right by giving him an unequivocal 'no' as an answer. I think Mary was a bit bullied by her friends – they meant to be kind because they both sincerely believed that the marriage would be good for her but they really should have accepted that her inner knowledge told her that she did not love Mr Gilmore. Mary has a conversation with Frank in which she asks him to forgive her for not falling for his best friend and also asks him to tell Harry not to wait and ask her again but to accept no as an answer. Even then, Frank says that she doesn't know her own mind and that she would be happy if only she would marry Mr Gilmore. Poor Mary! One against three is an unfair contest so she retires from the lists and goes home to her aunt in Loring. In kindness to Frank, who is after all a hero, I should point out that he tells Mary before she goes that there will always be a home for her at Bullhampton, should she need one.

As this is a story with lots of strands, we don't pick up on Mary's troubled love life until chapter 13. But wait a minute, this chapter starts with a description of the Marrable family, of which Mary's mother was a member. I hope that I am not the only reader of this typically Trollopian tangle of names not to have realised immediately that Mary and Walter Marrable were second cousins. Actually, having drawn the family tree, I think they are third cousins but let's not go down that rabbit hole. The important point is that they are not first cousins, which may be relevant later. Walter is introduced as another hero and better looking than Harry Gilmore but the description of him seems to be a bit terrifying. His rather ferocious looks and approach to life remind me strongly of Lord Chiltern and perhaps Trollope had him in mind since he was midway between Phineas Finn and Redux. Poor Walter was in the very unpleasant situation of having been robbed by his father of the money left to him by his mother. It seems that Walter's father, Colonel Marrable, was a thoroughly bad lot who ran up debts and borrowed or acquired money wherever he could and who had contrived to get his hands on his own son's inheritance. His justification was that his wife should have given the money to him in the first place. Not surprisingly his son doesn't see it that way and the two are at odds – this rather foreshadows the quarrel between Dolly Longstaffe and his father in The Way We Live Now, which was waiting in the wings. Walter Marrable comes to stay with his uncle in Loring – where you will remember that Mary is staying with her aunt – and Mary and her aunt meet Walter and are very sorry for him, having heard the story of his father's bad behaviour. Of course the two young people discuss things and of course Mary is very sympathetic and comforting to Walter. This is all cousinly chat between two people who haven't any siblings but to what may it lead? The two were on Christian name terms and Mary's aunt was beginning to fear for poor Mr Gilmore, waiting to be a hero at Bullhampton, As it happens, tonight's slice ends with Mary talking about Mr Gilmore in another context and Walter, whose fine eyes are already glowing with admiration of Mary, suggests that Mr Gilmore would be a good catch, a suggestion that Mary refutes: 'Do you think, Walter, that a girl ought to marry a man merely because he is a perfect gentleman and has a nice estate and is not yet married?

No, indeed, the course of true love is not running smooth for Harry Gilmore and perhaps Walter is gearing up to be one of the rocks in his path…….

2. The 'state of England' story

In 1868 Charles Dickens (referred to by Trollope in the Warden as Mr Sentiment) had written all his novels except the unfinished Edwin Drood. He had brought before the public many of the social injustices of the time and, through the power of his writing and personality, had brought about a great deal of social change, improving the lot of the poor and downtrodden in many ways. He had not, however, written about a 'fallen woman' since Little Emily in David Copperfield, written in 1850. Other English writers had tackled the subject and the most notable of them were George Eliot writing about poor Hetty Sorrel in Adam Bede in 1859 or Maggie Tulliver in 1860 and Mrs Gaskell, with Ruth in 1853, which had caused some amount of scandal, not least because it treated Ruth so compassionately. Considering this it is surprising in a way that Trollope wrote so cautiously in his preface about introducing Carry Brattle to his readers. Ruth and Adam Bede had, after all, been written 15 and 11 years earlier – not to mention Clarissa now over 100 years old. It was, however, the fate of all these young ladies to meet an untimely death or condign punishment.

In tonight's chapters Carry is only referred to in the most oblique terms as someone who was 'a thing, somewhere, never to be mentioned whose father had 'beaten a miscreant to death's door' and 'left him all but lifeless, and had walked off scatheless, nobody daring to put a finger on him'. Any Victorian reader would have known what all this meant and might not have expected to meet the 'second Magdalen' later in the novel had Trollope not warned them that they would. In case any of my genteel female listeners are feeling anxious about their virtue I can assure you that we won't meet her in chapters 1-14 this evening.

Carry, however, is part of a wider family around whom much of the state of England story revolves. The mill, where the Brattles live, is mentioned in the first chapter and we learn that it is a 'tattered, shattered, ramshackle concern' although the Brattles always paid their way.

In chapter 3 we meet Carry's brother Sam who, as a boy, was a great favourite with our hero Frank Fenwick and may possibly have been rather spoilt by enjoying this obvious preference. Alas, instead of using his undoubted brains and attractive attributes to make an honest way in the world he had fallen in with bad company. On the evening that Mary had fallen in the river Harry Gilmore meets Sam in the churchyard, with another man and suspects that they are up to no good. He doubles round to the front of the Vicarage and alerts Frank who finds Sam in his garden with two undoubted ruffians. The two other men escape but Frank manages to get Sam to stay and talk to him and try to persuade him to give up his evil influences. I admire very much the side of Frank's character that this shows. Even though he knows that Sam may well have been intending to rob him, he wants to believe that it was only fruit and vegetables that were in danger of being stolen and is sad that Gilmore thinks the worst of him. Frank believes that he will be able to persuade Sam to behave better in future. He is also concerned that he may have hurt one of the two other fellows and takes the trouble to consult the local doctor as to the likelihood of his coming to any real harm. Frank Fenwick is a good man – a real hero!

The next day (in chapter 6) Frank goes to Brattle's mill to speak to Jacob Brattle Sam's father. Although he was an upright citizen he was a pretty tough character and it is possible that his upbringing had not been particularly helpful to Sam. To be the favourite child of a harsh man, possibly seeing oneself escape punishment or disapprobation that other siblings received, does not necessarily bring out the best in a child. The conversation with Jacob does not get off to a good start, since the miller immediately starts to blame Frank for Sam's behaviour. After this fruitless conversation Frank goes to see Mrs Brattle, who is a kind-hearted, industrious, godly woman but she is unable to throw much light on Sam's whereabouts or his intentions. Frank reiterates his desire to see Sam turn from his ways and goes home sad at heart and blaming himself for showing favours to Sam

When we return to the robbers, in chapter 10, we learn that one of them was a local character known as Jack the Grinder and that he had said that he was bruised by a fall from a cart. It seemed that this was the chap whom Frank had hit and he is relieved to learn that there were no bones broken. Mrs Brattle walks over to the Vicarage to let Frank know that Sam is back at the mill and is working on the repairs that Mr Gilmore had started, in response to Mary's wish. He had, however, refused to come with her to see the vicar. Frank is determined to try to help Sam and walks over to the mill thinking that 'these Brattles had suffered much and he would bear with them, let the task of doing so be ever so hard'. Sam is reluctant to stop work to speak with Frank but does so at last, although he is defiant and tries to convince Frank that he was only walking in the churchyard. When Frank says 'I shall take no further steps about it' he rejoins: ' There ain't no steps to be taken, Mr Fenwick'. Frank is so relieved to see Sam hard at work that he rather respects him and even likes his independence in speaking up for himself. He defends him to his friend Harry Gilmore, who feels very differently. I have to say, though, that I am entirely of Fanny's mind when it came to having a large fierce dog:' he would only be tearing the maids and biting the children. I hate having a savage beast about'.

But now we reach:

3. A murder mystery

The plot thickens and we hear the very next morning that Mr Trumbull, the farmer next door to the Vicarage, has been murdered! Not only that, his fierce dog, Bone'm, has been murdered too. There are so few clues that even Poirot would have been puzzled, although no doubt Miss Marple would have knitted her way to the truth. Poor Mr Trumbull had relied on his dog and his strongbox to protect his money but they 'knocked his skull open with a hammer'. It turns out that Trumbull's sister knew that he kept his money in a box under his bed and so did his maid Agnes Pope and another elderly servant. Suspicion immediately falls on Sam Brattle, especially as he was known to have been friendly with Agnes Pope. Poor Agnes is viewed as a possible accessory and people find it hard to believe that she had not told Sam about the strongbox. It was immediately known that Sam, who was at the mill in the morning, had been out at night. Sam can only say that he had been out sitting by the road but that he had heard a cart that he thought might belong to Jack the Grinder. He had no alibi and so was arrested, although he pointed out to his mother that he would soon be home, since 'I ain't got any of the money and they can't bring it nigh me'. It is revealed in a letter from Janet Fenwick to Mary that the robbers took only the money (about £150) and that they probably killed Mr Trumbull because he fought them for the money. It now looks as though they were prowling about the Vicarage with a view to seeing how they could get into the farmer's house rather than to rob the Vicar. Mr Gilmore, who is a magistrate, has remained impartial and Janet, in a letter, reminds Mary how well he is behaving – poor Mary, she can't get away from this would-be lover even when a murder is being

discussed! This letter is the first part of chapter 14 and is discussed by Mary and Walter. It is this discussion that results in the conversation about Mr Gilmore, so we are back to strand 1 again.

4. Conclusion

This story has begun at quite a pace. We have a romance, a needy family, a kind and caring vicar and a murder, all in 14 chapters! No-one would be surprised to learn that the romance may become more complex or that things might not be as bad for Sam as we fear at present. But there are other characters waiting in the wings. I have not mentioned Mr Puddleham, the Methodist minister, although his name did come up briefly in the early chapters. Nor did I mention Lord Trowbridge, the major landowner in the district, to whom Mr Gilmore is very small beer. Mr Trumbull, the murdered farmer, was Lord Trowbridge's tenant and this is going to give our hero (well, my hero at any rate) Frank Fenwick a very great deal of trouble. Watch this space next time for strand 4 of this intriguing novel!

Possible discussion questions:

Does Trollope do 'state of England' as well as George Eliot or Mrs Gaskell?

Is he, dare we say it, more realistic in his characterisation than Dickens?

Should a Victorian girl accept a man because he is rich and in love with her?

Was Frank right to have singled out Sam as he had?

Bearing in mind what happened in Phineas Redux, however many men in Victorian England had life preservers??!!