

Trollope Society Online Conversazione on 26th April 2021
An introduction to chapters 15 to 28 of *The Way We Live Now*
by Gilly Wilford

Trollope has introduced us to the main characters of this complex book in the opening chapters (1 to 14), so I will briefly recap the strands of this novel, before we see how they develop.

The story takes place mainly in London, with rural excursions, and the main characters are, for the most part, London based. The main exception is Roger Carbury but he also plays an important role in London life, popping up there at one or two points in the story. He and his young relative, Paul Montagu, come closest to being the older and younger heroes of the tale – the baritone and tenor leads if this were an opera.

The Carbury family in London represent the best and worst of society. Lady Carbury, a contralto, still pretty, disillusioned and tarnished by an unequal and unhappy marriage, struggles to keep her head above water faced with the impossible task of supporting herself, her daughter and her wastrel son on an inadequate and uncertain income. Sir Felix (a weak second tenor) is terminally useless, selfish, greedy, immoral and amoral and it is a moot point as to how much his character has been developed by bad parenting or innate viciousness. Henrietta, our soprano lead, has somehow managed to grow up with a strong moral sense and good principles that enable her to see not only the glaring faults of her over-indulged brother but also the weaknesses of her mother.

The Melmottes are the sort of people that Trollope distrusts and despises – their success in life due to clever swindles and tricks that both captivate and repel those around them. While much of society shuns them there are many whose greed and desire to live way beyond their means lead them to court and flatter Mr Melmotte in the hope of picking up some of the crumbs from under his table.

The others, from the Longestaffes to the young reprobates at the Bear Garden, are the lesser roles that fill the stage and give a verisimilitude to this rich novel. More than any other of his works this book, as its name implies, is about a whole society, its corruption and sham gentility.

There are two major strands in the book: Greed and love and I thought it would be interesting to see how these are developed. It is not a very even contest, with greed taking up 10 of the chapters, love only 4 and most of those are dubious.

First: Greed
Chapters 15 to 17

Lady Carbury knows, though she hardly admits it even to herself, that Felix is hopeless and, rather than attempting to persuade him to reform, she decides that a marriage with Marie Melmotte is the best way forward. To this end she has engineered an invitation to her cousin Roger's house in Suffolk so that she and Felix can meet the Melmottes who will be at the Longestaffe's house, Caversham, nearby. She is not good enough at greed and deceit to be able to hide this design from Roger, so a quarrel happens almost at once. Roger, our

baritone hero, is not impressed since he is impervious to greed. We briefly see another, slightly worthier, greed displayed by the zeal of Roger's Catholic priest friend at dinner when he tries to convert Lady Carbury and, perhaps, even the Bishop. This is just a side show, however, and does not impinge at all on the rush of the worldly after gain.

But why are the Melmottes at Caversham? Well, because the Longestaffes are hopelessly in debt due to their own greed and swanky lifestyle and Mr Longestaffe rather stupidly thinks that having Mr Melmotte to stay will somehow lead to a magical improvement in his finances.

Felix is greedy enough to obey his mother's instruction to join them at Carbury Hall but so useless that he can't get there by either sensible train and turns up demanding brandy and soda at 4 in the morning. Roger is incensed by his attitude to all around him and longs to take him to task, prevented only by his scruples as host. Felix's behaviour the next afternoon at Caversham is calculated to put everyone's back up and also make it quite plain that he is going after the heiress. He takes Marie aside and sweet talks her enough to convince her that he is in earnest and that she does really love him. (Remember, the brandy and sodas haven't yet ruined his looks). The Longestaffes don't really mind this carry on as they are playing their own games. Mr Longestaffe is trying to sell a house to Melmotte and also to persuade his son to give it up but Dolly Longestaffe insists that he must have a half share of the proceeds. The female Longestaffes have made a treaty with their father that they will entertain the Melmottes only on condition that they can return for the London season and why? Because the girls have still to snare rich husbands.

We will return to chapters 18 and 19.

Chapters 20 to 25

The Carburys are invited to dinner at Caversham and Felix and his mother go to pursue their own ends. Henrietta is dragged along with them but she has no part to play in their machinations. Lady Carbury tries to sweet talk Mr Melmotte into liking her son but is no match for him and Felix carries on his game of entrapping Marie.

On the day after the dinner the guests return to town, leaving the Longestaffes desolate at Caversham and it is then that the girls realise that their father is going to renege on the treaty. Their indignation – especially Georgiana's – knows no bounds. They have entertained the Melmottes, whom they despise, solely on the understanding that this would enable them to return for the rest of the season. Their father, disappointed in what the great financier can do for him, refuses. Georgiana is so determined to go to town that she agrees to accept an invitation from the despised Melmottes and see if she can get her husband that way. Desperate times have called for desperate measures. Her sister, Sophia, is already deciding to settle for a local squire.

We return to London and the Railway Board and discover that our tenor lead, Paul Montague, is to some measure falling prey to the prevailing atmosphere. He is perplexed and uncomfortable but still enjoys the money and, I am sorry to say, uses some of it to join the gambling set at the Bear Garden. Lord Nidderdale and Felix would like to sell some shares, too, to realise some money from the Board but haven't quite understood that they

must first buy some. We begin here to see that Lord Nidderdale has some saving qualities and a certain level of morality that might rescue him from the morass later in the book. Felix is pushed by his mother into seeing Mr Melmotte to ask for permission to marry Marie but is checkmated by Melmotte's questions as to his money and prospects. Melmotte, on discovering to what extent Felix had overegged the cake of his prospects, almost admires his impudence.

Felix carries on the gambling but starts to lose to Miles Grendall, who is possibly the worst of the bunch at the club (definitely a bass) and he begins to realise that Miles is cheating.

Marie's crush on Felix deepens and poor Georgiana discovers that her London manoeuvre has been disastrous: she is ignored by her old friends and even Dolly is moved to write to her father to tell him to take her away as he thinks the Melmottes are not people with whom she should associate. Meanwhile Mr Melmotte is trying to work his way up the echelons of English society. He is now greedy for social recognition as well as money – it may not be wise.....

The final fling with greed is in chapter 28, when Felix and Dolly go to the city to buy some shares, using Mr Melmotte as a broker for Dolly's gambling debts and, allegedly, giving Felix £1,000 of shares in return. No scrip changes hands and Felix begins to wonder whether he has actually got anything for his money. Felix and Dolly have the first intimation that the wily old fox may be too many for them but they are still way off realising the extent of his machinations. Felix has told Dolly how he saw Miles Grendall cheating and is surprised to hear that Dolly is more or less indifferent to the news that he has found so shocking. I'm afraid that this might give Felix new ideas for money making.

And now: Love

We first hear of love tales in chapter 18 and I am sorry to say that the story is of the handsome town buck coming down to seduce the innocent country maid, with his good looks and smart ways. Ruby Ruggles, a local lass, (and the coloratura soprano) is too pretty for her own good and longs to escape from her tyrannical grandfather and unexciting marriage prospects. It's inevitable that she would come in Felix's way and just as inevitable that he should trifle with her. Ruby is enchanted and even Felix enjoys a half hour in the woods with a bit of kissing. Ruby is no Hetty Sorrel and Felix too lazy to get as far as ruining her, so he leaves her with hopes, dreams and not much else.

In chapter 19 Hetta has a far more serious lover. Roger is good, kind, well intentioned, thoroughly in love with Hetta and, let's face it, a bit of a bore. He's also nearly twice Hetta's age and Trollope's heroines don't rush to marry much older men in the way that Dickens' did. Now that Hetta has met Paul Montagu Roger doesn't stand a chance for all his worthiness.

But meanwhile, what is Paul up to? Is he true to Hetta? Well, yes and no. In chapter 26 we meet the beautiful, clever and American Mrs Hurtle, (clearly a luscious mezzo) who travels out of Paul's past to London to demand why he is wishing to renege on earlier promises of love that he had made to her on a sea voyage. Paul has found that her reputation is rather shady and also fears that she might not be quite so much of a widow as he thought. There

is something of the wild west about her, which is exciting but not exactly fitted for London society. Paul has also met Hetta and realised that, though fascinated by Winifred Hurtle, he isn't truly in love with her. She is determined not to let him go. Does she really love him or is she just unwilling to lose her power over him. Perhaps the fact that he is a bit younger than she is an added attraction. I am sorry to say that Paul – a flawed hero – doesn't quite know how to break with her and does rather silly things like taking her to the play, going to her lodgings as an acknowledged fiancé and kissing her. He seems to be working his way into a love triangle.....

The plot can only thicken.

Before I go I would like to add that it's not just about the plot, it's also his style. The beautiful phraseology, the humour – viz the treaty at Caversham – the characterisation and even the humorous names: Sir Damask Monogram is almost believable. He is just such a joy to read.