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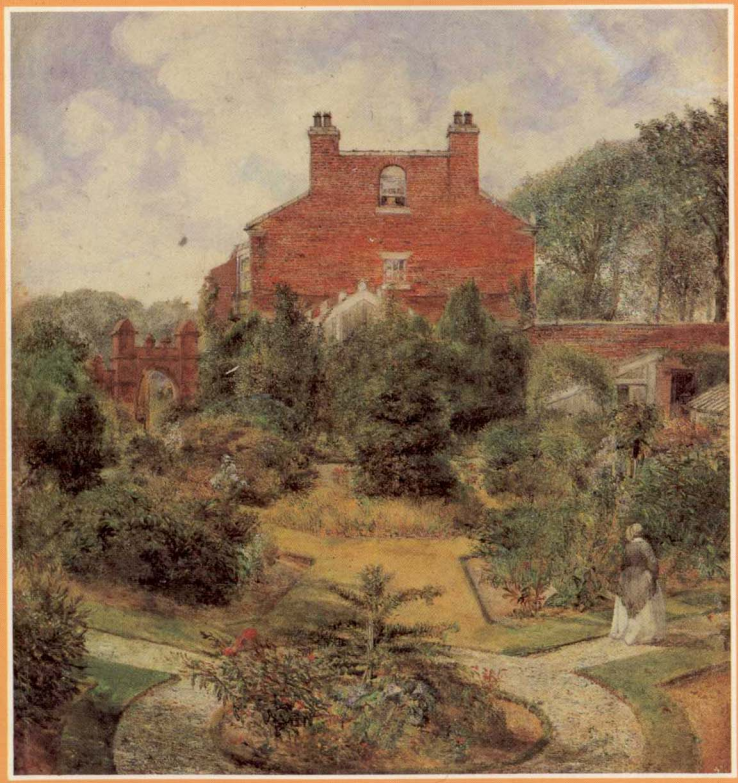
ANTHONY TROLLOPE

THE SMALL HOUSE AT ALLINGTON



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The Small House at Allington

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INTRODUCTION

The enormous popular success of *The Small House at Allington* appears to have struck Trollope as gratifying, bemusing, and somewhat annoying. He saw that it was Lily Dale who had 'made her way into the hearts of many readers', and he saw further that she had done so 'because she could not get over her troubles'. He steadfastly resisted the pleas of correspondents begging him to marry Lily to Johnny Eames. 'Had I done so,' he says, 'Lily would never have so endeared herself to these as to induce them to write letters to the author concerning her fate.' Perhaps understanding more than his readers or perhaps too close to her own peculiar mental state, he became irritated by her: 'In the love with which she has been greeted I have hardly joined with much enthusiasm, feeling that she is somewhat of a female prig.' In the succeeding novel in the Barsetshire series, *The Last Chronicle of Barset*, Trollope's annoyance with her becomes clear, but in the writing of *The Small House* he seems to have understood perfectly and presented with relentless unsentimentality Lily's peculiar blend of masochism and pathetic constancy to a world and values that nowhere exist.

'Outside of Lily Dale and the chief interest in the novel,' Trollope added, '*The Small House at Allington* is, I think, good.' A word now reserved for hopeless mediocrity, 'good' was, for Trollope, about the strongest expression of praise he allowed himself. And, despite his reservations as regards Lily, he was clearly not unsatisfied with the popularity of the novel. He received for it £3000, exactly triple the amount he had received for *Framley Parsonage*, which had established his reputation as a writer and as a commercial success. Beyond that, he tells us that *The Small House* 'redeemed my reputation' with the *Cornhill*, which, after the triumph of *Framley Parsonage*, had had to suffer through the tedious, pseudo-Dickensian *Struggles of Brown, Jones and Robinson.*

Confirmation of his ability and his earning power was

especially important to Trollope. He was, at the time the first serial instalment of *The Small House* appeared in the *Cornhill* (Sept. 1862), 47 years of age and had been writing at an astonishing pace for more than 15 years while pursuing actively and cantankerously a career with the General Post Office. It was as a Deputy Surveyor of rural letter deliveries in south-west England that he had visited Salisbury and laid claim to that imaginative landscape that was to become Barsetshire. He stayed on at the Post Office for another five years after *The Small House*, at which time the income from his novels no longer made such work necessary. By that time he had published 21 novels, most of them triple-deckers, two long travel books (on North America and on the West Indies), two volumes of short stories, three volumes of miscellaneous sketches, and many essays in periodicals.

By his own later standards, Trollope had been desultory and unproductive during this time. He was, no doubt, inspired by the image of his courageously industrious mother, who had taken up a literary career at the age of 50 in order to rescue her family from penury and had produced, he tells us, 114 volumes in the next 26 years, some of those written while she was nursing in the next room a dying husband and two dying children. 'Her career', Trollope quietly says, 'offers great encouragement to those who have not begun early in life.'

Great encouragement of a different sort came from Trollope's lifelong attempt to cover with success and popularity the terrible and shameful wounds he had received as a child. Pushed by a father who was both tragically unsuccessful in all he undertook and socially ambitious for his sons, Trollope was sent to a series of famous public schools – Harrow and Winchester most notably – each apparently offering more humiliation to him than the last. He was, he says, poor, ill-dressed, big, awkward, ugly, and sullen: a perfect target for the notorious and often vicious hazing. Even his older brother joined in, flogging him daily at one period with a big stick. 'I feel convinced in my mind that I have been flogged oftener than any human being alive,' he says. He was an outcast, taught to think of himself for many years

after as 'an evil, an encumbrance, a useless thing, – as a creature of whom those connected with him had to be ashamed.' It is doubtful that he ever totally released himself from this sad self-portrait.

But he, like his mother, never gave up trying. He wrote in all spare hours when he wasn't chasing down postal problems or chasing after the hounds. Trollope's candid (or perhaps tongue-in-cheek) account of his writing practices is well-known but perhaps not so well-understood. He paid his groom £5 a year extra to wake him early so that he could begin work at 5.30 and complete the day's literary labours before dressing for breakfast. He wrote with his watch before him and asked from himself 250 words every 15 minutes – and got them. The literary world of 1883, committed to the austere doctrines of Henry James and to a self-congratulatory idea of 'genius' more extreme than anything the early Romantics would have dreamed of, seized on Trollope's bland accounting and used it as an indictment both of Trollope and of the tradition he represented. As a result of this and other factors, his reputation suffered greatly and has only very recently begun to recover.

The whole episode marks an interesting chapter in the history of taste, or perhaps only in the power of smugness and dogmatism. Trollope's position, and it is a venerable one, sees art primarily as a craft, the artist as a maker, not an inspired historian creating a naïve illusion of verisimilitude. Trollope had great disdain for the myth of the fastidious genius waiting for inspiration, arguing that a shoemaker might as well blame an off day on a reluctant muse. Trollope was perfectly willing to admit that he was no genius. He was not, however, merely the mechanic, producing so many words per minute on demand. He was, he says, able to write so quickly because he had mastered the craft. Further, he thought so intently during the day of what he was to write the next morning that there was no need to chew his pencil and stare at the wall. All this suggests an imagination that is not feeble but intense, disciplined, and focused. It is an imagination nursed, as he says, on a habit developed during his lonely schooldays, a habit of constructing in his head

long narratives with himself as the hero. This habit he simply continued, with the single change of substituting other heroes and heroines for himself. Trollope had, then, a very long and rigorous apprenticeship. It should not surprise us that he was able to write so quickly and with such apparent effortlessness – once he had found a congenial mode.

But that took some doing. The early Irish novels are indeed interesting, but they are a series of false starts: tragedies, an excursion into historical romance, an extended diatribe after the manner of Carlyle, and a play. Even *The Warden* has a heavy vein of satire, a manner and point of view Trollope came more and more to dislike, and *Barchester Towers*, famous as it is, is not very Trollopean: its humour is often very broad indeed; its villains are pretty clearly marked; its moral dilemmas are muted and undramatic.

It is only with *Doctor Thorne* and *Framley Parsonage* that Trollope found his characteristic manner: a complex blend of the comedy of manners tradition he found in Jane Austen, the great nineteenth-century realist tradition, and the particular Trollopean complications of the disrupting, sly narrator and the contradictory subplots. It is in this Barchester series – *The Warden, Barchester Towers, Doctor Thorne, Framley Parsonage, The Small House at Allington*, and *The Last Chronicle of Barset* – that Trollope is able to find adequate space for exploring his truly radical distrust of plot and his reliance on an open, expansive exploration of situation and character.

While Trollope was for a time reluctant to include *The Small House* in the series, Allington not being in Barsetshire proper, he was clearly right to yield to the pressure of friends and publishers and put it there; for all six novels share the same basic pattern: an invasion, always from London, is launched against a small rural community and its values. The clash is between a world settled, conservative, easy in its morals and practices and a newer, more progressive, ruthless, and subtly inhuman one. The pattern is an ancient one reflected in the pastoral and its recall of a simpler, more stable world, one more kindly, if, in Trollope

at least, possibly more corrupt. While Trollope does not idealize the fading world of old feudal England, neither does he regard with unalloyed delight the new, hasty, brash arena that he figures in London. He watches as the new reformers, usually well-meaning and armed with abstract and unassailable principles, spread out from London into the unsuspecting and virtually unarmed country. The early London Invaders, John Bold in *The Warden* and Mr. Slope in *Barchester Towers*, are energetic and, in an abstract sense, often right. They cause great furore, pangs of conscience among the natives; but in the end they are dismissed: John Bold conveniently dies and Mr. Slope is sent packing. By the time of *Framley Parsonage* there is hardly a threat and the pastoral world seems secure. The enemy is not only beaten back but forced to yield territory and rights. The novel ends with a perfect riot of marriages, and the assurances to us and to the pastoral world are very nearly absolute.

But in *The Small House* they are altogether gone. At a point that looks like a comic climax, the hero, John Eames, saves the Lord De Guest from an attack by a bull and wins the Lord's powerful support and friendship. The Lord is a great believer in pastoral values and in his own shepherding powers: 'Guided by faith in his own teaching the earl had taught himself to look upon his bull as a large, horned, innocent lamb of the flock.' The wonderful ability to deny empirical fact is not shaken by this experience at all: 'The gentlest creature alive; he's a lamb generally – just like a lamb. Perhaps he saw my red pocket-handkerchief.' Johnny thus seems to be protecting the latest chief shepherd, who will now confer pastoral blessings on him. Indeed, that is Lord De Guest's firm intention, and he goes to work with an open hand and a very warm heart to arrange the proper marriages and secure the proper alignments to support the old values. But none of it comes off. Suddenly the magic power is gone, and the major values are unrealized.

As a result, this novel is far and away the darkest of the series, so dark that it has sometimes been dismissed by lovers of Trollope who expected an uninterrupted idyllic

series. Adolphus Crosbie is the first really powerful invader from London, and the pastoral world seems to collapse before him. The degeneration of the aristocracy, that is to say, the growth in power of liberal aristocrats, which had seemed to be checked in *Framley Parsonage*, is now out of control. The De Courcy people here operate like a nineteenth-century version of the Mafia, with equal power and equal terror. They tease Crosbie, whom they snatch hold of very quickly, about 'going about with a crook' at Allington, and soon teach him to distrust the comic and pastoral values. And he proceeds nearly to smash that world. It is scarcely redeeming that he is to some extent smashed himself.

In *The Small House*, as never before, the pastoral seems a small island of virtue surrounded by conditions which are, in their essence, incapable of resolution. The paradigmatic activity in this new ironic world is Mrs. Roper's. She runs a 'genteel' boarding house for miscellaneous sorts in London: 'Poor woman! Few positions in life could be harder to bear than hers! To be ever tugging at others for money that they could not pay; to desire respectability for its own sake but to be driven to confess that it was a luxury beyond her means; to put up with disreputable belongings for the sake of lucre, and then not to get the lucre.' Her daughter Amelia expresses even more succinctly the dominant and pointless immorality: she says she has been a knave and a fool, and 'both for nothing'.

In such a world nothing seems stable or connected. True virtue, therefore, is unsupported and can depend only upon itself. It is thus very likely to appear or to become perverse. It has none of the communal reliance which could make that virtue lie easily, unconsciously with the virtuous man. When, therefore, it is clutched firmly, as it must be, it becomes abstracted and unnaturally firm, removed from the rhythms of change and delicate modification that control comedy. Those, then, who would in a better world be chief actors in a natural comedy are now seen specifically as unnatural. Thus the problem of the novel is finally the problem of Lily Dale and the peculiar, twisted psychological position she finds herself in. At one point the narrator com-

ments that 'it is the view which the mind takes of a thing which creates the sorrow that arises from it'. Lily's own view may seem so outrageously arbitrary that we often want to shake her. The temptation to attack her is almost irresistible. As we have seen, Trollope himself found it more than he could resist. But he also saw that her brilliantly portrayed suspension from the natural currents of comedy was at the heart of the book. There is no easy explanation for Lily's state in psychological terms. That she is attracted to pain is certain, but, as in Squire Dale's case, that attraction is partly based on a certain and generally accurate expectation of pain in any case. Neither Lily nor Trollope is purely masochistic or perverse, or, if we choose to think they are, a perception of the condition is less important than an understanding of its causes.

Lily is not the only character who is firm unto perversity. Firmness is a characteristic of all those whom we are asked to respect in this novel. 'When did you ever know Christopher Dale change his mind?' asks Mrs. Hearn. Or any other Dale, for that matter. The theme of constancy is kept alive by frequent reiteration and by parodies in such people as the Hon. John De Courcy, who declares, 'they'll find no change in me', and in his sister, Amelia Gazebee, who has 'done her duty in her new sphere of life with some constancy and a fixed purpose'. The fixed purpose is something close to legal gangsterism, but she is constant to it. In its serious reflections, such constancy represents the last grim stand of pastoral values. It is the necessary reaction to the fluidity of all bonds. The insistence on a constancy at all costs is the inevitable and very dangerous last assertion of permanence in an unstable world. The Dales and those about them have resisted the movements of the world at large, but their very resistance creates their vulnerability. The attempt to retain innocence in a fallen world leads finally to a mad fixity that displaces them from the natural world they sought to inhabit. It renders them unable to join the supple currents of a flexible nature: 'Was she not a Dale? And when did a Dale change his mind?'

Ironically, this is said of Lily's sister Bell, who is one Dale

who does, in fact, change – and change radically. She is rewarded for her change by being allowed to participate in the novel's only fully comic action. Other plots move toward comedy, but none is allowed to reach its destination, and Lily's plot is derailed entirely. The basic rhetorical strategy here is to play off the lack of fulfilment and resolution in Lily's life and others' against very powerful currents of natural comedy. The novel makes us see clearly as we did in *Framley Parsonage* that a comic resolution is demanded, but here one is never presented. Everything in the novel moves toward comedy except the action. The major tension is thus established and the appropriate rhetoric of frustration produced. The formal conflict is arranged mostly through the intricate structural parallels in the four main actions: Bell's rejection of Bernard Dale and final marriage to Dr. Crofts, the movement of Mrs. Dale and the Squire toward greater understanding, the growth of John Eames into manhood, and the story of Lily and Crosbie.

The first plot is by far the least noticeable. Bell rejects the arranged love set up for her with the wooden Bernard, who 'had his feelings well under control' so well that his tenacity in clinging to her seems entirely impersonal, a light parody of the twisted constancy elsewhere. Bell has plenty of firmness of her own: 'If there was anything in this world as to which Isabella Dale was quite certain, it was this – that she was not in love with Dr. Crofts.' But of course that is what she is – in love with Dr. Crofts. Nature is allowed this one victory over unnatural, self-punishing rigidity. Such a triumph shows us what should, but does not, happen elsewhere.

One level more prominent but also one level more complex is the comic rejuvenation of Squire Christopher Dale. The Squire is one of those Trollope characters who is introduced with a long list of faults and a very short list of virtues, often even made up of spillovers from the vices: an idle man does not, at any rate, commit violent acts; a wrathful man is not idle. But there is always a quiet climax to such lists that renders the other traits superficial: 'And, moreover, our Mr. Christopher Dale was a gentleman.' We recognize immediately the signal intended here. Mr. Christopher Dale is the

moral touchstone of the novel; he is a gentleman, and, moreover, his house is possessed of that Trollopean emblem of approval: Tudor windows. The symbolism is quite unmistakable. Dale is concerned with the future of his estate, the continuity of family, and he therefore becomes deeply involved in the affairs of young people. All this sounds like a score of Trollope's other secret heroes, representatives of the conscience of the county. Here, however, the Squire lives in constant expectation of being thwarted. No one even pays attention to what he says. He is misunderstood and alone, cut off both from his fellow squires and from his tenants, really from the entire world: 'It makes me feel that the world is changed, and that it is no longer worth a man's while to live in it.' He could stand that feeling – it might even grow into the sort of happy grievance Trollope's Tories love – but he is not able to live easily with the hostility of his own family, his sister-in-law and nieces at the Small House: 'You and the girls have been living here, close to me, for – how many years is it now? – and during all those years there has grown up for me no kindly feeling. Do you suppose that I am a fool and do not know?'

Mrs. Dale understands the full force of his complaint and begins to understand the full warmth of his heart. In doing so, she begins to come to life herself. She had vowed to 'bury herself in order that her daughters might live well above ground', another unnatural resolution virtue is forced to make, one the narrator flatly says is 'wrong'. Mrs. Dale secretly thinks that it is wrong too, finds no masochistic pleasure in self-denial, and frets about getting back into life. The pressure of this romantic and comic movement is so great that we are likely not to attend to the Squire's protestations: 'What, begin again at near seventy! No, Mary, there is no more beginning again for me.' But, though he does manage to come more to the surface, offering Lily money and working actively in the conspiracy to help her, his rebirth is never complete. He never entails the estate or arranges a marriage for Bernard and is troubled by his failure to provide for the property. Correspondingly, his psychological growth is also suspended and the narrator can only

say at the end, 'he was a man for whom we may predicate some gentle sadness and continued despondency to the end of his life's chapter.'

But the Squire has a much more hopeful counterpart, the Earl De Guest, who refuses to give up on the pastoral world. When Dale tells him that the time for renewal 'has never come to you and me', his friend vigorously denies it: '"Yes it has", said the earl, with no slight touch of feeling and even of romance in what he said. "We have retricked our beams in our own ways, and our lives have not been desolate."' The similarity of the earl's life to that of Dale is stressed, but the earl lives in a different world altogether. He is purely of the country, living with a cosy disdain for London. He has never abandoned the comic premises his life has, on the whole, affirmed. He was poor, but now he is comfortable. He has, unlike Dale, solidified the estate and become a part of it: 'He knew every acre of his own estate, and every tree upon it.' Because he believes so firmly in innocent and beneficent change, he can himself practise a healthy constancy, not the one that is steadfast to pain but one that is loyal to happy alterations, satisfactory endings. He is, potentially, another Prospero, and when Johnny Eames saves him from the bull – more precisely, saves him from having to readjust his principles – the earl vows to support his young friend with all his comic constancy: 'Now, good-night, my dear fellow, and remember this – when I say a thing I mean it. I think I may boast that I never yet went back from my word.'

Johnny is the perfect natural hero: generous, open, and imaginative. He is Lord De Guest in an earlier stage of development, as the earl clearly recognizes. Johnny's faults are purely those which easy, natural education will remedy. He comes straight out of an irresistible tradition that rewards the gentle, the meek, the good-hearted. But here the tradition is resisted, just at the last. Johnny's education is, of course, conducted along the standard lines. He learns the first lesson of a Trollope gentleman, his comparative insignificance: 'I made a fool of myself, and have been a fool all along. I am foolish now to tell you this, but I cannot help it.' His insight and his impulsiveness are, according to the tradi-

tion, sure signs that in the very process of acknowledging himself to be a fool, saying so because he 'cannot help it', he is actively demonstrating his wisdom and his good heart. He can, therefore, survive a rough training period in London, the territory of the enemy. He plunges directly into a hellish world. There everyone struggles to hold on to connections, to bind people by force to vows that are always being broken. Every motive seems perverse, truly as masochistic as poor Cradell's 'moth-like weakness' for Mrs. Lupex's candle. Trollope specifically refers to this period as John's initiation and makes it seem all the more real by making it so very unsentimental. John escapes without cost to himself, but others are made to pay, especially the pathetic Amelia Roper: 'But the world had been hard to her; knocking her about hither and thither unmercifully; threatening, as it now threatened, to take from her what few good things she enjoyed.' John tries to slither out of this fluid world of the boarding-house with a few platitudes to Amelia about how it is all for the best, how 'we should never be happy'. But Amelia's startling response brings into focus for a moment the dark world from which for so many there is no escape: 'I should be happy – very happy indeed.' But 'John Eames becomes a man' and manages to 'come out of the fire comparatively unharmed'. He has so much on his side: 'You have everybody in your favour – the squire, her mother, and all.' The 'all' includes here not only the earl, who is speaking, but the whole tradition of romantic comedy. But though he can thrash the villain and win the heart of Lady Julia De Guest, Johnny cannot win the heart of Lily. The energies of the tradition are thus allowed full rein and are suddenly blocked, to our great discomfort.

Trollope's narrator calls attention to this countering of tradition at the very end of the novel with a mock apology: 'I feel that I have been in fault in giving such prominence to a hobbledehoy, and that I should have told my story better had I brought Mr. Crosbie more conspicuously forward on my canvas. He at any rate has gotten to himself a wife – as a hero always should do.' Crosbie, who is, the narrator insists, 'not altogether a villain', gets what he per-

haps deserves – nothing at all. He is punished somewhat by his marriage, but his wife soon flees, and he is liberated from definite punishment into a more appropriate emptiness. The form properly resists either punishing or rewarding him. Here, as elsewhere, resolution is denied. The novel makes it difficult to respond to Crosbie in any simple way. Though a genuine scoundrel, he really never meant harm. And he is a victim of Courcy Castle, which 'had tended to destroy all that was good and true within him.' Ironically, he finds it much easier to break the oath he has made to the constant Lily than that he has made to the slippery Courcy clan. There is a much subtler sense too in which we recognize that he is running to the Courcy people to escape another kind of victimization from Lily. After the engagement, Lily puts a sort of pressure on him that makes him feel caged and on display: 'And then she exacted from him the repetition of the promise which he had so often given her.' Surely this is Amelia Roper on a more advanced or just less self-conscious level. Lily throws herself, as it were, into Crosbie's arms and then looks up beaming, 'Yes, your own, to take when you please, and leave untaken while you please; and as much your own in one way as in the other.' He is understandably a bit uncomfortable with the burden and the sly trap it creates for him; the possession threatens to possess the owner. Lily says she desires to 'do everything for you. I sometimes think that a very poor man's wife is the happiest, because she does do everything.' There is a desire for power here that exposes how much of her excessive self-effacement, her exaggerated submission to Crosbie, is really a cry of triumph. Crosbie hears the bray and retreats. There is, then, a cutting sarcasm at work when Lily's sentimental and deliberately cute resolutions to punish herself for forgetting how much Crosbie is giving up by marrying her are echoed seriously a page or two later by Crosbie, who comes to believe her. Perhaps he *is* giving up too much.

But Lily's sentimental, mock desire for punishment becomes, in her painful humiliation, genuine perversity. She recognizes that she can discover no reason for her tenacity. At first she declares, 'I believe, in my heart, that he still loves

me', but her firmness is not shaken by clear evidence that he does not. Like a parody of Lord De Guest, she turns away from all evidence and embraces a world of absolutisms: 'I have made up my mind about it all clearly and with an absolute certainty.' Lily is not, then, just a masochist but a sentimental idealist, one who, unlike her sister, prefers novels whose capacity to minister to wish-fulfilment is greatest. Her pride contributes to her firmness, too, but Lily represents the attempt of the pressured pastoral world to reach out desperately for some stability. The great agent of comic fulfilment, Lord De Guest, says at the end that time will cure all, that Lily, like other girls, will change in accord with the gentle pressures of love, sex, growth. But the earl is wrong, and his hope for an innocent comic world where all bulls are really lambs is never realized.

JAMES R. KINCAID

NOTE ON THE TEXT

The Small House at Allington was first published serially in the *Cornhill Magazine*, between September 1862 and April 1864, and was first issued in book form in March 1864. The text reproduced here is based on that of the hardback World's Classic edition, first published by Oxford University Press in 1939. *The Small House* was not included by Trollope himself in the Barsetshire series of novels, but since it deals with many of the same characters it has generally been adopted as the fifth of the six *Chronicles of Barsetshire*.