

The Penguin



English Library

ANTHONY TROLLOPE

CAN YOU FORGIVE HER?



PENGUIN ENGLISH LIBRARY

CAN YOU FORGIVE HER?

ANTHONY TROLLOPE

Stephen Wall is a Fellow of Keble College Oxford, and lectures in English at the University of Oxford. He is co-editor of *Essays in Criticism*, and has edited the Penguin Critical Anthology on Charles Dickens.

ANTHONY TROLLOPE
CAN YOU FORGIVE HER?

*Edited with an introduction
and notes by Stephen Wall*



PENGUIN BOOKS

Penguin Books Ltd, Harmondsworth, Middlesex, England
Penguin Books, 625 Madison Avenue, New York, New York 10022, U.S.A.
Penguin Books Australia Ltd, Ringwood, Victoria, Australia
Penguin Books Canada Ltd, 2801 John Street, Markham, Ontario, Canada L3R 1B4
Penguin Books (N.Z.) Ltd, 182-190 Wairau Road, Auckland 10, New Zealand

First published in 1864-5
Published in the Penguin English Library 1972
Reprinted 1974, 1978

Introduction and notes copyright © Stephen Wall, 1972
All rights reserved

Made and printed in Great Britain by
Cox & Wyman Ltd, London, Reading and Fakenham
Set in Linotype Juliana

Except in the United States of America,
this book is sold subject to the condition
that it shall not, by way of trade or otherwise,
be lent, re-sold, hired out, or otherwise circulated
without the publisher's prior consent in any form of
binding or cover other than that in which it is
published and without a similar condition
including this condition being imposed
on the subsequent purchaser

Contents

Introduction	7
A Note on the Text	27
Bibliography	29
CAN YOU FORGIVE HER?	31
Notes	831

Introduction

Can You Forgive Her? begins the series of novels which contain the most sustained exercise of Trollope's imagination. During its course the marriage of Plantagenet Palliser and Lady Glencora, at first sight so shaky, becomes established firmly enough for Trollope to be able to develop it – intermittently but with complete confidence – throughout the so-called political novels which he was subsequently to write. The reader who follows the history of the Pallisers through *Phineas Finn* (serialized 1867–9), *The Eustace Diamonds* (1871–3), *Phineas Redux* (1873–4), *The Prime Minister* (1875–6), and *The Duke's Children* (1879–80) will have traced the course of one of the most sensitively presented and profoundly understood relationships in nineteenth-century fiction. Palliser himself appears as a secondary character in *The Small House at Allington* (serialized 1862–4), where his affair – if that is not too warm a word for what never appears as more than a frigid predilection – with Lady Dumbello is treated as semi-comic relief to the main business of the novel, the loves of Lily Dale, Adolphus Crosbie and Johnny Eames. *Can You Forgive Her?*, begun only six months after *The Small House* was finished, develops Plantagenet into a character to be taken seriously; by the end of the novel the basis for Trollope's claim that 'Plantagenet Palliser stands more firmly on the ground than any other personage I have created' becomes apparent.

This, at any rate, is what Trollope thought when he wrote his autobiography, in the winter of 1875–6; he began the final episodes in Palliser's career (described in *The Duke's Children*) immediately after finishing his memoir. The character was still much with him. Indeed the series of novels which *Can You Forgive Her?* initiates could not have been sustained without this sort of continuous presence in Trollope's consciousness of their principal personages. Trollope's remarks in chapter 10 of the *Autobiography* are a moving indication of both the intensity and the continuity

of his imaginative life: 'By no amount of description or asseveration could I succeed in making any reader understand how much these characters (the Pallisers) and their belongings have been to me in my latter life . . .' It is sad that testimonies of this kind, which occur several times in the *Autobiography*, have attracted less attention than Trollope's apparently suicidal revelations about his working methods – his early rising, his writing against the clock, his habit of starting the next novel as soon as its predecessor was finished, and so on. Trollope could hardly have written so continuously and so consistently had his inner life not been so active and so accessible. It was rooted in the fantasies he evolved as a protection from the miseries of his boyhood and adolescence: 'I learned in this way to maintain an interest in a fictitious story, to dwell on a work created by my own imagination, and to live in a world altogether outside the world of my own material life.' In Trollope's view the novelist can only make his characters real if

he knows those fictitious personages himself, and he can never know them unless he can live with them in the full reality of established intimacy. They must be with him as he lies down to sleep, and as he wakes from his dreams. He must learn to hate and to love them. He must argue with them, quarrel with them, forgive them, and even submit to them. He must know of them whether they be cold-blooded or passionate, whether true or false, and how far true, and how far false. The depth and the breadth, and the narrowness and the shallowness of each, should be clear to him. [*Autobiography*, chapter 12]

Trollope's extraordinary achievement in maintaining and deepening his knowledge of the Pallisers over the best part of fifteen years was made possible by just the kind of knowledge and intimacy that he here describes.

But the story of Alice Vavasor – she whom the novel's title asks us to forgive – had also been in his mind for a long time. Trollope's first attempt to present her situation had been in a play written thirteen years earlier, in 1850, called *The Noble Jilt*. At that time he had just written a historical novel of very little interest entitled *La Vendée*; the success of *The Warden* was still to come. The comedy was partly in prose and partly in blank verse; Trollope

Introduction

sent it to George Bartley, a well-known actor who was a friend of his mother's. Bartley's reasoned rejection of the piece was felt by Trollope as 'a blow in the face', although he fully accepted its justice. That he should not, after this, have abandoned the play's material altogether, is a good illustration of the remarkable tenacity of Trollope's imagination, once it had grasped something that seemed to him to be true. It is clear that at the heart of *The Noble Jilt* there was for him a human reality that he felt deserved expression, one way or another.

The correspondences between the play and the novel are considerable: the play's heroine jilts her impeccable lover, as does Alice, not because she doesn't love him but because she feels he will be too contemplative for her active spirit; she is encouraged to renew her relationship with an old lover more engaged in public life – as Alice does with George Vavasor – by his sister; he lets her down, and the heroine returns after much self-criticism to what in *Can You Forgive Her?* is called the worthy man. There is also a comic sub-plot involving a widowed aunt, hesitating between a substantial burgomaster and a swaggering captain. These become in the novel Cheesacre, the farmer from Oileymead, and the sold-out Captain Bellfield. Many of the widow's characteristics – her frequent references to her departed husband and her flagrant use of mourning, for example – also survive. The major difference between the play and the novel is that the former is historical and the latter contemporary. Like *La Vendée*, *The Noble Jilt* is set in the 1790s, and the action is bound up with the after-effects of the French Revolution; *Can You Forgive Her?* is a novel of the present day.

Trollope's gifts were essentially for the modern and the familiar; unlike some of his contemporaries, he did not tend to place his stories in a period about a generation back from the time of writing. The fidelity with which he reproduced normal life was sometimes compared by early reviewers to the then relatively new art of photography. They recognized what Henry James called Trollope's 'complete appreciation of the usual'. As James said in a notice of *The Belton Estate*, the novel which followed *Can You Forgive Her?*, the characters in it 'do, in short, very much as the

reader is doing out of it'. This realism is particularly apparent in Trollope's dialogue, which, at its best, uses a selection of the language really used by men with great expressiveness. The blank verse and period setting of *The Noble Jilt* cut him off from these resources. Any psychological truth Trollope may have perceived in the play's situation is unable to get past the obstructions which the diction places in its way. In this extract Margaret, the heroine, is rejecting the 'worthy man', Count Upsel:

Sir, I know I've wronged you much,
deceived you past all pardon, injured you
most foully. 'Twas in loving you I did so;
'twas when I took the hand you proffered me,
and made the promise which I now must break.

(Exit Margaret)

UPSEL:

I am amazed, and beyond my wont
put past all sober thinking. What, not mine!
Not be my wife, my friend, my soul, my all!
Hearts then are naught, and nothing can be trusted.
The earth is all one hell, peopled with angels;
the fairest are the furthest fallen from heaven.
Why, she has sworn she loved me, till her vows
were countless as the stars; has hung on me,
as tho' she drew her life from out mine eyes;
has clung around me with such pretty love,
as well becomes a maiden bride betrothed,
but else were lewdness and rank harlotry.

[Act II, Scene Two]

Not much can be conveyed in the broken-down and diluted Shakespearianism of this idiom.

But by the time he came to write *Can You Forgive Her?* Trollope had had ten years of literary recognition and had published ten novels, including all the Barsetshire series except *The Last Chronicle of Barset*. According to the *National Review* for January 1863, Trollope had become 'almost a national institution'. 'So great is his popularity, so familiar are his chief characters to his

Introduction

countrymen, so wide-spread is the interest felt about his tales, that they necessarily form part of the common stock-in-trade with which the social commerce of the day is carried on . . . The characters are public property.' As Trollope moves from the relatively restricted scope and comparatively immature technique of the Barset novels to the greater world and larger possibilities of the Palliser series, he is clearly a writer in command of his manner and in possession of his audience. It is an indication of his position that he gained £3,525 by *Can You Forgive Her?*, the largest sum he ever received for a novel.

The title of the novel is itself in an odd way an indication of his confidence. It is as if he felt he could ask the question because he had himself become clear about the answer.

But can you forgive her, delicate reader? Or am I asking the question too early in my story? For myself, I have forgiven her. The story of her struggles has been present to my mind for many years, – and I have learned to think that even this offence against womanhood may, with deep repentance, be forgiven. And you also must forgive her before we close the book, or else my story will have been told amiss. [Chapter 37]

To a present-day audience, of course, Alice's 'offence against womanhood' is not likely to seem very dreadful, and even some of the first reviewers of the novel felt that Trollope was fussing rather. But to be called a jilt seems to have been a hard thing for a proper-minded mid-Victorian woman to take, and – however Alice's conduct is viewed – it must be conceded that she behaves badly. Even if it might now be felt that the 'penance' she is made to undergo at the end of the novel is a bit much, it is clear that she has made two bad mistakes – breaking off her engagement to John Grey, and re-engaging herself to George Vavasor – which (given the moral tendency of mid-Victorian fiction) she ought to pay for.

But if we are to 'forgive' Alice as Trollope asks, it will not be because we are satisfied that moral justice has been meted out to her but because we have come to understand why she acted as she did, why she was – given her nature – bound to act as she did. For Trollope was, as usual, much more interested in the particular case than the general principle. Any authorial comments that he

makes about the moral life and social convention tend to be of the kind illustrated in the second paragraph of chapter 11:

People often say that marriage is an important thing, and should be much thought of in advance, and marrying people are cautioned that there are many who marry in haste and repent at leisure. I am not sure, however, that marriage may not be pondered over too much...

The tone is a curious but typical mixture of the tentative and the bluff, and the attitude that emerges is of commonsense rescued from prejudice by observation. The conclusions are not insensitive, but neither are they strikingly intelligent; the generalizing gravities that give such weight to George Eliot's authorial voice are not found in Trollope's style, and he did not try to supply them. In fact, Trollope was a devoted friend of George Eliot, and his attitude to her work was deeply respectful; he made few claims for the durability of his own fiction, but a letter written to George Eliot just before he began *Can You Forgive Her?* assures her that *Romola* 'will live after you. It will be given to very few latter-day novels to have any such life'. Nevertheless Trollope did feel that George Eliot was apt to write over her readers' heads, and part of the conventionality of the authorial comments in his novels must be attributed to his respect – for it was a respect rather than a subservience – for the feelings of his public.

Trollope, then, has no intention of challenging the moral code which made the question whether Alice Vavasor can be forgiven a real one. Nor does he underline in a less orthodox but no less rigorous way the remorseless moral consequences of wrong actions, as George Eliot might have done. Alice is really let off very lightly: apart from a few lectures from Lady Midlothian and some other tickings-off, she is rewarded in the end for her errors by a husband who comes round to doing the very thing that he earlier enraged her by refusing to consider. John Grey stands for Parliament – and under much more favourable auspices than were ever available to George Vavasor. However, what happens to Alice *in the end* is not what interests Trollope most; indeed, the final chapters of many of his novels are as predictable, and one might almost say as

Introduction

perfunctory, as they are in this case. What, surely, kept Alice's situation in Trollope's mind for so long was not the way in which she finally resolved her dilemma, but what it was in her nature that precipitated it.

Like an interestingly large number of Trollope's central characters, Alice is a vacillator. The question why Trollope was so fascinated by people who change their minds is a large one, but it is obvious that to follow the processes by which a person first comes to, and then reverses, a decision must be to discover a good deal about their personality. The reasons for vacillation will vary according to the individual case. Alice's changes of mind might seem, in summary, very similar to those gone through by Clara Amedroz, the heroine of *The Belton Estate*, which immediately followed *Can You Forgive Her?* Clara hesitates between a physically urgent cousin who is a gentleman farmer, and a correct, eligible, but cold M.P.; it is clear that she really loves the former, but she feels that she ought to marry the latter – a decision she later regrets and retracts. But the situation of the later novel is only superficially like that of the earlier; in fact, the experience offered by the two books is quite different, partly because the two heroines are quite different. And it is in what makes the difference that the fictional interest lies.

Although Trollope provides some descriptions of Alice's temperament and suggests some of the factors by which she has been conditioned, it is important to pay as much, if not more, attention to what is dramatically shown as to what is analytically asserted. 'How am I to analyse her mind, and make her thoughts and feelings intelligible?' Trollope exclaims in chapter 37 – as if he felt he lacked the vocabulary to describe adequately the internal conflict he envisages so clearly. At any rate, it becomes plain early on that as soon as Alice makes a decision she feels trapped by it. Her engagement to John Grey is so eminently satisfactory – not least because she really is attracted by him – that she feels a perverse necessity to resist it. The factors involved in this recalcitrance are various and – as is so often the case in Trollope's most sensitive portrayals – the motives behind it are not only mixed but inconsistent. One source of resentment against the admirable Grey is

the feeling that he is too admirable. His reply to her letter announcing her proposed trip to Switzerland in the company of her cousin George could not be more proper – ‘she knew that he was noble and a gentleman to the last drop of his blood’ – but in Alice ‘there was almost a feeling of disappointment’ that he has behaved so correctly (chapter 3). During the scene between them in chapter 11, which takes place after she has asked to be released from her engagement, Alice wishes that Grey’s self-control were not so great; she is equally infuriated and mortified by his composure in chapter 63. All the same, his assumption of mastery, even his imperturbability, also attract her, and eventually in Switzerland she has to give in to their sustained pressure.

Another apparent source of dissatisfaction is Grey’s quietism. The noiseless tenor of a country life near Cambridge is not what Alice thinks she wants – even though her present life in London, with a father who takes little interest in and spends little time with her, could in effect hardly be more retired. And she dislikes Grey’s assumption that his life will suit her, just as she resents the conventional social judgement that it ought to suit her. She has the understandable feeling that her individuality is not being acknowledged. It is not a question of woman’s rights, however. Trollope brings up the question only to put it on one side: a ‘flock of learned ladies’, bold enough to ask the question what should a woman do with her life, are alluded to briefly in chapter 11, but a consciously adopted feminist position is not an effective element in Alice’s motivation. Her feeling that she would like to identify herself with a cause, her willingness to support the career of George Vavasor, are as much symptoms of self-negation as of self-assertion. Apart from a general inclination towards Radicalism, the most obviously militant force in the established politics of the period, she does not seem to spend her abundant leisure in the serious study of public issues and events; it is more given over to morbid self-analysis. When she is introduced to the world of wealth and power at Matching Priory, she is too socially inhibited to make very much of an opportunity that a more committed woman would surely have grasped – although she stands up to Palliser vigorously enough when her integrity is impugned.

Introduction

Part of Alice's difficulties come from her tendency to be attracted by possibilities which frighten her when they threaten to become realities. Her restlessness and what she diagnoses as frustrated ambition easily attach themselves to George Vavasor, whose energy and aggressiveness she is encouraged by his sister Kate to see as part of a heroic struggle to make his way in the world. But when George, not unreasonably, wants from Alice some sign that her renewal of her engagement to him means a revival of her physical feelings towards him, he is refused it. The latent sense of violence which George carries about with him (and of which his facial scar is the rather obvious signification) excites Alice as long as it remains latent, but it horrifies her when it surfaces into his attack on her in chapter 46. One is bound to wonder whether Alice's troubles are partly due to sexual timidity and an instinct for self-preservation. Grey over-awes her physically: 'It was the beauty of his mouth, beauty which comprised firmness within itself, that made Alice afraid of him' (chapter 11). However, she feels something like panic when she contemplates the physical relationship with George that she finds herself committed to:

Was she able to give herself bodily, – body and soul, as she said aloud in her solitary agony, – to a man she did not love? Must she submit to his caresses, lie on his bosom, – turn herself warmly to his kisses? 'No,' she said, 'no,' – speaking audibly as she walked about the room; 'no; – it was not in my bargain: I never meant it.' [Chapter 37]

She is perfectly prepared to let George have her money as long as he doesn't touch her, as indeed a substitute for touching her. Given the conventions of fiction in his day, and given too the innate delicacy of his own mind, Trollope cannot be very explicit about such things, but the ungovernable attractions and repulsions of sexual feeling operate powerfully in his novels, even if actual references to them are often as restrained as they are in these passages.

Alice's tendency to shrink from experience is partly rationalized (as we might now say) by her tendency to self-punishment. It is as if she 'pays' for her independence by self-accusation. Going

back to Grey after the Vavasor episode is even more difficult for her than throwing him over in the first place, because she will be making herself happy in a way that she feels she does not deserve. As her reflections recorded in chapter 70 indicate, the initial argument that she was not fit for Grey must apply even more when she has added the insult of her engagement to George to the insult of jilting him. But her motives for resisting Grey for so long are, as usual, mixed and confused, as Trollope makes clear in one of his more searching pieces of analysis:

But there still clung to her what I fear we must call a perverseness of obstinacy, a desire to maintain the resolution she had made, – a wish that she might be allowed to undergo the punishment she had deserved. She was as a prisoner who would fain cling to his prison after pardon has reached him, because he is conscious that the pardon is undeserved. And it may be that there was still left within her bosom some remnant of that feeling of rebellion which his masterful spirit had ever produced in her. He was so imperious in his tranquillity, he argued his question of love with such a manifest preponderance of right on his side, that she had always felt that to yield to him would be to confess the omnipotence of his power. [Chapter 74]

As Trollope dryly concludes a few pages later, Alice grudgingly regarded her final happiness as an ‘enforced necessity’.

The place where Alice first rebels against Grey is the balcony of the hotel at Basle, and she capitulates to him at the same place (chapters 5 and 75). It is when she is on her Swiss holiday with George and Kate Vavasor and later when she stays at the Vavasor home in the Lake District that Alice feels the appeal of romance, an appeal which is not exerted by the idea of domesticity with John Grey amidst the boring countryside of Cambridgeshire, in Trollope’s roundly expressed view (chapter 10) the least attractive county in England. What she has to come round to is the idea that George’s ‘romance’ is a specious and self-interested imitation and that underneath the gentlemanly decorum of Grey’s manner lurks the real thing. George is prepared to exploit the romantic tendencies in Alice and in his sister but he has no belief in any mode of conduct that is not purely opportunist; John Grey seems