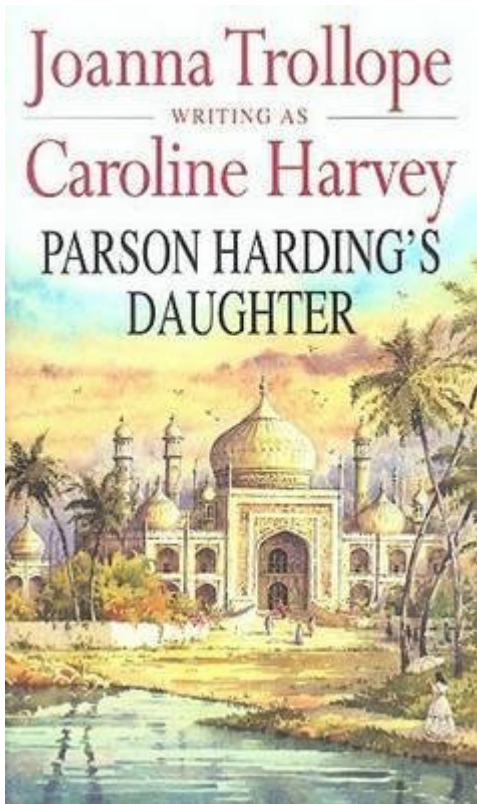


Parson Harding's Daughter

by Joanna Trollope writing as Caroline Harvey



The heroine of this story is Caroline Harding, the rather plain daughter of Reverend Henry Harding. Bullied by her elder sister, condescended to by Lady Lennox, the local “gentry”, and nervous in the company of her equals, she is only conscious of a stubborn pride. She is not however nervous when visiting the poor and ailing, which is where her forward thinking, intelligence, great generosity, and fortitude shine through.

Caroline demonstrates her courage by attending the villagers in their damp cottages, even when they are ill with scarlet fever. She is rewarded with praise from the local doctor when she helps to cure rickets in some of the young children.

“She was soon able to accept praise without blushing, though it never delighted her as much as her own sense of usefulness did”.

However, her sister Eleanor warns her that she might bring the fever home. When her father does succumb to the disease, she feels that she has inadvertently killed him, and this opinion is underlined by her sister’s constant criticism. She feels that her pride in her achievements has been her downfall.

Life at the vicarage becomes intolerable for Caroline. She is in a deep depression, thinking that her pride in her good works has partly been responsible for the loss of her father and Eleanor constantly criticises her every action, complains about her inaction but never gives her any useful thing to do.

Eventually she snaps.

“Nobody shall preach to me any longer...I will not do the will of those who are merely attempting to exercise their petty power!”

At this low point in her life Caroline receives a proposal of marriage from Johnny Gates, engineered by Lady Lennox, who is scheming to keep Johnny’s inheritance for her own children. When she was 18, Caroline had fallen in love with the young rogue Johnny, who had been brought up by the Lennoxs after his parents had died. Johnny was sent off to India to work for the East India Company to keep him out of trouble and to mend his ways. He had been engaged to Caroline before he left but over the next 8 years, she had heard nothing from him.

Caroline feels that the only way she can ever not be beholden to anyone is to accept Johnny’s proposal, as there is no useful purpose she can achieve by remaining at the vicarage. She sails

to India and on the voyage, her good sense and fortitude enable her to make two firm friends, both who support her in her later hardships in India. The lovely Isobel Grant and the wonderfully old-fashioned and gallant General North.

Johnny has not mended his ways. Caroline finds him on the quayside in Calcutta, a man who has, through an excess of drink, food and sex become;
“A stout, florid, overdressed man in a wig like a cauliflower, and a coat that became summer skies but not his particular girth or complexion”.

Because of her pride Caroline refuses the offers of help from Isobel and General North and instead goes to stay with Bella Rathbone who is apparently one of the most promiscuous women in Calcutta. Bella has a heart of gold, is a great comfort to a number of young men and, luckily for her, has a very unobservant husband.

Trollope gives us a real feeling of how the strangeness of India must have felt to young Caroline, fresh from a sheltered life in a country parsonage. The brilliant colours of the vegetation, the heat, the dust, the smells, the excesses of the British population and the subtle way in which the servants exploit their British rulers. Our heroine treats the Indians in much the way she had treated the poor in her parish in England and thus reaches an understanding of the locals which appears to be ignored by the general expatriate populace. A verbal picture is painted of a corrupt society where no one does anything unselfishly and everyone is trying to rip off everyone else, whether the clerks defrauding the East India company, the servants ripping off the masters, the masters exploiting the servants and the fashionable trying to rise in society by trampling on others and ruining reputations with gossip.

Caroline feels that, despite his unsuitability, she has no option but to marry Johnny, as she is without money, or any means of support and her pride will not allow her to take up Isobel's offer of a place as her companion and friend. Johnny and Caroline reach an agreement whereby if they marry, she will be a housekeeper for him and he can do as he pleases as long as he never shares her bed. He turns out to be a brute, hitting his wife, never giving her any money, and never being happy with her efforts at keeping him and his home clean and well managed.

After some time, due to the machinations of her friend Isobel, she falls in love with a rich and influential man who is attracted to her mind rather than her looks. This is Isobel's relative Sir Edward Ashton

Trollope writes of Ashton;

“It was not that he was a priggish man, but rather that he felt that sin, like the classic definition of tragedy, only achieved greatness, and therefore any kind of distinction and interest, when committed by the great. Those people around him in Calcutta, those tawdry, scrambling little people, obsessed with their lust for gold and pleasure, seemed to him to fall as far short of greatness as was humanly possible.”

Caroline seems to him to be the very opposite of these “tawdry little people”, and when at a dinner party she defends herself for her actions in getting close to the Indians in her employ, he is completely bowled over and calls her “magnificent”.

Edward eventually asks Caroline to be his mistress, but her pride causes her to refuse him, and she again becomes depressed, realising after a few days that she has made a terrible

mistake. Life with Johnny is awful for her. Johnny is such a wretch that the reader is relieved when eventually he is killed by accidentally burning down his house in a drunken stupor.

At the time of the fire Caroline is looking after her friend and lodger's baby. Ann Wheeler and her baby had moved in for Ann's convenience and indirectly to help Caroline with providing her with a small income. Caroline is able to save her own life and that of the baby by lashing the baby to her and clambering down a banyan tree to safety, helped by her devoted Sikh servant Ranjit.

Bella and Ann help Caroline to recuperate from the fire, and by careful planning arrange for Caroline to meet Edward alone.

Protesting, feeble from lack of food and long inaction, Caroline is incoherent when confronted by Edward and can only ask for forgiveness.

"You are absurd", Edward said with the utmost indulgence. "Also uniquely courageous, sympathetic, remarkable – and mine"

When Caroline breaks down in Edward's arms and bursts into the first tears she has been able to shed for twenty years, I realise that I too am in love with Caroline and shed tears along with her.

Spoiler alert!

The BBC made a play of the book, and in the play an extra chapter was added, where Lady Caroline and Sir Edward Ashton confront Lady Lennox and repossess Caroline's inheritance due to her from Johnny.

Ian Paget
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