AI-Generated Graded Readers
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Publication webpage:
https://www1.gifu-u.ac.jp/~masaru/a1/ai-generated_graded_readers.html

Publication date: April 18, 2026

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This book is a simplified English adaptation created for extensive reading practice.
The text was generated using ChatGPT and prepared for intermediate English learners as part of an educational project.

Target reading level: CEFR A2-B1

This edition aims to support fluency development through accessible vocabulary, expanded narration, and improved readability while preserving the original story structure.

Source Text

Original work: Mansfield Park
Author: Jane Austen

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Jane Austen, *Mansfield Park* (Simplified Edition, Adapted and Simplified by ChatGPT)

Part 1

About thirty years before Fanny Price came to Mansfield Park, three sisters of the Ward family had very different lives. The eldest, Maria Ward, married Sir Thomas Bertram, a rich man with a large house and a high position. People said she was lucky, because she had not brought much money into the marriage, but she had gained a fine home and a secure future. Her sister Miss Ward married Mr. Norris, a clergyman connected to the Bertram family, and her life was respectable enough. The youngest sister, Frances, made the worst match of all, because she married a poor lieutenant named Price, and she did it against the wishes of her family.

This marriage broke the peace between the sisters. Mrs. Price did not write before her wedding, because she knew her family would try to stop her. Afterward, Mrs. Norris sent her a long angry letter, and Mrs. Price answered with equal anger. Very soon the sisters stopped writing to each other at all. They lived far apart, moved in different circles, and for many years hardly heard anything of one another except that Mrs. Price kept having more children.

After about eleven years, however, poverty softened Mrs. Price's pride. She had a disabled husband, little money, and too many children to feed and clothe. At last she wrote to Lady Bertram and asked for peace and help. In the letter she spoke sadly of her troubles, her coming ninth child, and the future of the eight children already born. She especially asked whether Sir Thomas might one day help her eldest son in some useful profession.

The letter moved the people at Mansfield Park in different ways. Sir Thomas sent kind advice and offers of help. Lady Bertram sent money and clothes for the baby. Mrs. Norris wrote most of the answers and talked more than anyone else about doing good for poor Mrs. Price. Soon she began to say that perhaps the best thing would be to take one child away from Portsmouth and bring that child up at

Mansfield Park.

“Why not take her eldest daughter?” she said. “The girl is about nine years old now. Her poor mother has too many children to care for all of them properly. It would cost very little for us, and it would be a great kindness.”

Lady Bertram agreed at once in her calm, lazy way. “Yes,” she said, “I think that is best. Let us send for the child.”

Sir Thomas did not answer so quickly. He sat and thought about the matter seriously. He knew that if they took the girl, they must really take responsibility for her life. He thought of his own four children, of the duties they would owe the child, and of the need to raise her as a gentlewoman. Still, before he could fully state all his objections, Mrs. Norris rushed in with speeches about generosity, family duty, and how well the whole thing could be managed.

She said, “Give a girl a proper education and let her grow up in a good house, and she will probably do well in life. If she grows up with your sons and daughters, she will be like a sister to them. There is no danger in that. In fact, it is much safer to bring her up here than to leave her away from us and let the boys see her later as a stranger.”

Sir Thomas admitted that there was truth in what she said. “Very well,” he answered, “but if we do this, we must do it honorably. We must remember that she cannot be left half cared for. If she gains no good marriage in the future, then we must still see that she has the means to live as a lady.”

Mrs. Norris praised his noble feelings, but in her heart she never meant to spend her own money on the child. She loved directing others, not paying herself. When the practical question came, Lady Bertram asked, “Where shall the child live first, sister? With you or with us?” Then the truth became clear. Mrs. Norris explained that poor Mr. Norris’s health made it impossible for a child to live at the Parsonage, and after his death she found other excuses just as easily. So, from the beginning, the burden fell on Mansfield Park.

“Then she had better come to us,” said Lady Bertram quietly.

Sir Thomas answered with dignity, “Yes. Let her home be in this house. We will do our duty by her. She will have companions of her own age and a regular teacher.”

Mrs. Norris immediately began arranging the girl’s place in the house, though not in the family. She said the little white attic near the old nurseries would be best. It was near the maids, near the schoolroom, and far enough from the comforts of the real daughters of the house. She also spoke of the child as if she must be grateful every moment of her life for such kindness. Sir Thomas agreed that they must be careful. He wanted his daughters to be friendly to their cousin, but never to forget that she was not their equal in rank or fortune.

Mrs. Price accepted the offer with thanks, though she seemed surprised that they wanted one girl when she had so many boys. She wrote that her daughter was a sweet-tempered child and hoped they would never regret taking her. So the matter was settled, and the girl was sent for. That child was Fanny Price.

Fanny was only ten years old when she made the long journey from Portsmouth to Northamptonshire. At Northampton Mrs. Norris met her and enjoyed the importance of bringing her into Mansfield Park herself. The great house, the new faces, and the strange life frightened Fanny almost at once. She was small for her age, pale, shy, and easily made unhappy. Still, there was nothing vulgar in her manner, and when she did speak, her voice was gentle and her face could look pretty.

Sir Thomas received her kindly and tried to make her feel welcome, but his serious manner frightened her. Lady Bertram said very little, yet her soft smile made her less alarming. The young people were all at home. Tom and Edmund seemed like grown men to Fanny, while Maria and Julia examined her dress and face with cool confidence. They were used to praise and attention, and they quickly saw that their cousin had neither beauty nor accomplishments to attract them.

Fanny, however, felt only misery. She missed home, though home had been poor and noisy. Mrs. Norris had talked the whole way about Fanny’s good fortune and the gratitude she ought to feel, and this made the child more miserable, because she believed it was wrong not to be happy. She was tired from travel, afraid of every person in the room, and near tears from the first moment. Even a kind place on the sofa beside Lady Bertram and her little dog, and even the sight of a tart at supper, could not comfort her. She soon began to cry so much that they sent her to bed.

“This is not a very good beginning,” said Mrs. Norris after she had gone. “I told her on the road that she must behave well from the first. I hope she is not sulky like her poor mother. Still, we must allow something for a child leaving home.”

But Fanny’s sadness was not a passing fit. For days and days she felt alone everywhere. Her cousins thought little of her because she had never learned French and owned only two sashes. Miss Lee, the governess, wondered at her ignorance. The servants laughed at her clothes. Sir Thomas still frightened her, Lady Bertram was too silent to help, and Mrs. Norris scolded more than she comforted. The house itself, with its large rooms and expensive furniture, seemed too grand for her. She moved through it in fear, always worried that she might break something, do something wrong, or be seen where she should not be.

At night she often cried herself to sleep, but no one understood how unhappy she was. About a week after her arrival, Edmund found her one morning sitting on the attic stairs, weeping quietly. He was the younger of the two Bertram sons and was then about sixteen. Instead of laughing or scolding, he sat down beside her and spoke very gently. “My dear little cousin, what is the matter? Are you ill? Has anyone been unkind to you? Can I help you?”

At first Fanny could only whisper, “No, no, thank you.” She was ashamed to be seen crying and too shy to speak freely. But Edmund stayed beside her and asked about home, her brothers, and her sisters. When he mentioned her family, her tears grew stronger, and he understood. “You are sorry to leave your mother,” he said, “and that shows you are a good girl. But you are with relations who wish to be kind to you. Come, let us walk in the park, and you can tell me about the people you miss.”

As they talked, Edmund discovered that among all her brothers and sisters there was one she missed most. It was William, her elder brother, her best friend, and the person who had always stood up for her. Fanny spoke of him again and again. Edmund listened patiently and then asked, “Will he write to you?” Fanny answered, “He said he would, but he told me I must write first.” When Edmund asked why she had not done it, she lowered her head and said, “I do not have any paper.”

“Then that is easy,” he said. “Come to the breakfast room. I will find paper and everything else you need, and you can write to William now.”

Fanny followed him, though she was still frightened. Edmund prepared the paper for her, ruled the lines carefully, and stayed with her while she wrote. He helped her spell difficult words and made the whole business easy for her. Then he did something even kinder. He wrote a few words himself to William, sent his love, and enclosed half a guinea under the seal. Fanny could hardly speak for gratitude. To her, this kindness seemed greater than anything she had yet received in Mansfield Park.

From that day Edmund became her true friend. He saw that she had a warm heart, good sense, and a strong wish to do right, even if fear and shyness hid these qualities from others. He tried to help her feel less afraid of the family and gave her advice about living with Maria and Julia. Little by little Fanny grew more used to the house and its ways. She was still low in everyone’s opinion, and her cousins often laughed at what she did not know, but she no longer felt entirely alone.

As the years passed, Mansfield Park slowly became another home to her, though never a place where she forgot her lower position. Edmund remained kind when the others were careless. He encouraged her reading, guided her judgment, and gave her the sort of steady attention that helped her mind grow stronger. Sir Thomas helped her brothers when he could, and once William came to visit, which brought Fanny deep happiness and then deep pain when he left again. Yet through all these changes, Edmund’s friendship never failed. In time, there were two people in the world whom Fanny loved best: William, her brother, and Edmund, her cousin.

Part 2

When Fanny was about fifteen, the first great change in the family came with the death of Mr. Norris. Mrs. Norris left the Parsonage, stayed for a time at the Park, and then moved into a small house in the village called the White House. She spoke as if grief had broken her, but she also comforted herself very quickly. She said she could live very well without her husband, and she talked even more than before about saving money and managing everything carefully.

Mr. Norris's death also affected Edmund. The living at Mansfield ought one day to have been his, but Tom's debts had already made that impossible. Sir Thomas had been forced to give the next appointment to another man, and he felt deeply ashamed of the injustice. One day he spoke very seriously to Tom. "You have taken from Edmund what should have been his," he said. "You may have cost him many years of income, perhaps all his life, and no future favor can fully make up for it."

Tom listened with some shame, but he did not keep the feeling for long. He was sorry for a moment, yet he soon began to comfort himself in his usual selfish way. He thought that some young men had been in much worse debt than he had. He thought his father had made far too much of the matter. He even thought that the new clergyman might die soon, and then perhaps the whole loss would not matter much.

The new clergyman was Dr. Grant, a large, hearty man of middle age, with a younger wife and no children. They came to live at the Parsonage, and at first they were considered quite respectable and pleasant. But Sir Thomas's attention was soon turned to another question. He believed that now, at last, Mrs. Norris would take Fanny to live with her. Fanny was older, Mrs. Norris had a house of her own, and it seemed natural that she should now do what everyone had once imagined she meant to do.

Lady Bertram told Fanny the news carelessly, as if it were a small matter. "So, Fanny, you are going to live with my sister," she said. "You have been here five years already, and it will make very little difference." To Fanny, however, it made all the difference in the world. She had never loved Mrs. Norris, never felt safe with her, and never believed she could be happy under her roof. She left the room with tears in her heart and went straight to Edmund.

"Cousin," she said, "something is going to happen, and I cannot bear it. I am going to live with my aunt Norris." Edmund was surprised, but he tried at once to comfort her. He said it might be a good thing for her, because she would become important to Mrs. Norris and be forced to speak and act for herself more than she did at Mansfield. Fanny shook her head. "I can never be important to anyone," she said. "My situation, my foolishness, and my awkwardness make that impossible."

Edmund would not let her speak so badly of herself. "You have good sense, a sweet temper, and a grateful heart," he told her. "Those are the best qualities in a friend and companion." He reminded her that even if she lived at the White House, she would still have the same park, the same library, the same family near her, and the same horse to ride. Fanny listened because she always trusted him, and because his kindness made even painful things easier to hear. Yet his comfort did her little real good, because he was reasoning from a mistake.

Mrs. Norris had never truly meant to take Fanny at all. She had chosen the White House exactly because it was small, and she kept speaking of the absolute need for a spare room for a friend. When Lady Bertram said one day, "We shall not need Miss Lee when Fanny goes to live with you," Mrs. Norris was almost shocked into honesty. "Fanny live with me?" she cried. "What could I do with a girl of that age? I am a poor widow, quite broken in health and spirits. I am fit for nothing but solitude."

Then followed one of her longest and most selfish speeches. She declared that she had hardly money enough to live like a gentlewoman, that she must now practice strict economy, and that she could not possibly give up her spare room. She also tried to make her selfishness look noble. "Everything I save is really for your children," she told Lady Bertram. "My only wish is to be useful to your family." But beneath all her sad words and generous poses, the truth was plain. She did not want the trouble, the cost, or even the company of Fanny.

Sir Thomas was surprised, but once he understood her clearly, he said nothing more about it. Fanny soon learned that she was not going to the White House after all, and her relief was immediate and deep. Edmund had truly believed the move would help her, and he was a little disappointed for her sake, but he could not be sorry to see her happy. Mrs. Norris settled into her new house, and the Grants settled into the Parsonage. For a short time, life at Mansfield became quiet again.

The Grants were friendly enough, but Mrs. Norris quickly found reasons to disapprove of them. Dr. Grant liked good dinners, and Mrs. Grant spent more money than Mrs. Norris thought proper on servants, food, butter, and eggs. Mrs. Norris complained of all this with great energy. Lady Bertram cared little about the household expense, but she had her own complaint. She could not understand how a woman as plain as Mrs. Grant could be so comfortably married.

Before long another change came. Sir Thomas decided that he must go to Antigua himself to arrange his business there, and he took Tom with him, hoping to separate him from bad friends and bad habits. They were likely to be gone for nearly a year. Lady Bertram disliked losing her husband, but more because it disturbed her own comfort than because she feared for him. Maria and Julia, on the other hand, felt a freedom they hardly tried to hide, because their father's absence removed the chief restraint on their pleasures.

Fanny also felt relief, and this troubled her. She knew Sir Thomas had done much for her and for her brothers, and she thought it wrong not to feel more sorrow at his leaving. On his last morning he had even told her kindly that perhaps William might visit Mansfield in the winter. But then he spoiled the kindness by adding that he hoped William would find his sister improved, though she still seemed in some ways too much like the girl of ten. Those words hurt Fanny deeply, and after he was gone she cried bitterly. Her cousins, seeing her red eyes, only thought her false.

Life then moved into a new pattern. Tom had spent so little time at home before that he was scarcely missed, and Edmund quietly took on many of his father's duties in the house. Letters soon arrived to say that Sir Thomas and Tom had reached Antigua safely. Mrs. Norris had already imagined the worst and prepared speeches for a disaster, so she was forced to put away her fears for the time. Through the winter she became busy presenting Maria and Julia to the neighborhood, praising their beauty and manners, and searching for rich husbands for them.

The two sisters were now admired everywhere. They were handsome, well taught, and outwardly easy and polite, and their aunt's constant praise helped them believe themselves almost perfect. Fanny had no place in these public pleasures. She stayed at home with Lady Bertram and became more useful than ever, talking to her, reading to her, and helping her through the quiet evenings when the others went to balls and parties. Strange as it may seem, those peaceful nights were often happy ones for Fanny, because in that stillness nobody laughed at her, ordered her about, or made her feel small.

In the spring she lost her old grey pony, and for a time the loss hurt both her spirits and her health. Everyone agreed that riding was good for her, but no one did anything practical. Maria and Julia always wanted the horses, Lady Bertram thought exercise unnecessary, and Mrs. Norris thought walking was enough for everybody. When Edmund came home and saw how matters stood, he refused to leave it so. "Fanny must have a horse," he said, and he said it again and again until all objections were useless.

Since he had no horse fit for a woman to ride, he exchanged one of his own and found a gentle mare for her. Fanny loved the mare at once, but even more than the gift she loved the kindness that had given it to her. Edmund had once again seen her need when no one else had really cared to see it. Her feelings toward him grew stronger and deeper, though still mixed with gratitude, trust, and respect. She thought him good in every way, and she felt that no one in the world understood his worth as she did.

Sir Thomas did not return in September as they had expected. New difficulties kept him abroad, and at last he sent Tom home while he remained behind to finish the business himself. Tom returned safely with a good report of his father's health. Even this did not fully quiet Mrs. Norris, who now decided that Sir Thomas must have sent his son away because he feared he might never come back. Yet another winter, with all its visits and plans, soon gave her something else to think about.

A young man of large fortune, Mr. Rushworth, had lately come into a great estate, and he quickly became interested in Maria. He was not clever, and there was little life in him, but he was rich, respectable, and eager to marry. Maria, now twenty-one, began to think marriage almost a duty, and a marriage with Mr. Rushworth would give her a larger income than her father's house, as well as a London home. Mrs. Norris worked hard to encourage the match, praised Maria as an angel, praised Mr. Rushworth as if he deserved her, and pushed the two families together at every opportunity. Before long an understanding was formed, and then an engagement, though they still waited for Sir Thomas's full consent before the marriage itself could take place.

Part 3

The young people liked one another almost at once. Maria and Julia were pleased with Mary Crawford because she was pretty, lively, and easy in company. She did not threaten them by being grander or more beautiful than they were. She was small, dark, and bright, and they could admire her without feeling beaten by her. Her brother Henry was different. At first both sisters thought him plain, but after meeting him two or three times, they stopped saying so. He had a pleasant smile, fine teeth, a graceful figure, and a way of speaking that made people forget his face and enjoy his company instead.

Very soon both sisters were interested in him. Julia felt that, because Maria was engaged to Mr. Rushworth, Henry properly belonged to her side of the field, and she was ready enough to like him. Maria's feelings were less clear. She did not want to examine them too closely. She told herself there could be no harm in enjoying the attention of an agreeable man. Everyone knew she was engaged, and therefore, she thought, Henry Crawford must take care of himself if any danger existed.

Henry, for his part, began lightly enough. He only wished to please and be admired. One evening he said to his sister, "I like your Miss Bertrams very much. They are elegant and agreeable girls." Mary answered, "You like Julia best." Henry laughed and said, "Yes, I like Julia best." But when Mary reminded him that Maria was generally thought the more beautiful, he admitted it at once. “Miss Bertram is certainly the handsomest,” he said, “and perhaps the most agreeable too. Still, I can say I like Julia best, because you tell me to.”

Mary knew her brother too well to trust him. “Remember that Miss Bertram is engaged,” she told him. “Her choice is already made.” Henry only laughed again. “That makes her safer, not less pleasant,” he said. “An engaged woman can use all her powers to please without danger.” Mary did not like that answer. She said she would not have him deceive anyone or be deceived himself. Henry replied with the careless talk of a man who enjoyed the game too much to care about the pain it might cause.

Their conversation turned toward marriage in general, and Mary spoke in a way that showed the world she had lived in. She said that in marriage people were often disappointed because they expected too much and showed too little honesty about themselves. Mrs. Grant answered more kindly and said that people usually found comfort somewhere, even if one hope failed. Mary laughed and said, “Very well, when I am a wife, I will defend married life just as strongly as you do.” Mrs. Grant told both her brother and sister that Mansfield would cure them of their wrong ideas if only they stayed long enough.

They were very willing to stay. Mrs. Grant liked having them with her, Dr. Grant was pleased to have pleasant company and good wine at dinner, and neither Henry nor Mary had any hurry to leave. Mary began by thinking Tom Bertram the most attractive of the brothers. He had easy manners, quick spirits, much to say, and the advantage of being the eldest son of the house. She looked around Mansfield with an eye that saw comfort and rank very clearly. The park, the house, the title, and the future inheritance all made Tom seem a very acceptable man.

Fanny watched all this quietly. Nobody asked her opinion, and she gave it to nobody. She admired Mary’s beauty in silence, but she still thought Henry plain, no matter what Maria and Julia said. One day Mary, walking with the Bertram brothers, said, “I think I begin to understand all of you except Miss Price. Is she out in society or not? She dined with us, which makes her seem out, but she says so little that I cannot tell.” Edmund answered, “She has the age and sense of a woman, but I do not know how to explain the rest."

Mary then told a story about a girl who had first hidden behind shyness and a bonnet and later become suddenly bold and social after being "out." She laughed at the whole system, and Tom answered in the same spirit. Edmund, however, was more serious. He said the fault often lay in education. Girls were taught to think too much about appearance and vanity from the beginning, and later the world blamed them for following the lesson they had learned. Mary did not fully agree, but she listened. She liked lively talk, yet Edmund's seriousness gave him a kind of weight that could not be laughed away.

Soon after this, Tom left home for the races. Mary expected that his absence would make life at Mansfield duller. She thought Edmund would have much less to say at table and that dinner would lose most of its spirit. But when they all met again at the Park, another subject quickly took hold of the whole company. Mr. Rushworth had returned full of ideas about improving Sotherton. He had visited a friend whose grounds had been changed by a famous landscape improver, and now he could talk of little else. He declared that when he came back to Sotherton, his own house looked like an old prison.

Mrs. Norris cried out at once, "A prison? Sotherton Court is one of the finest old places in the world." But Mr. Rushworth insisted that it wanted improvement everywhere. Maria listened with calm satisfaction, because every word about Sotherton reminded her of the large estate that would one day be hers. Mrs. Grant smiled and said that Sotherton would no doubt receive every improvement its owner could wish. Maria then said quietly, "Your best helper would probably be Mr. Repton." Rushworth eagerly answered that he had been thinking exactly the same thing and that he might hire him at once.

Mrs. Norris, who loved planning the spending of other people's money, encouraged him warmly. She said he should not think of expense at all and should make everything beautiful in the best style. Then she began one of her long speeches about planting, walls, orchards, and all the improvements she had once planned at the Parsonage. Dr. Grant, who disliked her busy pride, answered dryly when she praised an apricot tree. Mrs. Grant added a playful remark, and for a few minutes Mrs. Norris was forced into silence. The table moved on to other things, though not for long.

Mr. Rushworth soon returned to his favorite subject. He spoke of his seven hundred acres, the avenue at Sotherton, and the changes that might be made there. Fanny, who sat near Edmund and had been listening closely, said softly, "To cut down an avenue would be sad. It makes me think of a poem about fallen trees." Edmund smiled and answered her gently, "Yes, I am afraid the avenue is in danger." Fanny then said she would like to see Sotherton before it changed, though she supposed she never would.

Mary asked what sort of place it was, and Edmund described it for her. He said the house was large, old, and respectable, though heavy and badly placed. The woods were fine, and there was a stream that might be improved. He added that he himself would not wish to hand everything over to a professional improver. "If I had a place of my own," he said, "I would rather make mistakes according to my own judgment than accept another man's taste completely." Mary answered in her lively way, "That would not suit me at all. I would gladly pay someone to make it beautiful and then stay away until it was finished."

Their talk moved from country houses to Mary's missing harp, which had at last been found in Northampton. She described the trouble of trying to hire a cart in the country and laughed at her first belief that money could immediately produce anything she wanted. Edmund explained why farmers could not spare horses during harvest, and Mary accepted the lesson with good humor. She then said Henry had kindly offered to fetch the harp in his barouche. Edmund said he was glad of it and hoped he would soon be allowed to hear her play. Fanny, who had never heard a harp at all, listened with quiet pleasure.

Mary also spoke of the navy when William Price was mentioned, but here Edmund became more reserved. She treated admirals and ranks lightly, as if they were only parts of fashionable talk, while Edmund answered with respect and called it a noble profession. This was not the first time that evening he had felt troubled by her tone. He admired her strongly and was drawn to her beauty and liveliness, but he could not wholly like her careless way of speaking about serious things. Still, her smiles and easy manner soon softened the moment, and the conversation went on.

Meanwhile, the subject of Sotherton returned yet again. Mrs. Grant praised Henry’s talent for improvement, Julia admired his quick judgment, Maria supported the idea of using a clever friend instead of hiring a professional at once, and Mr. Rushworth was delighted to ask for Henry’s help. Henry politely said he would be glad to be useful. Then Mr. Rushworth invited him to Sotherton to look at the place properly. Mrs. Norris immediately improved the plan by making it a whole party. She proposed that everyone should go, that she herself should sit with Mrs. Rushworth while the others walked about, and that they should all dine pleasantly together. In arranging the party, she added, as if it were the most natural thing in the world, “Fanny will stay at home with Lady Bertram.” Lady Bertram did not object, the others readily agreed, and only Edmund said nothing.

Part 4

The plan for visiting Sotherton soon became firmer. Mrs. Rushworth came to Mansfield herself, full of civil words and warm invitations. She wished Lady Bertram to come, the Miss Bertrams to come, Edmund to come, and if possible everybody else as well. Mrs. Norris at once took control of the whole matter, answering for one person after another, arranging places, and speaking as if the day were already her own success. She decided that Lady Bertram could not go so far, but that Maria, Julia, and she herself would go with pleasure.

Mrs. Rushworth then turned kindly toward Fanny. She said she would be very happy to see Miss Price too, because Fanny had never yet been at Sotherton, and it was a pity she should miss such a place. For one moment the idea rose brightly in Fanny’s mind. She had never seen Sotherton, had heard so much of it, and was ready to enjoy even the quietest corner of such a day. But Mrs. Norris immediately pushed the hope away.

“Oh no,” she said quickly, “Fanny must stay at home. Lady Bertram cannot possibly do without her. There will be many chances for her to see Sotherton later.”

Lady Bertram, who never liked to lose a useful companion, added in her soft lazy voice, “No, I cannot do without Fanny.” So the matter was settled in a moment. No one except Edmund seemed to feel that anything unfair had been done.

Mary Crawford was also invited. Mrs. Grant declined for herself, but was glad enough that her sister should go. Mary accepted after a little pressing, as good manners required, and Mr. Rushworth hurried back from the Parsonage pleased with his success. Edmund returned just in time to hear what had been arranged. He walked with the ladies after the visit, and on coming back to the breakfast-room found the family discussing how they should all travel.

Then another little struggle began. Mrs. Norris was thinking aloud about seats, numbers, and carriages, and the Miss Bertrams laughed over the ease of fitting themselves into Mr. Crawford’s barouche. Edmund at once objected. “Why should Mr. Crawford’s carriage be used at all?” he asked. “Why is my mother’s chaise not enough for the family?” Julia cried out that nobody wanted to be packed into a post-chaise when a barouche might be had instead. Maria added, very calmly, that Mr. Crawford clearly expected to take them and would think it almost a promise.

Mrs. Norris supported the young ladies as usual. She said there was no reason to refuse such a convenience, and that everybody knew how pleasant it was to go in an open carriage on a fine day. Edmund gave up the point, but not because he thought them right. He saw too clearly how ready they all were to accept Henry Crawford’s attentions. Fanny saw it too, though she said nothing. She could not watch Maria and Julia without anxiety, and she felt more and more that Henry liked turning admiration into a kind of game.

In the midst of this planning, Edmund and Mary found more and more chances to be together. Mary’s harp had now arrived, and Mansfield became brighter whenever she played. She liked to be admired and liked still better to be listened to by a man whose attention had thought in it as well as pleasure. Edmund admired her with increasing warmth. Her beauty, her quickness, her smiles, and the lively way in which she spoke of everything around her drew him strongly toward her, even when he could not fully approve of what she said.

One day the talk turned more seriously to Edmund himself. Mary had known for some time that he was meant for the Church, but she still treated the subject with light surprise. “A clergyman?” she said. “You, of all people? That seems the last thing I should have guessed.” Edmund answered quietly that it had long been his profession and that he chose it for himself. Mary smiled and said, “Then I am very much astonished. I thought the Church was what men entered when they wanted a comfortable life and had nothing better to do.”

Edmund was hurt, though he controlled himself. “That may be true of some men,” he said, “but it is not the right way to think of the office itself. A clergyman has serious duties. He must teach, guide, visit, and help the people who depend on him. If he is careless, the fault is his own. The work itself is honorable.” Mary looked at him with half amusement and half admiration. “You are really in earnest,” she said. “I begin to believe you would be a clergyman from conviction.”

“I hope so,” Edmund replied. “And if I did not respect the profession, I ought not to enter it.” Mary shook her head. “In the world I know,” she said, “a clergyman is seldom taken very seriously. He dines out, says proper things, reads prayers on Sunday, and lives very comfortably if his income is good. That is the picture most people have.” Edmund could not smile as easily as she did. “Then the world you know judges badly,” he answered. “It sees the form and not the duty.”

Mary did not mean to wound him, but she did not truly understand why he cared so much. She had grown up in a society where rank, ease, and amusement mattered more than responsibility. To her, a military officer, a lawyer, or a man of fashion all seemed to offer more spirit and freedom than a country clergyman. She even laughed and said that she could better imagine Edmund in almost any other line of life. He answered with steady seriousness that the usefulness of the work was exactly what recommended it to him most.

Fanny heard some of these conversations with deep interest. She admired Edmund more every time he defended what he believed right. At the same time, she was troubled by Mary Crawford. Mary was so pleasant, so pretty, and so full of life that it was easy to understand Edmund’s attachment. Yet Fanny felt that

Mary laughed at things that ought not to be laughed at. She could charm Edmund, but she did not always understand him. That difference, small as it seemed in an evening's talk, rested heavily on Fanny's mind.

Mary herself was not blind to Edmund's value. She had first been drawn to Tom because he was lively and because he would inherit Mansfield Park. But Tom's absence, his careless habits, and his lack of steadiness now showed themselves more clearly. Edmund, by contrast, was always near when real help, thought, or kindness was needed. He listened well, spoke with feeling, and never tried to shine at another person's cost. Mary still laughed at his future profession, but she had already begun to prefer the man to the objection.

At the same time, Henry Crawford continued his light attacks on the sisters. He talked, smiled, rode with them, and paid both enough attention to keep both interested. Julia believed that Maria, being engaged, ought in fairness to stand aside. Maria, however, was too vain and too excited to do any such thing. She had chosen Mr. Rushworth for his estate, but Henry pleased her pride and imagination far more. Fanny, watching her cousin, could not feel easy. The more Maria seemed amused, the less safe the amusement appeared.

Preparations for the Sotherton visit went on, and the day became something to look forward to for almost everyone in the house. Maria anticipated the display of her future home and the pleasure of Henry's company there. Julia anticipated the same day with a more restless hope. Mary expected entertainment wherever there were agreeable people and open country. Mr. Rushworth expected universal admiration of his place. Mrs. Norris expected importance for herself in arranging everything and talking to everyone. Only Fanny looked forward with mixed feelings, and even then she was not to go.

She did not complain. She almost never complained. When Edmund learned more clearly that she was to be left behind, he was sorry for her and showed it. He spoke kindly of Sotherton in a way that only made her wish a little more to see it. Yet he could not change the plan, and Fanny tried to be content. She told herself that staying with Lady Bertram was natural, that her place in the family was a lower one, and that she ought to be grateful to be useful at home. Still, in her quiet heart, she felt the exclusion keenly.

As Wednesday came nearer, the feelings of the party grew stronger and more separate from one another. Beneath the pleasant words and cheerful arrangements, several currents were already moving in dangerous directions. Edmund admired Mary more each day, while seeing too little that should have warned him. Maria moved closer to Henry while pretending perfect safety. Julia grew jealous without knowing how to hide it. Fanny, who had the least power of all of them, saw more clearly than most that the day at Sotherton would not be an ordinary day. It would seem like an innocent visit, but it would carry many hidden meanings with it.

Part 5

Edmund did not let the Sotherton plan remain as Mrs. Norris had made it. He knew very well that Fanny wished to see the place, and he also knew that such chances did not often come to her. At first he even meant to stay at home himself so that she might go instead, and this made Fanny more grateful than happy, because she could not enjoy the day if he lost it for her sake. In the end, however, another arrangement was found. Mrs. Grant kindly offered to spend the day with Lady Bertram, and so Edmund was free to join the party, while Fanny was included too.

Wednesday came bright and fine. The young people were in spirits, the barouche arrived early, and all the little troubles of the plan were forgotten in the pleasure of setting out. To Fanny, the day began with more feeling than display. She was glad to be going, glad that Edmund would be there, and glad to escape one more proof that she must always stay behind. Yet she went quietly, as she did everything, without claiming joy too openly or asking to be noticed for it.

Sotherton itself had all the effect that such a place was sure to have on different minds. Mrs. Rushworth received them with the full importance of a woman who had long lived among old rooms, old names, and old habits. She led them through the house and explained everything. She spoke of former owners, ancient visits, family distinctions, and changes made by earlier generations. Mary Crawford listened with politeness and little interest, but Fanny listened with a serious delight. To her, almost everything was new, and even what was old in the house felt alive because it touched history and imagination.

The rooms were many, and several seemed large enough only to prove that the house had been built in a more stately age. Henry Crawford, standing by the west front windows, soon began to criticize what he saw outside. He shook his head over the line of the house, the gates, the iron fence, and above all the avenue beyond. He had a quick eye for effect, and he enjoyed finding fault where improvement could be proposed. Mr. Rushworth was ready enough to hear it, because he already believed Sotherton wanted great changes, and Maria liked to listen because all discussion of the estate pleased her pride.

At last they came to the chapel. Mrs. Rushworth apologized for taking them in by the lower entrance, though she said it was easier among friends, and they all entered. Fanny had expected something darker, older, and more solemn. She looked around at the polished wood, the velvet, the gallery, and the orderly neatness, and she felt disappointed. She said softly to Edmund, “This is not what I imagined. There is nothing sad here, nothing grand, nothing that makes one feel very small.”

Edmund answered gently, “You are thinking of ancient places, of great churches and older chapels. This was built only for the family, and for private use. It was never meant to have the same feeling.” Fanny saw that he was right, but she still felt the difference. Then Mrs. Rushworth began to explain how the chapel had once been used every day, with regular prayers morning and evening, until the custom had been dropped by the late Mr. Rushworth. Mary smiled at once and said, “Well, every generation has its improvements.”

Fanny turned to her almost with pain. “I think it is a pity that the custom was given up,” she said. “It must have been a good thing for a family to meet there every day.” Edmund agreed with her, and he spoke seriously of the value of such order and such duty in a house. Mary, who could never leave a solemn subject alone if it offered room for wit, answered in her lively way that she was not sure a private chapel and a resident clergyman were so necessary to happiness as some people thought. To her, the old form seemed less important than present ease.

Edmund did not laugh. “A clergyman is not only a man who reads prayers,” he said. “If he respects what he does, he gives an example to the whole house. He may keep alive more serious habits than people notice at the time.” Mary looked at him with amusement and with growing interest. “You defend your profession very warmly,” she said. “I begin to think you really mean to honor it.” He answered, “I hope I do,” and Fanny, hearing him, admired him more than ever.

When the house had been seen, they went outside again. The day was warm, and the brightness on the open lawn soon made the shade beyond look inviting. Mary cried out that she wanted comfort, not sunshine, and pointed to a small door opening from the terrace into the wilderness. It was tried and found unlocked, and they all gladly entered. The change was immediate. Inside there was shade, coolness, trees, and a softer silence. Even a place too neatly arranged could feel almost natural after the glare outside.

Here the party began to separate according to their wishes and tempers. Henry Crawford, Maria, and Mr. Rushworth were soon busy again with plans and opinions. They walked on together talking of improvements, lines, prospects, and where this or that should be altered. Mrs. Rushworth and Mrs. Norris lagged behind in their own way, one from slow movement and the other from talk. Julia, who had once hoped to enjoy Henry Crawford’s notice herself, was left in the most painful position of all. She had to remain civil while feeling neglected, and she had not enough self-command to suffer it quietly in her heart.

Edmund, Mary, and Fanny naturally kept together for a time. Mary soon returned to the subject she liked best when she wished to tease Edmund. “So you really will be a clergyman,” she said again, as they walked in the cool shade. “You choose it freely, and yet you expect me to admire your choice.” Edmund answered with steady seriousness that he did choose it freely and respected it deeply. Mary smiled and said that in the world she knew, people did not usually expect wit, spirit, or distinction from a clergyman. Edmund replied that the office must not be judged by the idleness or vanity of the men who sometimes held it badly.

Fanny listened more than she spoke, but every word fixed itself in her mind.

She could see Mary’s beauty, hear the charm in her voice, and understand very well why Edmund loved her company so much. At the same time, she felt the danger in Mary’s light treatment of serious things. Mary could draw Edmund on, could make him smile, and could even make his earnestness seem more attractive by opposing it. But she did not, Fanny thought, truly value the same things. That difference, quiet as it seemed in conversation, troubled her more than she could say.

After some walking, they came to a point where others of the party had already gathered near a locked gate. Beyond it lay another part of the grounds which Maria wanted to reach. Mr. Rushworth, eager to be useful, declared that he would go back for the key. He set off at once, pleased to have business and quite unconscious that leaving Maria behind with Henry Crawford was the last thing he should have chosen if he had understood more. Fanny, who was already tired, sat down. Mary too was ready enough to rest, while Edmund remained near them.

What followed showed more plainly than before how little safety there was in Maria’s play with Henry. The gate was locked, but Henry quickly pointed out that there were other ways of getting beyond it if a person truly wished. Maria needed little encouragement. She knew very well that she ought to wait for Mr. Rushworth and his key, yet the very fact that she ought to wait gave a sharper pleasure to not waiting. Before long she and Henry had found a way round, and they passed on together, leaving the gate, the rules, and good appearances behind them.

Julia arrived too late to share in that moment and saw enough to feel the insult of it. Her temper, her jealousy, and her wounded pride all rose together. Fanny saw her pain and pitied it, though Julia never asked for sympathy and would not have received it well. Edmund and Mary, meanwhile, were drawn away into more conversation and another walk. So Fanny, who had no strength for wandering farther and no wish to force herself where she was not wanted, remained behind for a time near the gate and the bench, tired in body and heavy in mind.

At last Mr. Rushworth came back with the key, proud of his success and quite unprepared for the foolish figure he must make with it. The gate could now be opened, but the people for whom he had fetched the key were no longer there to use it. He was confused, mortified, and yet too slow of mind to feel the full meaning of the scene. Fanny could only answer him gently and as clearly as she could. The whole party became more and more broken into separate groups, scattered by inclination, vanity, or carelessness rather than brought together by the visit itself.

By the time they were all collected again, the day had lost much of its first easy brightness. Nothing openly wrong had happened, and yet something had certainly gone wrong. Maria had been flattered too much, Henry had been amused too lightly, Julia had been hurt too deeply, and Edmund had been drawn into a more serious admiration of Mary than before. Only Fanny seemed to come away with her impressions made clearer rather than happier. She had seen much beauty, much politeness, and much talk, but she had also seen selfishness, carelessness, and danger moving quietly beneath them all.

The evening was beautiful when they drove home. The air was soft, the sky calm, and the country looked peaceful enough to end any common pleasure-day well. But inside the carriage there was not much real ease. Mrs. Norris alone had talk enough left for everyone, and even she finally stopped. When she was silent, the rest were silent too. They had all had enough to think about, and if any one of them had been asked whether Sotherton had given more pleasure or more pain, the answer might not have been easy to give.

Part 6

The visit to Sotherton was soon followed by letters from Antigua, and those letters brought no comfort to the young people at Mansfield. Sir Thomas wrote that his business was nearly done, and that he hoped to sail in September and reach England early in November. To anyone who loved him well, this would have been joyful news. To Maria and Julia, however, it was dark and unwelcome. They had grown used to freedom, and the thought of their father’s return fell on them like a cloud.

For Maria the news was worse than it was for Julia. Julia had only to fear the loss of liberty, but Maria had more to fear than that. Her father's return would not only bring authority back into the house. It would also bring Mr. Rushworth nearer to becoming her husband. She had allowed herself to enjoy Henry Crawford's attention, and now she tried to comfort herself with foolish hopes. "It may not be early in November," she told herself. "There may be delay. A great deal can happen in three months."

One evening Mary Crawford came to Mansfield with her brother, and there she first heard the fixed time of Sir Thomas's return. She congratulated the family politely, but her mind was more active than her few words showed. Later, after tea, she stood at the open window with Edmund and Fanny and looked out into the soft half-dark of the evening. Behind them, Maria, Julia, Mr. Rushworth, and Henry were gathered at the pianoforte with lights and music. Mary turned back, looked at Mr. Rushworth, and said with a smile, "How happy he looks. He is thinking of November."

Edmund looked at Mr. Rushworth but did not answer at once. Mary enjoyed touching lightly on serious things, and she went on in that same tone. She hinted that if she were in Mr. Rushworth's place, she might not wait so patiently for November when another sister was near and equally handsome. The words were playful, but the play had sharpness in it. Fanny felt ashamed for Mr. Rushworth, while Edmund seemed more struck by the spirit of the remark than amused by it.

Mary had a quick eye and a quick tongue, and often said the very thing that others would only think. That evening she spoke as if marriage were partly a joke, partly a bargain, and partly a matter of chance. Such talk came naturally to her, but it did not sit easily on Edmund's mind. He still admired her warmly, yet every now and then she showed him some difference in feeling that he could not quite overlook. Fanny, standing quietly beside them, felt that difference more and more, though she would sooner have blamed herself than Miss Crawford.

Time passed on, and the house settled into an uneasy sort of pleasure. Henry Crawford continued to come and go with complete ease, and both sisters were alive to his presence. Julia thought she had as good a claim to his attention as Maria, and perhaps a better one, because Maria was already engaged. Maria thought no rule need bind her while Henry chose to admire her. He, in turn, seemed pleased with the power he held over both, and had not enough principle or self-knowledge to ask himself what harm such pleasure might do.

At the beginning of September he was called away to Everingham in Norfolk for a fortnight. His absence had a very clear effect on Mansfield. Maria became dull and restless with only Mr. Rushworth to speak to, and Julia, who had no fixed occupation and no lover of her own, felt the loss even more sharply. The two sisters, left with their own thoughts, might almost have learned wisdom from the change. Julia, in particular, had enough jealousy to understand that Henry Crawford's attentions were not to be trusted.

Henry himself might also have learned something if he had been a man in the habit of judging himself honestly. In Norfolk he had little to do except ride, shoot, sleep, and think when he chose to think at all. A better man might have seen that he ought to stay away longer. He might have admitted that he had been trifling with the feelings of two women, one of whom was already promised to another man. But Henry had lived too lightly and too long for the present moment only. He found Mansfield agreeable, found the sisters agreeable, and wanted the amusement again.

So he came back as soon as the fortnight was over, and he was welcomed with equal readiness. Everything at once seemed to return to its former channel. Maria listened again to him with pleasure and to Mr. Rushworth with impatience. Mr. Rushworth could talk for a long time about shooting, dogs, neighbors, fences, and poachers, but such subjects could not hold Maria unless affection helped them, and affection was not there. Julia also took heart again. Each sister believed herself to be the favorite, and each found enough in Henry's manner to support the belief.

Yet his manner, though warm enough to keep hope alive, never became steady enough to force a decision. He was animated, attentive, and agreeable, but he stopped just short of what would have made the whole neighborhood speak. That was part of the danger. If he had been openly serious, one thing might have followed. If he had been openly cold, another thing might have followed. Instead, he kept them both uncertain, and uncertainty fed vanity, jealousy, and self-deception in all the worst ways.

Fanny was the only person in the house who saw this state of things with real uneasiness. Since the day at Sotherton, she had not been able to look at Henry Crawford beside either sister without wondering what he meant and blaming him for meaning so little that was good. She had not enough confidence in herself to speak strongly, but at last she ventured a small remark to Edmund. “I am surprised,” she said, “that Mr. Crawford came back so soon. I thought he was so fond of moving from place to place that something else would have drawn him away.”

Edmund did not understand her meaning. He answered kindly, but in a way that showed he had seen none of what troubled her. “It is to his credit,” he said. “And I dare say it pleases his sister. She does not like his unsettled habits.” Fanny then said, “What a favorite he is with my cousins.” Edmund replied without suspicion, “Yes, his manners to women must please. He is exactly the sort of man to be welcomed everywhere.” That was all. The hint had been given, and the hint was lost.

Fanny could not go farther. She was not used to trusting her own judgment against that of others, least of all against Edmund’s. If he saw nothing wrong, perhaps she had judged unfairly. If he thought well of Henry Crawford, perhaps she had been severe. Yet her uneasiness remained. She had watched too much, and felt too much, to become easy only because another person was blind.

Meanwhile, Mary Crawford continued to grow in Edmund’s thoughts. He loved her conversation, her taste, her spirit, and the brightness she brought into every room. He still met with things in her that pained him, but he believed, or wished to believe, that such faults were slight and could be softened by better influence. Fanny, who knew better than anyone how much Edmund admired Mary, suffered quietly and said nothing. In the same weeks that Maria was becoming more deeply entangled with Henry, Edmund was also moving farther into an attachment that was not safe for him.

Thus the autumn went on with outward ease and inward disorder. Sir Thomas’s return drew nearer. Mr. Rushworth remained constant and foolish. Maria grew more restless. Julia grew more jealous. Henry Crawford found new pleasure in continuing what he had no honorable wish to finish. Mary kept Edmund charmed while not always sharing his deepest feelings. And Fanny, with less power than any of them, saw enough to be afraid. Nothing had yet broken, but the whole house was moving toward trouble.

Part 7

Soon after these uneasy autumn weeks had begun, another visitor arrived at Mansfield, and with him came a new kind of danger. This was Mr. Yates, a fashionable young man, a friend of Tom's, and a younger son of a lord. He had not much solid value in himself, but he had money enough for pleasure, habits of expense, and a lively love of whatever was called amusement. Sir Thomas, had he been at home, would probably not have wished to see such a guest settled comfortably in the house. But Sir Thomas was in Antigua, and Tom was glad enough to welcome any man who could make Mansfield more entertaining.

Mr. Yates came earlier than had been expected because a large party at another great house had suddenly broken up. He had gone there for pleasure, and most of all for acting. A private play had been nearly ready for performance when a death in the family had destroyed the whole scheme. He had been within two days of success, applause, and a flattering notice in the newspapers, and he felt the loss with all the seriousness that a foolish young man can give to a foolish disappointment. From the moment of his arrival, he could speak of little except rehearsals, parts, dresses, jokes, scenery, and the glory that had been almost his.

His hearers were ready enough to listen. A taste for the stage, or at least a taste for pretending, is common among the young, and at Mansfield there was already vanity, idleness, restlessness, and a wish to turn every passing interest into excitement. Mr. Yates described the play that had been chosen at Ecclesford, spoke of the different parts, praised some performances, criticized others, and kept them all alive with the picture of what had nearly happened. The subject suited Tom exactly. It gave him animation, occupation, and the pleasant feeling that something clever and uncommon might be attempted under his own roof.

Maria and Julia were equally pleased, though not for exactly the same reasons. To them, acting promised novelty, display, and a chance of appearing to advantage before Henry Crawford. Henry himself, who liked any scheme that offered movement, clever talk, and new relations among the party, entered into the subject at once. Mary Crawford, too, had all the ease and quickness that such an amusement seemed to require. Only Edmund looked doubtful from the beginning, and Fanny, though she said almost nothing, felt a quiet dread before any plan had been formed.

At first the talk was no more than talk. People laughed, suggested, admired, and imagined. But at Mansfield, where there were many young persons together and no stronger principle near them than Edmund's, amusement could easily become intention. Tom soon began to wonder aloud whether something of the same sort might not be done there. "Why should Ecclesford have all the pleasure?" he said. "We have rooms enough, people enough, and a long dull autumn before us. I do not see why we should not act too."

Mr. Yates caught fire immediately. "Exactly," he cried. "That is the very thing. Mansfield would do admirably. You have the house, the family, the right ages, and half the spirit already. Nothing is wanted but decision." Maria smiled, Henry supported the plan, Julia looked ready for anything that promised distinction, and even Mary laughed as if the thing were almost settled. Edmund then spoke more seriously than any of them. "There is one thing wanting," he said. "My father's consent."

Tom tried to make light of that objection. "My father is in Antigua," he answered, "and is not likely to trouble himself about our finding some amusement while he is away." Edmund replied, "That is not the point. The house is his. The arrangement of the family is his. We have no right to turn his home into a theatre merely because he is absent." This had weight in itself, but it had little power over young people already pleased with the image of their own success. They answered him with laughter, excuses, and easy assurances that Sir Thomas would never truly mind a harmless private play.

Fanny listened with a beating heart. She entirely agreed with Edmund, yet she could scarcely hope that anyone would listen to him. She knew too well the spirit of the rest. They did not want to judge the matter. They wanted to enjoy it. If there was even a doubtful line, they were ready to step over it, because stepping over it promised more pleasure than stopping short. She felt all this more keenly because she had no power at all to guide the discussion, and because every look and every word seemed to carry Edmund farther into difficulty.

The first question after that was what play they should choose. Here trouble appeared at once, because no single piece pleased everybody. Some plays had too few parts, some had parts of the wrong sort, and some contained matter that could not well be acted by members of the same family under such circumstances. There was also the problem of the rooms, the scenery, the rehearsals, and the time. Yet none of these difficulties discouraged them. On the contrary, each difficulty seemed only to make the scheme more interesting. Young people often enjoy an amusement more when it looks like work.

They discussed one piece after another. Mr. Yates wanted something with spirit and movement. Tom wanted something that would make a proper event of the thing. Henry Crawford wanted parts with life in them and did not care much what the moral side of the business might be. Mary was ready to laugh at all the scruples of the others so long as she herself might be entertained. Maria and Julia thought chiefly of what would allow them to appear well, while Mrs. Norris, once she understood that the plan might really go forward, became its busiest defender, because it gave her a new field for arranging, praising, and managing.

Edmund remained the one steady opponent. He did not storm or preach, but he said again and again that the whole thing was wrong. It was not only that Sir Thomas was absent. It was also the kind of intimacy, freedom, and confusion that such a scheme must bring into the house. Rehearsals would mix people together in ways that common daily life did not. Pretending strong feelings would make real feelings less guarded. Vanity, rivalry, and improper ease would naturally increase. Edmund did not state every fear in full, yet he felt enough of them to wish the project stopped before it was fully born.

Fanny understood him better than anyone. She saw, though imperfectly, what he meant. She had already seen Henry Crawford too attentive to Maria, Maria too willing to enjoy what should not have pleased her, Julia too jealous to be safe, and Mary too ready to laugh serious objections away. To place all these people together under a theatrical plan, to give them scenes of feeling to rehearse, and to do it all in Sir Thomas's absence, seemed to her full of danger. She did not know how to argue. She only knew that the whole thing felt wrong.

At one point Edmund turned to her, almost as if asking whether she too thought badly of the scheme. Fanny, frightened to be addressed before so many, answered in a low voice, "I think you are right." The words were few, but they were sincere. Edmund was glad to hear them, though they did not strengthen his power over the others. Fanny's support could comfort him; it could not command the room. She was too timid, too little valued, and too accustomed to stand behind everybody else.

The dispute might still have ended in nothing if the right book had not happened to appear at the right moment. But Henry Crawford, moving among the books with his usual readiness, found a copy of *Lovers' Vows*. He opened it, looked through it, and quickly declared that this was the very thing. Mr. Yates agreed almost immediately. The piece had enough parts, enough movement, enough feeling, and enough importance to satisfy the strongest theatrical appetite among them. Tom approved. Maria and Julia were interested before they had half understood what it contained. Mary laughed over the title and was ready to be pleased by anything the others praised.

Edmund objected again, and more strongly than before. Of all pieces, this seemed to him particularly improper for such performers and such a house. He did not wish his sisters to act it. He did not wish Mary Crawford to act it. He did not wish to see Mansfield arranged around it as if no question of judgment or delicacy could possibly arise. Tom answered impatiently that Edmund was too grave, too difficult, and too determined to spoil the comfort of everybody else. Mr. Yates declared that the play was excellent. Henry spoke lightly but cleverly in its defense. One voice after another came in on the side of acting it, until Edmund stood almost alone.

Even then he would not give way in principle. “I cannot approve it,” he said. “I cannot think it right. If you must act, choose something less open to objection. Better still, do not act at all.” But the movement of the room had now gone beyond calm debate. A play had been found. Excitement had found its object. From that moment, the chief feeling among most of them was not whether they should act, but how soon they could begin. Fanny felt the change at once. The danger that had before been only in the air had now taken shape.

Before the evening ended, *Lovers’ Vows* had become the center of every thought. They spoke of the characters, of who might take which part, of what room might serve, of how the stage might be arranged, and of the pleasure of having a real occupation for every day. The more they talked, the more alive they became. Every objection was treated as a small trouble that would soon be overcome. Only Edmund looked more serious with every minute, and only Fanny felt more unhappy the nearer the plan came to life.

What troubled her most was not only the play itself. It was the spirit behind it. Mansfield had once had order, distance, and a clear sense of what was proper. Now, step by step, that order was being turned into amusement. A guest full of theatrical vanity had come into the house, and instead of being laughed at and forgotten, he had infected almost everyone. Edmund still stood apart, but even he was being drawn into the center of the matter by his very effort to resist it. Fanny saw that the others were not merely planning an entertainment. They were beginning a course from which it would be hard to go back.

Part 8

Once *Lovers’ Vows* had been named, the next struggle was over the women’s parts. Tom, thinking himself a manager already, tried to settle everything with quick decision. He said Maria must be Agatha and Miss Crawford must be Amelia. Julia heard this with growing anger. She had already been hurt by Henry Crawford’s clear preference for Maria, and now even the play seemed arranged against her.

Henry only made matters worse. He praised Amelia as a difficult and delicate part, and he spoke as if only a woman of real grace and skill could do it well. That was enough to make Julia feel that Maria had won again, and at her expense. Maria herself looked satisfied, calm on the surface and secretly pleased to triumph. At last Julia could bear no more. “Do not fear that I want the part,” she said sharply. “I will not be Agatha, and I will do nothing else. I hate Amelia. She is a foolish, unpleasant girl.” Then she left the room in anger.

No one truly pitied her except Fanny. The others quickly returned to the practical side of the business. Tom and Mr. Yates began talking of scenery and rooms. Maria prepared to go herself to the Parsonage and offer Amelia to Mary Crawford. Henry stayed near her and spoke in a low voice that seemed meant only for her. Fanny was left alone at last, and the first thing she did was take up the book and begin to read the play for herself.

What she found there shocked her deeply. She had expected something foolish perhaps, something lively perhaps, but not something that seemed to her so unfit for the daughters of a family like Mansfield Park. The story of Agatha, the freedom of Amelia’s speeches, and the open language of feeling all struck her as improper for such performers in such a house. She could hardly believe that Maria and Julia fully understood what they had accepted. Most of all, she longed for Edmund to come back and say clearly what must surely stop the whole plan.

Mary Crawford accepted Amelia readily enough. Soon after that, Mr. Rushworth arrived, and he too was given a part. He had the choice between Count Cassel and Anhalt, and after much confusion, much looking through the play, and some help from Maria, he fixed on Count Cassel. He liked the idea of rich clothes much more than the idea of difficult speeches. Maria, who had no wish to hear him speak more than necessary, was quite content. She even helped shorten some of his speeches and advised him on colors for his costume, which pleased him greatly.

Edmund returned before dinner and heard the news at once from Mr. Rushworth himself. “We have got a play,” he said cheerfully. “It is *Lovers’ Vows*, and I am to be Count Cassel. I am to wear a blue dress and a pink satin cloak." Edmund looked at him in astonishment and then at his brother and sisters as if he could hardly think they were serious. "*Lovers' Vows*?" was all he said at first. But his face showed much more than the single word did. Fanny watched him with anxious hope.

When Tom, Yates, and Mr. Rushworth had left the room for a moment, Edmund spoke more freely to Maria. He begged her to read the play again carefully and judge it honestly. "Read only the first act aloud to my mother or aunt," he said, "and then decide whether it is fit." Maria answered with spirit and with pride. She said she knew the play very well, that a few small changes would remove any objection, and that she was not the only young woman who thought it proper enough. Edmund could only answer, "In this matter, it is you who must lead. You must set the example." But Maria had no wish to lead in that direction.

From that point the scheme moved faster rather than slower. Tom took the billiard-room for the theatre. Carpenters came in, measurements were taken, and a scene-painter was employed. The house itself seemed to change its use. Rooms were no longer only rooms. They became stage, dressing-place, rehearsal room, and store of properties. A spirit of business and excitement spread everywhere, and the more the work grew, the harder it became for anyone to stop it. Even what had first looked silly began to look important because money, labor, and pride were now tied to it.

Fanny saw all this with increasing pain. She could not help moving through the house and meeting the signs of the new activity at every turn. Bits of painted canvas, discussions of entrances and exits, arguments over words, and endless talk about parts followed her everywhere. She still agreed with Edmund completely, but she also saw that he was no longer strong enough to master the others. He disliked the scheme, yet the scheme now had a body, a room, and a daily life of its own.

Another difficulty soon rose. Mrs. Grant, who might naturally have taken the smallest woman's part, was not to be depended on. Dr. Grant wanted his dinners, his comfort, and his wife's attention too much to like her being drawn into rehearsals. Besides, Mrs. Grant herself had not enough eagerness for the stage to struggle for it. So the company still lacked one woman for the Cottager's Wife, and when that want became clear, people began to look around for the easiest answer. Their eyes turned at last toward Fanny.

At first the suggestion seemed almost playful, but it quickly grew serious. Mrs. Norris declared that Fanny ought of course to oblige the family in such a small matter. Lady Bertram asked lazily why she should not do it, since it was only a little part. Tom said that anybody could manage it. Even those who did not press hard seemed to assume that she must yield in the end. Fanny was frightened but firm. "No," she said softly, again and again. "Please do not ask me. I cannot act."

Her refusal surprised them because she so seldom refused anything. Mrs. Norris called it ungrateful and unreasonable. Tom was impatient. The whole tone of the room seemed to say that Fanny had no right to have a will of her own when everyone else wanted ease. Yet fear itself gave her strength. She could not stand on a stage, could not speak such words, and could not bear the thought of being watched by the others while doing it. If they had asked her to carry messages or sit up half the night sewing, she would have done it; but this she truly could not do.

At length the pressure stopped for a while, though not because they respected her much more than before. They only turned away to other immediate wants. Fanny escaped with her work to the East room, glad to be alone, glad to be away from one more unnecessary rehearsal, and glad not to see Mr. Rushworth. She tried to quiet her mind with sewing, but her thoughts would not be quiet. The whole house seemed restless around her, and even her little refuge felt uncertain because the play had spread everywhere.

After a short time there was a gentle knock at the door, and Mary Crawford entered. She was bright, smiling, and perfectly at ease, though she had come on a serious purpose of her own. "I have come to beg your help," she said. "Please hear my third act with me. I had meant to rehearse it with Edmund by ourselves, but he is not here, and I do not think I can go through it with him until I have hardened myself a little. There are some speeches that are not easy to say." Fanny could only answer politely that she would do whatever she could.

Mary opened the book and pointed out the very speeches that troubled her. She laughed, but her laughter admitted the truth. “How am I to look him in the face and say such things?” she asked. “You must help me. I will imagine you are him for a little while, and then perhaps I shall manage better later.” Fanny took the book and read because she had promised to help, but every line made her more uncomfortable. The play had seemed improper when she read it alone. Spoken in a room at Mansfield, with Edmund clearly in Mary’s mind, it seemed worse.

Mary, however, was too lively to remain uneasy for long. She joked about the school-room chairs that must now serve for the stage, about Yates storming somewhere else in the house, and about Agatha and Frederick rehearsing endlessly together. Fanny heard her, answered when she had to answer, and did her best to remain composed. Yet as she read Amelia’s lines and imagined Edmund later reading the answers, a new fear entered her heart. The play was not merely an amusement now. It was drawing people into new closeness, new freedom, and new dangers. What Edmund had warned against was already beginning to happen.

Part 9

The next morning Fanny went early to the East room, because it was the one place in the house where she could think quietly. It had once been the schoolroom, and over time it had become almost her own. Her books were there, her plants were there, her little works and treasures were there, and almost every object in the room reminded her of some comfort from earlier years. When she had been hurt, misunderstood, or laughed at, she had often found peace there afterward. Now, however, even that room could not calm her at once. She was no longer sure only of what she feared. She had begun to question what she ought to do.

She walked slowly from one side of the room to the other and tried to judge herself honestly. Was she right to refuse so strongly when everyone else wished her to agree? Was it principle, or was it only fear? She knew she hated the idea of acting, hated being watched, hated speaking before others, and hated the play itself. Yet she also knew that she owed much to the family, and that the memory of many gifts and kindnesses could weaken her courage even when her conscience remained clear.

While she was still in this state of doubt, Edmund came in. She saw at once that he had something serious on his mind. “I want your opinion, Fanny,” he said. “I do not know what to do.” She was surprised and pleased, because nothing was dearer to her than being trusted by him. Yet she also feared what was coming, because his face showed conflict rather than peace.

He then told her the new trouble. The play still lacked the man to perform Amelia’s lover, and the others were ready to bring in a young man from outside the family to take the part. This, to Edmund, seemed worse than all that had gone before. It would destroy what little privacy had been claimed at first, bring a stranger into the house at all hours, and create a degree of easy familiarity that he thought very improper. “There is only one way to stop it,” he said at last. “I must take the part myself.”

Fanny was silent for a moment because his decision hurt her more than she could quickly express. He mistook her silence for doubt of his reasoning and tried to persuade her further. He spoke of Mary Crawford and said it would be ungenerous to force her to act with a stranger when she had clearly shrunk from the thought. He said her feelings ought to be considered and that he could not bear to see her placed in such an unpleasant position. Fanny listened, but this argument only made the matter worse for her heart, because it showed too plainly how much Mary’s comfort weighed with him.

At last she answered as honestly as she could. “I am sorry for Miss Crawford,” she said, “but I am more sorry to see you do what you once resolved against, and what you know my uncle would dislike.” Edmund admitted that she was right to feel the difficulty, but he still thought there was no other choice. If he refused, the stranger would come; if he accepted, the evil would at least remain within the family. Fanny could not agree, yet she could not oppose him with force. As so often before, she saw clearly and spoke weakly.

His decision was soon known in the house, and it was greeted with joy by the very people who had most reason to feel ashamed of it. Tom and Maria were delighted. They had not only secured the play. They had also seen Edmund brought down from the higher ground on which he had stood before them. Outwardly they behaved kindly and with much good humor. Inwardly they enjoyed the victory. They could now think that his judgment had given way, not to conscience, but to personal feeling.

Mary Crawford was delighted too, though in a softer and prettier way. Her cheerfulness returned at once, and the whole matter looked light again as soon as her own difficulty had been removed. One kindness followed from her pleasure. At her request, Mrs. Grant agreed to take the small part that had been pressed upon Fanny. So Fanny was safe from acting at last. Yet even this relief had bitterness in it, because it came through Mary, and because Edmund spoke of Mary's goodness with open admiration.

Fanny was now spared the stage, but she was not spared suffering. The rest of the party grew busier, brighter, and more important every day, while she felt more outside them than ever. Everyone had some active interest—some part to learn, some dress to discuss, some scene to improve, some private understanding with another person. She alone had nothing. She could move among them unnoticed or slip away to the East room without being missed. At moments she thought almost anything would have been easier than standing so near them all while having no share except pain.

Julia, however, was unhappy too, though not in the same innocent way. She had allowed Henry Crawford's attentions to please her for too long, and now she could no longer doubt that Maria was preferred. Her pride was hurt, her temper was wounded, and she had neither enough self-command nor enough generosity to bear the injury well. Sometimes she sat silent, dark, and angry. Sometimes she turned suddenly lively with Mr. Yates and laughed at everybody else. But nothing in her changed the real truth: she was suffering from jealousy, and suffering openly enough for Fanny to pity her.

Henry Crawford, after one or two small attempts to smooth matters over, gave up caring much about Julia's feelings. He was too occupied elsewhere, and too careless by nature, to persevere long in repairing the harm he had done. His flirtation with Julia had amused him while it was easy. Now his attention was more fully fixed on Maria, and that suited his vanity better. Mary, who understood him well, warned him again not to go too far; but she warned him lightly, as a sister who disliked trouble more than wrong. Mrs. Grant was not easy, yet she too preferred comfort to strong action.

Meanwhile, rehearsals became more serious and less pleasant. The novelty had not disappeared, but small complaints rose every day. Tom grew impatient with delays, the painter, and the waiting. Mr. Yates disliked other people's acting almost as much as he admired his own. Mrs. Grant laughed when others wanted gravity. Mr. Rushworth could hardly remember where to enter or what to say. Edmund, though now engaged in the scheme, was still annoyed by the growing expense, the show of the whole thing, and Tom's careless habit of inviting more people than had first been intended.

Fanny heard almost all these complaints because she listened kindly and was often the only quiet person near enough to hear them. She learned who thought whom dull, who thought whom too loud, and who believed another person spoiled every scene. She saw also what pained her far more than any spoken complaint. Maria avoided rehearsing with Mr. Rushworth whenever she could, and seemed always ready to rehearse with Henry Crawford. Their first scene together was repeated more often than need required, and repeated in a way that made its meaning too real. Fanny could not watch them without uneasiness.

Yet even in all this discomfort, she could not deny that Henry Crawford acted best. She did not like him as a man, but she had to admit his talent. He had more ease than Edmund, more taste than Tom, and more judgment than Mr. Yates. Maria too acted well—too well, Fanny sometimes thought, because feeling seemed to pass too naturally from the play into real life. Mr. Rushworth, on the other hand, remained helpless. Fanny tried patiently to help him learn, repeated his lines with him, and even almost learned the part herself for his sake, but little came of it.

Thus the house that had once seemed orderly and settled was now full of noise, disappointment, vanity, jealousy, and hidden fear. No one was entirely satisfied, though almost everyone still pretended to be happy. Each person wanted something different, and each blamed another for not making the whole move more smoothly. Fanny, standing outside the active circle, saw more of this than most of them did. The play was no longer only a game. It was beginning to show what each person truly was.

Part 10

The rehearsals went on until almost everyone in the house was tired, though few would admit it. What had begun as pleasure had turned into a daily demand. There were scenes to repeat, words to correct, entrances to arrange, curtains to measure, and new small causes of annoyance every hour. Yet because so much had already been done, nobody wished to be the first to confess that the whole thing had gone too far. Pride held them together when good sense should have separated them.

Fanny, who had no part in the acting, became more necessary than ever in quiet ways. She helped Mr. Rushworth with his lines, because no one else had patience enough for him. She listened when one person complained of another. She carried messages, found books, and stood ready wherever she could be useful. In this way she saw more of the disorder than the actors themselves did, because each of them was busy with personal wishes, while she had nothing to do but observe and feel.

What troubled her most was not the noise of the house, nor even the play itself. It was the new freedom among the young people. Maria and Henry were too much together. They repeated scenes that needed no repetition and seemed to forget that others could see them. Edmund and Mary also spent more time in each other’s company than before, and though their manner was far more guarded, Fanny could not watch them without pain. What had once been a family house now seemed full of private understandings, hidden hopes, jealous looks, and feelings that had found a dangerous excuse for showing themselves.

One day Mrs. Norris came running with the greatest excitement to say that everything was at last nearly ready. The stage was advanced, the curtain would soon hang properly, and another full rehearsal must take place that very evening. Tom and Mr. Yates were all fire and movement. Maria was agitated, Henry animated, Mary bright, and even Mr. Rushworth more important than usual because he had a costume to think about. Fanny alone felt only dread. She wished the evening over before it had begun.

When the time came, the whole party gathered for another rehearsal. The room had been altered enough to make the house look strange even to its own people. Furniture had been moved, lights placed differently, and the appearance of a real theatre was now much stronger than before. Fanny sat apart with her work, as if work could protect her from what she saw and heard. She was not forgotten because no one cared for her, but because everyone cared far more for something else.

At first the rehearsal went on in its usual confused way. One person forgot a word, another entered too early, another laughed where seriousness was wanted. Mr. Yates scolded, Tom arranged, Henry corrected, and Mary smiled at everything. Yet beneath the outward confusion there was something more dangerous than disorder. The speeches of feeling were no longer merely speeches. Maria spoke them too naturally to Henry, and Henry answered too easily. Even Fanny, who wanted to think as little ill as possible, could not doubt that the play was helping what should never have been encouraged.

In the middle of all this, while attention was fixed on the stage and on the persons before it, the door opened. No one had expected interruption. For one moment there was no sound at all except the dying echo of the last speech. Then every eye turned, and there stood Sir Thomas. His return had not been looked for that day, still less at that exact moment, and the shock was complete. It was not only that the father of the house had entered unexpectedly. He had entered and found his home changed into the very thing he would most have disapproved.

The whole room seemed struck silent and still. Tom lost his color. Maria stepped back in confusion. Julia, who had enough resentment in her heart to make fear seem almost relief, said nothing at all. Mr. Yates looked like a man who had walked into open disgrace and had not yet decided whether to defend himself or escape. Mr. Rushworth could only stare. Mary Crawford preserved more outward self-command than most of the others, but even she was serious. Edmund's position was perhaps the most painful of all, because he had once opposed the scheme and had ended by joining it. Fanny alone, though full of pity for others, felt inwardly that the house had been saved in the very moment of its greatest danger.

Sir Thomas looked around him and understood enough at once. He did not break into loud anger. That would almost have been easier to bear. Instead, he spoke with grave astonishment and cold displeasure. "What is all this?" he asked. "Am I to find my house turned into a theatre?" No one answered well. Explanations began and failed. Tom tried to speak of harmless amusement, Mr. Yates attempted politeness, and others looked as if they wished the floor would open under them. Sir Thomas heard enough, saw more than enough, and needed no long account.

The rehearsal ended in that instant. Whatever words were still to be spoken in the play remained unspoken. Whatever hopes had been built on the next scene or the next evening were gone. Sir Thomas did not storm, but his judgment was clear, and it was final. The stage, the curtain, the preparations, and the whole bold plan were to disappear. Mansfield Park was no place for such entertainment, and his absence had not given anyone the right to forget what was due to him, to the house, or to themselves.

The evening that followed was smooth only on the surface. Music was called for, conversation was attempted, and outward order returned, but real ease did not. Almost every person at table was disturbed in a different way. Tom felt shame mixed with irritation. Edmund felt self-reproach. Maria was in painful suspense, because Sir Thomas's return brought Mr. Rushworth nearer than ever, while Henry Crawford had still said nothing decisive. Julia was angry, jealous, and secretly glad that the play, which had favored Maria, was gone. Fanny pitied them all, but she also felt that a wrong road had at last been stopped.

Maria's thoughts that night were in a miserable state. More than ever she needed Henry Crawford to speak openly and without delay. If he had declared himself then, much later misery might perhaps have been prevented, though even that is uncertain. She had expected to see him the next morning, and she hoped that the shock of Sir Thomas's return would force him into seriousness. But the first morning passed in disappointment. No one from the Parsonage came. A note arrived from Mrs. Grant with civil inquiry and congratulation, but Henry himself did not appear. To Maria, those missing hours were full of restless fear.

On the following day he did come, walking up with Dr. Grant to pay his respects to Sir Thomas. Maria saw the introduction with strong agitation, because now the man she had preferred stood before the father whose return was to unite her with another. Yet even in that painful moment Henry could not wholly give up his old light manner. Speaking in a low voice to Tom, and with only the smallest show of respect toward the interruption that had stopped them, he even asked whether there was any chance that the play might be resumed. He said that if *Lovers' Vows* were to begin again, he would return at any time and hold himself ready for the party. It was a foolish offer, and one that showed how imperfectly he understood either Sir Thomas or the seriousness of the whole situation.

Nothing more was needed after that to show that the theatre at Mansfield was truly dead. Sir Thomas was present, and his presence changed the whole moral air of the house. What had seemed easy in his absence became impossible before him. Rooms must be rooms again. Family order must be family order again. The curtain would come down without ever rising properly, and the young people, whether angry, relieved, ashamed, or disappointed, would now have to face themselves without the excuse of a rehearsal. For Fanny, that change was severe for others, but it was also merciful. She felt that something dangerous had been stopped just before it passed a point from which it could not have been called back.

Part 11

Sir Thomas's return changed Mansfield Park at once, even apart from the end of the play. Under his rule the house became quieter, more regular, and more serious again. Some of the visitors were no longer wanted, and those who remained were less lively than before. There was much less going back and forth between the Park and the Parsonage. Sir Thomas, after finding his home in such a state, wished at first to keep almost entirely to his own family, and among outsiders the only people he really drew near were the Rushworths.

Edmund understood his father's feeling, though he was sorry for one result of it. One evening he said to Fanny, "I only wish my father knew the Grants better. They were really attentive to my mother and sisters while he was away. If he knew them better, I think he would value them as they deserve. We are rather dull among ourselves now, and Dr. and Mrs. Grant would bring some life into our evenings." Fanny answered more quietly, "I do not think my uncle wants any addition at present. I think he likes the very quietness you call dullness."

Edmund reflected a moment and then admitted that she might be right. Fanny went on to say that the evenings did not seem long to her at all. "I like to hear my uncle speak of the West Indies," she said. "I could listen to him for a long time. It interests me much more than many livelier things." Edmund smiled at her and began to tease her gently. He told her that if she wanted compliments, she should go to Sir Thomas, because Sir Thomas had lately begun to think her very pretty and would certainly be ready to say so.

Fanny was made uncomfortable at once. Praise from Edmund already felt too strong for her, and praise about her looks was more than she could bear easily. He still went on in a kind, playful manner and told her that her uncle was disposed to be pleased with her in every way. Then he added more seriously, "I only wish you would talk to him more. You are still too silent in the evening circle." Fanny answered with sudden earnestness, "But I do speak more than I did. Did you not hear me ask him about the slave trade last night?"

"I did," said Edmund, "and I hoped you would ask more." Fanny lowered her eyes and said, "I wanted to, but there was such a silence after it. My cousins sat there without saying a word, and I did not want to seem to care more for my uncle's knowledge than his own daughters did. It would have looked as if I were trying to make myself appear better than they were." Edmund understood her at once. He admired her modesty, but he also wished she were less afraid of being seen as she truly was.

Then, as often happened, his thoughts moved from Fanny to Mary Crawford. He told Fanny that Miss Crawford had spoken of her with great good sense and had said that Fanny seemed almost as afraid of praise as other women were of neglect. He praised Mary's quick understanding of character and then wondered aloud what Mary thought of Sir Thomas. He wished they met more often, and he hoped Mary did not imagine that Sir Thomas disliked her. Fanny answered as calmly as she could, but there was pain in the effort. She said Miss Crawford could not easily fear neglect where all the rest of the family liked her so much.

The next day Sir Thomas, Edmund, and Tom dined at Sotherton, and Sir Thomas had five long hours in Mr. Rushworth's company. That visit made plain what he had not fully understood before. He had wished to think well of the young man, but he could no longer hide from himself that Mr. Rushworth was dull, uncertain, and weak in mind. He was neither firm in judgment nor quick in business, and he had much less substance than Sir Thomas had once hoped to find in the man who was to marry Maria.

After that day Sir Thomas began to look more closely at his daughter herself. He soon saw that her manner toward Mr. Rushworth was cold and careless. She did not love him. Indeed, she hardly seemed to like him. Being both a proud and a kind father, Sir Thomas resolved to speak to her seriously. He told her that if she repented the engagement, he would rather face every difficulty of breaking it than see her unhappy for life. He asked her to be sincere and assured her that he would himself release her if she wished it.

Maria had one short struggle in her mind, but only one. Pride, hurt feeling, and the desire to escape Mansfield were all stronger in her than honesty. She thanked her father warmly for his kindness and said he was entirely mistaken. She declared that she still thought very highly of Mr. Rushworth and had no wish at all to end the engagement. Sir Thomas was relieved and accepted her answer too readily. He wished the marriage to succeed, and once she had spoken firmly, he preferred to believe her rather than examine further.

Maria left the conversation satisfied in her own way. She was glad that she had now bound herself again to Sotherton and put herself beyond the possibility of appearing rejected by Henry Crawford. If Henry had wounded her happiness, she would not let him wound her pride, her position, and her future too. She longed more than ever to leave home, leave restraint, and lose herself in consequence, movement, and society. Mr. Rushworth wanted the marriage soon, and Maria wanted it no less. So the preparations moved quickly, and before the middle of November she became Mrs. Rushworth in a very proper wedding, where everything looked right even if very little felt right.

After the marriage and Julia's departure with the new couple, Fanny's place in the family changed. She was now the only young woman left in the drawing room, and that alone made her more visible. People noticed whether she was present or absent. "Where is Fanny?" was sometimes asked now without any errand in it. Even at the Parsonage she became welcome in a new way. Mary Crawford, deprived of the Miss Bertrams and tired of dull November weather, found real relief in any fresh face, and Fanny was soon invited more than she had ever been before.

The beginning of this new intimacy came by chance. Fanny had been sent into the village by Mrs. Norris and was caught in a heavy shower near the Parsonage. She tried to shelter herself under a tree, but Dr. Grant saw her and came out with an umbrella, so she had no choice but to enter the house, wet and ashamed. To Mary Crawford, who had been looking gloomily at the rain and thinking the day ruined, Fanny's arrival was like a gift. She and Mrs. Grant were immediately kind, helped her change into dry clothes, and kept her in the drawing room until the weather improved.

During that visit Fanny noticed the harp and confessed that she had still never heard it played there. Mary was surprised and almost ashamed of the neglect. "Then you must hear it now," she said. She played at once, and Fanny listened with sincere pleasure. Mary, delighted to have so grateful and admiring a listener, played one piece after another and then said, "You must stay for one more. It is your cousin Edmund's favorite." That name made the music more moving to

Fanny than before. She imagined Edmund listening in that very room and liking the same air, and though she was pleased, she also felt an even stronger wish to escape before she betrayed too much.

From that day she began to go to the Parsonage every few days. She did not go because she truly loved Mary Crawford, for she did not. She still often disliked Mary's tone, her worldliness, and the ease with which she made light of things Fanny respected. Yet there was a kind of attraction in being wanted, in hearing the harp, and in sharing walks and conversation that no one at home was eager to offer her. The weather was unusually mild, and the two young women often walked or sat together in Mrs. Grant's shrubbery, where Mary talked more openly than she had done before.

One day Mary said, "I once thought country life impossible for me, but now I can imagine it pleasant enough under certain conditions. An elegant house of moderate size, good connections, constant society, some importance in the neighborhood, and then after all the visits and dinners, nothing worse than a quiet evening with the person one likes best in the world. There is nothing dreadful in such a life, is there, Miss Price?" Fanny understood the direction of her thoughts very well, but she would not help them forward. She only answered, "Envy Mrs. Rushworth? I do not know that anyone need do that."

Mary laughed and continued in the same playful spirit until she suddenly saw someone approaching and cried, "Ah, here he is." It was Edmund, walking with Mrs. Grant. Mary immediately began talking of his name and said she was glad his elder brother was gone, because then he could be Mr. Bertram again. Fanny, more moved than she wished to show, answered warmly that there was nobleness in the name Edmund, and that it sounded to her full of honor and deep feeling. Mary laughed at that too, but Edmund came up with particular pleasure in finding them together. He was delighted that two persons so dear to him should now be friends, while Fanny, standing between them, could only feel that the new closeness she witnessed might one day bring happiness to one of them and sorrow to herself.

Part 12

After Maria's marriage and departure, Mansfield Park seemed at once emptier and calmer. Julia was gone too, and with two daughters missing, the drawing-room had a new shape. Fanny, who had long been little more than a quiet figure in the background, now became more visible simply because there were fewer people to stand before her. She was still modest, still retiring, and still ready to think herself of no importance, yet others were forced to notice her more often. Even small changes in a household can alter a person's place in it.

Sir Thomas was now more inclined than before to be pleased with her. He had been disappointed in much, and disappointment often makes people value modest good sense when they had once overlooked it. Fanny's quiet attention to Lady Bertram, her regular usefulness, her careful manners, and her freedom from display all recommended her more and more to him. Edmund, seeing this, was glad, and he sometimes tried to encourage her to take advantage of the new favor. "My father likes you much better than you think," he said. "He only wishes you would talk to him more."

Fanny answered with her usual sincerity that she did try. "I do speak more than I used to," she said. "I asked him about the slave trade, and I wanted to ask more. But nobody else said anything, and I was afraid of seeming to put myself forward." Edmund understood the feeling well enough. Fanny could never forget that she was not a daughter of the house. Even when she was most right, she was afraid of looking as if she wanted to shine at the expense of those who stood above her.

Yet while Mansfield was quieter, it was not entirely dull. The Parsonage still gave variety to their lives, and Fanny's place there also changed. Mary Crawford, deprived of Maria and Julia, found Fanny much more agreeable company than before. She liked to have someone to listen to her, someone who admired her harp, and someone whom she could treat with easy kindness without effort. Fanny did not truly love Mary, but she could not be indifferent to being wanted. So she went more often to the Parsonage, heard more music, took more walks, and was drawn more often into Mary's confidence.

During one of those visits, Mary spoke more openly than usual about the future. She painted, in her bright way, a picture of country life that might still be pleasant if only it were mixed with enough society, taste, and importance. Then she turned toward Edmund more than once in both look and meaning. Fanny could not mistake her. Mary was thinking seriously of him, or at least as seriously as a woman like Mary could think while still laughing at half her own feelings. The knowledge pained Fanny, but it did not make her unjust. She could see why Edmund loved Mary, because Mary was full of life and quickness and beauty. She could also see why the match might still fail, because Mary and Edmund did not value the same things in the deepest way.

Edmund himself was moving steadily nearer a crisis. He loved Mary more every day, but he was also approaching the time when he must take orders. To him, that step was not only necessary. It was right, chosen, and honorable. He had never doubted his profession in his own conscience. The doubt lay only in Mary's opinion of it. He hoped, perhaps too long, that affection might reconcile her to what judgment in her world still disliked. Fanny, who knew both hearts better than either of them guessed, saw more plainly than either of them saw themselves.

One evening at the Parsonage, that hidden difference came fully out. Mary had been lively as usual, music had helped the evening on, and things seemed easy enough on the surface. But then she learned in a more certain way than before that Edmund's taking orders was no distant possibility. It was near, fixed, and real. The knowledge struck her almost like an insult. She had hoped, half against reason, that something might change. She had trusted too much in her own influence and too little in Edmund's seriousness.

Her disappointment quickly turned into anger. She did not make a loud scene, but her manner changed. She became colder, sharper, and inwardly proud. "So he really means it," she thought. "He chooses this life fully, though he knows I could never value it." She had come very near loving him in her own manner, and because she could not respect his choice, she was hurt all the more. Before the evening ended, she had almost resolved to meet him with equal coolness. If he could hold to a life she despised, then she too would protect herself by treating the whole attachment more lightly.

Fanny saw enough that evening to understand the change, though not every word of what passed. Mary took refuge in music more than in conversation, and the cheerfulness of the room had become false. Fanny sat quietly, answered when Mr. Crawford spoke to her, and watched the whole with a heart that was uneasy for Edmund and almost ashamed for Mary. She did not rejoice in Mary's disappointment, because she knew too well that Edmund's pain must follow soon after. When feeling is one-sided, it is unhappy; when feeling is mutual but rests on different principles, it is often worse.

Soon after this came one of the evenings at Mansfield when cards were arranged in a way that brought Henry Crawford very near Fanny. Sir Thomas, Mrs. Norris, and the Grants made one table; the others, under Mary's direction, formed another. Lady Bertram knew nothing of the game before her and wanted teaching. Fanny also said she knew nothing, but Henry at once offered to sit between them and guide them both. Thus he had exactly what suited him best: business enough to seem useful, freedom enough to be playful, and a place close beside Fanny for the whole evening.

He was in excellent spirits and did everything well. He managed cards, joked with Lady Bertram, laughed at small mistakes, and still found time to speak to Fanny more than once in a tone meant especially for her. Fanny could not like him, but she could not deny his powers. He was clever, easy, and agreeable in all outward ways. Even when she wished him farther off, she was forced to answer him. For Henry, who had long enjoyed women's admiration without effort, this mild resistance had its own charm.

During a pause in the play, he began talking to Edmund about Thornton Lacey and the improvements that ought to be made there when Edmund should live in it. He spoke with taste, confidence, and the pleasure of imagining a place remade by intelligence and style. He described moving the farmyard, improving the grounds, and giving the whole house the look not merely of a clergyman's dwelling, but of a gentleman's residence. Mary listened. Edmund half agreed. Fanny, though she said little, listened very closely, because anything connected to

Edmund's future was important to her beyond all the rest.

Henry, turning partly toward Fanny, asked whether she had ever seen the place. When she said no, he went on lightly, saying that the future society between Mansfield, Sotherton, and Thornton Lacey would be a very agreeable one. There was even, he hinted, room for a fourth happy house nearby. Fanny understood enough to feel suddenly silenced. He was speaking in his easy playful way of futures that seemed simple to him and terribly complex to her. Mary and Edmund, Edmund and Thornton Lacey, Thornton Lacey and all that it implied—such things were not light matters in Fanny's mind, whatever they might be in Henry Crawford's.

The evening ended with no open event, yet Henry left it more struck by Fanny than before. He had once hardly noticed her except as a modest girl in the background. Now he saw that she had grown prettier, quieter in a way that invited attention, and more interesting because she did not seek admiration. Both Maria and Julia had welcomed his attentions and reflected them back at once. Fanny did not. She neither encouraged him nor tried to win him, and for a man like Henry, who was tired of easy victories, that reserve began to look like a challenge.

The next morning he made his new plan known to his sister. Mary found him cheerful and self-satisfied, and when she asked how he meant to amuse himself on the days when he did not hunt, he smiled and answered, "I will tell you. I mean to make Fanny Price fall in love with me." Mary laughed at first and called it nonsense. She thought he had already done enough by playing with the feelings of two cousins. But Henry only laughed the more. "No," he said, "I am not satisfied without Fanny. You do not know how much she has improved. She is quite pretty now, and what is better, she does not care for me as the others did. I want to make a small hole in Fanny Price's heart."

Mary tried, half in jest and half in earnest, to turn him from the idea. She said he ought to leave the poor girl in peace. She reminded him that Fanny was different from Maria and Julia. But Henry was only more entertained by the difference. A woman's indifference, especially when joined with sweetness and modesty, was exactly the sort of thing to tempt his vanity. He did not begin with love. He began with the desire to succeed. Yet from such beginnings, in idle and selfish people, much real trouble may grow. By the time breakfast was over, he had fully made up his mind to stay longer at Mansfield and try his new design.

Part 13

Henry did not let his new plan remain only a thought. The very next morning he came to Mansfield earlier than common politeness required, and by good luck for himself, he found Fanny almost alone. Lady Bertram was just leaving the breakfast-room, and as soon as she was gone, he turned to Fanny with unusual warmth and eagerness. Taking letters from his pocket, he said, “I am very glad to tell you this before anyone else does. Your brother has been promoted. William is now a lieutenant.”

For a moment Fanny could hardly breathe, much less speak. All her heart flew at once to William. Henry gave her the letters and watched her joy with real pleasure, because he knew he had brought happiness and because he liked to be the one who brought it. “I thought you should hear it first,” he said. “I could not bear that anyone else should have that right before you.” Fanny thanked him with a fullness of feeling she could not hide, and in that moment her gratitude was entirely sincere.

The news spread quickly through the house, and everywhere it was welcome. Sir Thomas was pleased, because he had long meant to do something for William and now saw that his interest had been of use. Lady Bertram spoke of it as a pleasant event and soon sank back into her usual ease. Mrs. Norris took care to make the whole thing sound almost as if it were one more kindness flowing naturally from Mansfield Park. But to Fanny it was not a family success or a subject of talk. It was William’s fortune, William’s joy, and therefore her own.

Henry remained near her as much as he could that day. He spoke with more steadiness and gentleness than had once been usual with him, and Fanny, though far from loving him, could not help feeling that he seemed improved. Gratitude makes many things softer for a time. She still did not trust him, still did not like his earlier habits, and still wished he would not speak in a way that hinted at more than mere kindness. Yet his behavior toward her brother's interests, and toward her own feelings as a sister, touched her much more than she wanted to admit.

There was, in addition, a ball that evening at Mansfield, long expected in the house and now made brighter for Fanny by William's news. She had been anxious about it before, because any public appearance frightened her a little. But happiness gives courage, and this day gave her more than usual. For once the evening before her seemed not a trial but a promise of pleasure.

When she dressed, she felt that several different kindnesses had come together at once. William had sent her a small cross. Edmund had helped her in one way, Mary in another, and after a little difficulty she found that she could wear the little memorial of her brother in the manner she most wished. That thought pleased her almost beyond anything in dress or appearance itself. She felt, as she looked at the cross and chain, that both William and Edmund were with her.

Even Lady Bertram remembered her on this occasion with unusual attention. It occurred to her, without being told, that Fanny might want better help than usual in dressing for the ball, and she sent her own maid upstairs. The help came too late to be useful, but the thought was kind, and Fanny felt the kindness. In a life where she was often forgotten, even small recollections had weight.

When she went down to the drawing-room, Sir Thomas looked at her with decided approval. He did not praise her too openly before her face, but he was pleased by her appearance and by the modest propriety of it. Fanny felt that she was approved, and the sense of looking well made her look better still. Then Edmund, as she passed him, quietly said, "You must dance with me, Fanny. Keep two dances for me. Any two you like, except the first." That alone would almost have been enough to make the evening dear to her.

The ball itself brought her more notice than she had ever known before. People saw that she was not merely a shy cousin in the background, but a young woman who could look very well when allowed to appear. Henry was attentive, Mary was lively, and Sir Thomas observed more than he had once done. Yet the chief happiness of the night, to Fanny, lay where it had always lain. Edmund's promised dances, his kindness, and the quiet feeling that he wished to give her pleasure mattered more than all the admiration of others.

Henry, however, came away from the evening more fixed than before in his pursuit. He had already resolved to attach Fanny, partly from vanity and partly from curiosity. Now he found that he liked being near her in a different way from the easy flirtations he had known before. She did not run to meet his attention. She did not answer quickly, and she did not show pleasure in the ordinary way. Her reserve made him more eager, because he could not win her by the same methods that had once served him elsewhere.

The next step came through Mary. She sent Fanny a note with congratulations on William's promotion, but it also contained playful lines that plainly pointed to Henry's feelings. To Mary such teasing was light and natural. To Fanny it was painful and alarming. She could not bear to have the subject made into a joke, and she could not bear still less to think that Henry and Mary together might be reading her silence as encouragement.

She sat down at once to answer, though her hand trembled and her thoughts were confused. She thanked Mary warmly for her kindness about William, but then she begged her not to mention the other matter again. In substance, what she meant was simple. She wanted Mary to understand that Henry's attentions gave her no pleasure, that she knew too well the manner of man he had been, and that the whole subject must end there. It was not an elegant note, but it was honest.

While she was still writing, Henry himself came near under the excuse of receiving the note for his sister. Seeing how shaken she was, he said in a low voice, "Please do not hurry. I do not mean to trouble you." But his very gentleness troubled her more, because it showed how closely he was watching her. She gave him the note at last without raising her eyes and moved away at once. He had no choice but to take it and go.

That day left Fanny in a strange mixture of joy and distress. William's advancement was a real and lasting happiness, and every thought of it warmed her heart again. But Henry's conduct, Mary's playful interference, and the whole burden of being noticed in such a way gave her deep discomfort. She hoped she had now spoken clearly enough through her note. She hoped Henry would understand her meaning and leave Mansfield with his sister very soon. Yet even while she hoped it, she was uneasy, because she had begun to suspect that plain discouragement might not send him away as easily as she had once imagined.

Part 14

Fanny woke the next morning still uneasy, but she was not doubtful. She believed her note had been plain enough. Mr. Crawford must now understand that she did not welcome his attention, and she hoped he and his sister would soon leave Mansfield. If they would only go, much pain would end at once. She tried to think quietly in this way, but quiet did not last long.

Before much time had passed, she saw by chance that Henry Crawford was again coming up to the house, and at an hour almost as early as the day before. This alarmed her immediately. She did not know whether he had come on her account or for some other reason, but she could not bear the risk of meeting him. So she went upstairs at once and hid herself in the East room, resolving not to come down unless she were directly called. Mrs. Norris was still in the house, and that made her hope she might be left alone.

For a while she sat trembling and listening. Every sound seemed to come nearer than it really did. Yet as no one approached, she gradually became calmer and even began to work a little. She was just growing hopeful when she heard a heavy step on the stairs, steady and unmistakable. It was her uncle’s step, and in one moment all her fear returned.

Sir Thomas came in and asked whether he might enter. Fanny stood up at once and tried to look composed, though she felt anything but composed. As he came farther into the room, his eye first fell on one thing that surprised him greatly. “Why have you no fire today?” he asked. Fanny, wrapped in a shawl, could hardly answer.

She said she was not cold and never sat there long in winter, but he was not satisfied. He soon understood enough to see that this was another of the small hardships she had quietly borne under Mrs. Norris's rule. He spoke of moderation, of different constitutions, and of the mistaken way in which such strictness had been carried too far in her case. Then, in a kinder tone, he told her that she must not resent the past and that those who had prepared her for a modest life had meant to do right by her, even if they had been too severe. Fanny, though shaken, was touched by his fairness and by the trouble he took to explain himself.

But this was only the beginning. After a short pause, Sir Thomas said, with some attempt at ease, that he had had a visitor that morning and that Fanny might perhaps guess his errand. She turned red at once and could not raise her eyes. He then explained, with real satisfaction, that Mr. Crawford had come to declare his love for her, to ask her hand openly and properly, and to seek the uncle's approval in the place of her parents. Sir Thomas admired the manner of the proposal very much, and in speaking of it, he was so pleased that he did not at first notice the terror of the person before him.

At last he rose and said that Mr. Crawford was still downstairs and hoped to see her there. Then Fanny could keep silent no longer. "Oh no, sir," she cried. "I cannot go down. He must know I cannot. I told him yesterday that this was very unpleasant to me, and that I could not return his feelings." Sir Thomas stared at her in complete surprise.

He had believed exactly the opposite. He said that, from all he had heard, she had behaved with proper modesty but with no discouragement that an honorable man would clearly understand as refusal. Fanny, frightened as she was, had to tell him he was mistaken. She said she had never encouraged Mr. Crawford, that she had begged him not to speak to her in that way, and that she had hoped he did not mean the matter seriously. Her breath almost failed her as she said it, but she said enough.

"Am I to understand," said Sir Thomas, after a silence, "that you mean to refuse Mr. Crawford?" Fanny answered, "Yes, sir." He repeated the words as if they were almost beyond belief. Then he asked her reason, and she could only say, very faintly, that she did not like Mr. Crawford well enough to marry him. To Sir Thomas this answer seemed not only poor but unreasonable.

He then described Henry Crawford in the strongest terms. He spoke of his fortune, his manners, his position, his good sense, and his generosity in helping William forward. He said that such an offer might never come to her again in all her life. He even declared that he would gladly have given either of his own daughters to Mr. Crawford. Fanny heard everything with shame, because she felt how much there was to praise in outward appearance, and yet she could not change her heart.

Sir Thomas next tried another line. He hinted that perhaps her affections were already engaged elsewhere. At that, Fanny's face grew so red that he looked at her closely. But when he named Edmund only indirectly and received from her a calm answer that agreed with his own view of Edmund's likely attachment elsewhere, he gave up that suspicion. The relief did her no good. Once that explanation was removed, her refusal seemed to him still more wilful and still less pardonable.

Then came the heaviest part of all. He told her, with growing severity, that she had disappointed him deeply. He said he had believed her modest, manageable, and free from the self-will that he found disgusting in many modern young women. Instead, she had shown herself obstinate, independent, and thoughtless of the great advantage this marriage would bring not only to herself but to all her family. He spoke of her parents, her brothers, and her sisters, and asked how she could throw away such an establishment without even wishing for time to consider it better. By the end, poor Fanny was crying so bitterly that even his anger had to stop.

She could only say again and again, "I am very sorry." It was true. She was sorry with all her heart that she seemed selfish and ungrateful in his eyes. Yet she was also certain that to marry without affection would be wrong. When she found strength enough to say that she could never make Mr. Crawford happy and would be miserable herself, Sir Thomas began to soften a little. He still thought her mistaken, but he now believed that more time and Henry Crawford's perseverance might change her.

So he told her to dry her tears and come downstairs to give Mr. Crawford her answer herself. Fanny showed such real misery at the idea that he at last spared her. He decided that an immediate meeting might do more harm than good and left her alone for a while. She sat in total disorder of mind. The proposal, her uncle's anger, her own shame, Henry's possible suffering, and the fear that everyone would now think her selfish and ungrateful all pressed upon her together.

After some time Sir Thomas returned, calmer than before. He told her that Mr. Crawford had gone and had behaved with great delicacy and generosity when informed of her distress. He said that Henry still hoped to speak with her alone at some later time, perhaps the next day, when her spirits were more composed. He also gave her two kindnesses she felt deeply. First, he told her to go out and walk for an hour to recover herself. Second, he promised that he would say nothing of the whole matter downstairs, not even to Lady Bertram, and ordered her also to keep silent. That mercy almost overcame her with gratitude.

She obeyed at once and went out to the shrubbery. The walk did her some good, if only because it gave her something to do besides cry. She tried to strengthen her mind, tried to regain her uncle's good opinion, and tried above all not to betray anything by her face when she came back. When she returned to the East room, she found another surprise waiting there. A fire had been lit for her, by Sir Thomas's order, and it was to be kept every day. Even in misery, she felt the kindness sharply and said to herself that she must indeed be a brute if she could ever be truly ungrateful.

At dinner her uncle behaved almost as usual, which comforted her a little. Mrs. Norris, however, soon began scolding her for having gone out without first telling her, because she might have been sent on some small errand to the White House. She called Fanny secretive, independent, and foolish. This time Sir Thomas tried more than once to turn the conversation away, and though Mrs. Norris continued longer than he liked, Fanny saw enough to know that he did not wish her to be insulted in that manner. Even that gave some comfort.

By the evening she had begun to hope that the worst of the day was over. She believed she had done right. She believed, too, that once Henry had gone to London, he would soon recover from his attachment and perhaps even laugh at it himself. She was sitting with these faint hopes when Sir Thomas was called out of the room. A little later the butler returned and came straight to her. "Sir Thomas wishes to speak with you, ma'am, in his own room," he said. Mrs. Norris instantly interrupted and declared that Sir Thomas must mean her, not Miss Price. But the butler was firm. It was indeed Miss Price. Fanny rose, already trembling, and in another moment found herself exactly where she had feared to be—alone with Mr. Crawford.

Part 15

Fanny stopped at the door, because she had no power to go farther at first. Henry Crawford came toward her at once, but with more respect and seriousness than she had ever seen in him before. There was no laughter in his face now, no lightness in his manner, and no wish to shine. He spoke warmly, but he spoke like a man who believed his own feelings and wanted her to believe them too. He said he knew he had surprised and distressed her. He said he blamed himself for giving her pain, yet he could not repent loving her, because to love her was now the most serious and truest feeling of his life.

Fanny could only stand and listen in great confusion. She had expected importunity, but perhaps not so much earnestness. Henry went on to say that he had once been foolish and vain, but that she had changed him. Her sweetness, her modesty, her quiet strength, and the very difficulty of pleasing her had taught him to think more deeply than he had ever done before. He did not ask her to answer him kindly at once. He asked only for hope, for patience, and for permission to go on trying to deserve her better opinion.

These words, spoken so seriously, might have touched almost any woman, and they did touch Fanny so far as pity and gratitude could be touched. But they could not touch her heart in the way he wanted. She answered with agitation and with kindness, because she could not be harsh when a person spoke of love and suffering before her. She thanked him for the honor he meant her, said she was sorry to seem ungrateful, and admitted that she must always remember his goodness to William. Yet through all her trembling courtesy, the meaning remained the same. She could not return his affection. She could not give him hope. She could never marry him.

Henry did not accept that answer as final. Vanity still helped him, even in his earnestness. Fanny’s compassion, her distress, and the softness of her voice made him think her refusal less strong than it was. He said that indifference might be overcome, that gratitude might become affection, and that time, constancy, and better conduct might yet win him what he now sought in vain. He declared that he would persevere, that he would not despair, and that nothing but her happiness could make him give up his claim to try. Fanny, hearing this, felt her pity beginning to harden into resentment.

For at that moment she saw again what had once disgusted her in him before. He was speaking of love, but he was still thinking too much of his own wishes. He heard her refusal, yet would not respect it. He saw her suffering, yet continued to press her because pressing her gave him hope. The selfishness that had once made him trifle with Maria and Julia seemed now to appear in a new form. He was no longer playing with feeling, but he was still careless of another person’s peace where his own desire was concerned. This discovery made Fanny inwardly firmer than before, even while her outward manner remained gentle.

At last he was forced to let her go. He parted from her without despair and with every appearance of confidence. Fanny left the room in a state of nervous agitation that made almost everything else disappear from her mind for a time. She went upstairs to the East room and sat over the new fire which Sir Thomas had ordered for her, trying to recover herself. There she thought over the whole scene again and again. She was astonished at the past, astonished at the present, and still more uncertain of the future. But through all her confusion one thing was perfectly clear. Under no circumstances could she ever love Henry Crawford.

Sir Thomas waited until the next morning to learn what had passed between them. He then saw Henry and heard his account. His first feeling was disappointment. He had believed that an hour alone with such a man would have done much more with a girl so gentle and modest as Fanny. But that disappointment did not last long. Henry spoke with so much confidence, so much steadiness, and such determined hope that Sir Thomas was soon encouraged again.

If the lover himself could still trust in success, why should not the uncle do the same? He quickly returned to the belief that a little more time, a little more influence, and a little more gratitude would bring Fanny to a better mind.

Accordingly, Sir Thomas omitted nothing that might strengthen Henry in his plan. He praised Fanny. He praised Henry's constancy. He said the match remained as desirable as ever. At Mansfield Park, Henry would always be welcome. He had only to consult his own judgment and feelings as to how often he came, now or later. Sir Thomas also made it plain that among all who truly loved Fanny, there could be only one opinion on such a subject. Everyone must wish her to accept so brilliant and honorable an offer. Henry received all this with grateful joy, and the two gentlemen parted the best of friends. Fanny, who did not hear the conversation itself, nevertheless felt its result almost at once. The whole force of Mansfield would now be turned one way.

She was not wrong. Sir Thomas did not scold again immediately, but his manner carried disappointment in it whenever he looked at her. He became more thoughtful, more observant, and in some ways kinder than before, because he wished to guide rather than drive her. Yet the pressure was there. He clearly believed her mistaken, and he clearly meant not to abandon the hope of correcting her. Fanny felt the weight of this more than if he had spoken harshly all day. She would sooner have borne anger than constant expectation.

Lady Bertram, when she came to know enough of the matter, received it in her usual quiet way. She thought Mr. Crawford a very agreeable young man, thought the marriage would be an excellent one, and could not understand Fanny's difficulty. "If you are so very determined, I do not know what can be done," was the substance of all her opinion. There was no malice in it, but there was no help. Mrs. Norris, on the other hand, was full of indignation. To her, Fanny's refusal was pride, folly, ingratitude, and madness all at once. She spoke as if a beggar girl had been offered a throne and had thrown it away only to insult those who had raised her. Fanny could not escape her reproaches, and they were harder to bear because Mrs. Norris partly believed herself perfectly right.

Through all this, Fanny had to hold her ground almost alone. She knew she looked unreasonable. She knew that if people judged only by fortune, manners, and outward conduct, they must think Henry Crawford a brilliant match. She knew too that his help to William seemed to lay her under another obligation. At times she almost wondered whether she must be wrong because so many wiser and stronger persons said she was. But then she remembered his conduct with Maria and Julia, remembered his selfish persistence the day before, and remembered above all the total absence of love in her own heart. That always brought her back to certainty. She might be weak in manner, but she was not mistaken in conscience.

Henry meanwhile did not leave the neighborhood. Encouraged by Sir Thomas and by his own temper, he remained ready to return, to plead, and to try again. Fanny knew this, and the knowledge rested heavily on her. She had once hoped that one plain refusal would end the whole matter. Now she understood that the real trial had only begun. What had been an unwelcome attention was becoming a settled pursuit, and the more serious it grew for him, the more painful it must grow for her. She had refused him honestly, but honesty had not brought peace. It had only placed her in open opposition to almost every influence around her.

Part 16

Sir Thomas did not return to open anger after this. He kept to the milder plan he had chosen, and by that very mildness made the whole trial harder for Fanny. The next time he spoke to her alone, he did so with grave kindness. He told her that he had seen Mr. Crawford again and now understood perfectly how matters stood between them. Then he praised Henry's constancy in a way that made Fanny feel more and more guilty, though not less resolved.

"You are very young," he said, "and perhaps you do not yet know how uncommon such steadiness is. Men often feel warmly for a day and coldly the next. But Mr. Crawford has met discouragement and still remains fixed. That deserves respect." Fanny answered, with all the sincerity of her nature, "I am very sorry that Mr. Crawford should continue to think of me in that way. I feel his good opinion much more than I can say. But I cannot return it.”

Sir Thomas looked at her with disappointment too plain to be mistaken. He did not accuse her of falsehood, because he now believed her honest. What he could not understand was how honesty could continue so blind. To him, Henry Crawford’s faults belonged to the past, his present manner was admirable, and his future promised everything. To Fanny, the past still mattered, the present still did not touch her heart, and the future could only look unsafe if built on esteem without love. Between these two views there was no easy meeting.

He therefore tried to reason with her in a calmer, broader way. He said that affection often followed esteem, and that young women who expected a violent first love from books and imagination were often unfit for real life. He told her that marriage was not made only by feelings, but by character, sense, and suitability. He spoke too of the duty she owed to herself and to those connected with her. “You must not,” he said, “throw away so unexceptionable an offer from a mistaken idea of delicacy or romance.”

Fanny trembled but did not give way. She answered that she did not expect romance, that she knew very well what she was refusing, and that she was painfully aware how little others could understand her. Yet none of that altered the central truth. She could not marry a man she did not love. She could not feel secure with one whose conduct to Maria and Julia she had so quietly watched. She could not think herself likely to make him happy when the whole marriage would begin in reluctance on one side and in mistaken hope on the other.

Sir Thomas, hearing only a part of this and inferring the rest, became grave again. “You speak of things you do not fully know,” he said. “As for former attentions, young men will sometimes trifle till they meet with the woman who commands their serious attachment. That is not uncommon. It is your own behavior, your own character, that has fixed Mr. Crawford.” Fanny could not answer that. The very praise made resistance harder, because resistance under praise always looks like ingratitude.

Meanwhile the rest of the family were not silent. Lady Bertram thought the whole matter very strange, but in the most languid way possible. She could not understand why Fanny, who had no fortune and no expectations, did not take so pleasing a young man at once. Yet even while saying this, she could not feel the subject long enough to press it strongly. Mrs. Norris, on the other hand, felt enough for twenty people. She spoke of Fanny's folly, pride, and madness whenever she could do so without crossing Sir Thomas too openly.

"How often have I said," she cried one day, "that we never know what we are rearing when we take a child out of poverty and bring her into comfort! There is the thanks one gets. There is the return for years of kindness. A niece without beauty, without fortune, without anything to recommend her, turns away from such a man as Mr. Crawford, and because why? Because she chooses to be fanciful." Fanny heard these attacks in silence, because silence was easier than defense. But silence did not save her feelings.

There were moments when she nearly lost courage, not because her judgment changed, but because she was so tired of seeming wrong to everyone she loved. Had anyone spoken to her gently and simply, merely asking what she herself feared in Henry Crawford, she might perhaps have answered more freely. But the matter was never put in that form. Henry was always the brilliant match, the generous friend, the admirable young man. Fanny was always the girl who ought to be grateful. In such a picture, her own heart looked like an unreasonable thing and her own conscience like mere stubbornness.

Sir Thomas at last began to think that argument inside Mansfield had done all it could do. If Fanny would not value Henry Crawford properly while surrounded by comfort and distinction, perhaps she might value him more after seeing clearly what she had once come from and what she might still fall back upon. He had long believed, in a general way, that she ought to visit her parents sometimes. Now that belief took on a new purpose. A return to Portsmouth, he thought, might do her good in every direction. It might awaken her natural affection for her family. It might soften her heart by gratitude. It might also give her a stronger sense of the advantages she was refusing.

When he first opened this idea to her, the effect was very different from what he meant. To Sir Thomas it was partly correction and partly duty. To Fanny it appeared, in the first instant, almost pure happiness. To see her parents, her brothers, and her sisters after so many years; to go with William, who was still on land; to spend some weeks in the home of her childhood; and above all to be free for a time from every look and every word connected with the Crawfords—this seemed an overwhelming blessing. She could hardly speak her thanks, and the depth of her joy was shown more by silence than by speech.

Yet even in that joy there were mixed feelings. She knew that distance from Edmund might do her good, and she honestly wished it might. Away from Mansfield, away from his voice, his kindness, and his constant nearness, she might perhaps learn greater quietness of heart. She could think of him from afar as merely engaged in his own future, perhaps even in arrangements that would bring him closer to Mary Crawford, without being wounded every hour by the sight of him. This was painful to admit even to herself, but she did admit it. The journey to Portsmouth offered not only escape from Henry, but a sort of discipline for her deeper and more secret sorrow.

The only thing that checked her joy was Lady Bertram. Fanny knew she was of real use there, and though Lady Bertram often seemed not to value people till they were absent, Fanny knew she would still miss a hand always ready, a voice always mild, and a companion who never contradicted her. Sir Thomas, however, was master in the house, and once he had determined on the measure, he carried it. He explained at length that it was proper for Fanny to see her family, proper that she should not be cut off from them forever, and proper too that she should learn to divide her affections more naturally between her first home and her present one.

Lady Bertram submitted because Sir Thomas wished it, not because she was convinced. In her own mind, she could see very little need for Fanny ever to go near parents who had done without her so long, especially while Fanny was so useful to herself. Mrs. Norris also objected in a selfish spirit, though from another direction. She disliked any plan that was not her own, disliked trouble of arrangement, and disliked above all whatever might suggest that Fanny had claims independent of Mansfield. Yet both had to yield. Sir Thomas had decided, William would be her companion, and the visit to Portsmouth was fixed.

Thus the matter settled itself at last, though not in the way anyone around Fanny exactly imagined. Sir Thomas thought he was sending a grateful but mistaken girl back to the sight of poverty, confusion, and obscurity, and that she would return wiser, softer, and more ready to accept the hand she had refused. Fanny thought only that she was going to her family and away from pressure. Both were partly right, and both were partly wrong. But at the moment of decision, she could only feel thankful. Her heart swelled with so much quiet happiness at the thought of going with William that, for the first time in many painful weeks, she was able to look forward rather than merely endure.

Part 17

The plan for Portsmouth, once fixed, brought relief to Fanny more quickly and more deeply than anyone around her understood. To Sir Thomas it was a wise measure. To Lady Bertram it was an inconvenience. To Mrs. Norris it was a troublesome arrangement that had not begun in her own head. But to Fanny it opened a door out of pressure, fear, and daily embarrassment. She would see her parents again. She would go with William. She would be free, for a time at least, from every look and every word connected with Mr. Crawford.

Even so, her happiness was not simple. It was of the quiet kind that filled the heart too fully for easy speech. When she first understood what her uncle meant, she could hardly do more than thank him and accept. Later, when the thought became more real, she spoke more openly to William and Edmund. The whole picture of her earliest life came back to her with renewed force. She imagined being once more in the middle of her brothers and sisters, loved without fear, needed without shame, and able to feel herself not below everyone around her, but equal to them.

Another thought was mixed with this, though she scarcely liked to name it even to herself. To be two months away from Edmund might do her good. At Mansfield she could never escape his kindness, his looks, or the pain of knowing that his deepest feelings were turning elsewhere. At Portsmouth she might perhaps learn greater calm. She might think of him at a distance, perhaps already making arrangements in London which would settle his future with Mary Crawford, and bear the thought better than she could bear his presence. What would have wounded her hourly at Mansfield seemed from far off almost manageable.

The one drawback was Lady Bertram. Fanny knew too well that, useful as she was to almost nobody else, she was truly useful there. She arranged little things, read aloud, listened patiently, fetched what was wanted, and softened the long idle hours of a woman who had grown used to being served without effort. Sir Thomas had the greatest difficulty in winning his wife's consent. He spoke long and seriously about duty, family claims, and the rightness of Fanny's seeing her own people sometimes. Lady Bertram submitted because he wished it, not because she herself saw any need in it.

In truth, when left to her own thoughts, she could not understand why Fanny should go near a father and mother who had long managed without her, especially while she herself found Fanny so convenient. Her objections were not warm enough to stop the plan, but they were steady enough to show Fanny that she would in some degree be missed. That softened Fanny's joy and gave it a more tender shape. She was going eagerly, yet she could not go without sorrow.

Mrs. Norris, meanwhile, created another brief misery by suddenly saying that she was half minded to go too. She declared that it would be a great indulgence to herself to see her poor dear sister Price again after so many years, and that her older head might help the young travelers on the road. William and Fanny were struck with horror. The whole comfort of the journey would be destroyed if she joined them. They looked at one another in dismay and waited in painful suspense for the decision.

In the end, Mrs. Norris remembered one very practical truth. She could go to Portsmouth for nothing, but she might not get back for nothing, and that thought was stronger than sisterly affection. So she discovered that she was far too necessary at Mansfield Park to leave Sir Thomas and Lady Bertram even for a week, and with much talk of self-sacrifice decided to stay behind. William and

Fanny received this as a deliverance. They were too wise to show delight openly, but inwardly they were full of it.

Edmund too had to give something up because of Fanny's journey. He had meant, about that time, to go to London, and the hope connected with that visit was no small one. He was looking toward the fixing of his happiness, though he did not speak boastfully of it. Yet with Fanny going away, Maria married, Julia absent, and the house emptier than before, he could not leave his father and mother just then. He told Fanny that he must delay his journey for a week or two longer. She knew enough already to understand the whole meaning of that delay, and the knowledge gave them one more confidential conversation about Miss Crawford before she left.

That conversation hurt her more because she felt it must be the last in which Mary Crawford's name would pass between them with any freedom. After this, everything would be different. Edmund was too near a final step, and she herself was too near removal, for such quiet discussions to continue as before. Yet even in pain there was sweetness in being trusted by him, and she listened as she always listened, with sympathy more complete than he guessed and suffering more silent than he could imagine.

Once only afterward did he allude to the same subject, and then so quietly that no one else could have noticed it. Lady Bertram had been telling Fanny in the evening that she must write soon and often, and promising lazily to be a good correspondent herself. Edmund, finding a moment beside Fanny, said in a low voice, "And I shall write to you too, Fanny, when I have anything worth writing about, anything I think you will like to hear, and will not hear so soon from another person." She looked up, and the color in his face told her all the rest. The letter he meant would be the letter that announced his happiness.

From that moment even Edmund's future letters became a cause of fear. That change in itself shocked her. That a letter from him, once the surest of comforts, should now be something she must prepare herself to bear, seemed one more proof that her whole inner life had altered beyond anything she would once have believed possible. She said little, because little could be said. But the thought stayed with her through the last hours at Mansfield and mixed itself with every feeling of departure.

Poor Fanny, though going willingly and almost eagerly, could not make the last evening anything but sorrowful. Every room, every chair, every common habit of the house had a claim on her heart. Mansfield had not made her openly happy, yet it had formed her, sheltered her, educated her, and contained the people she loved best. To leave it, even for a short time, was painful. She moved about quietly, feeling each small parting more than she showed, and finding that joy in the future and grief in the present could live together very easily.

When the morning came at last, she set out with William as her companion and protector, full of affection, anxiety, and expectation. Portsmouth lay before her as the home of her childhood and the place where she hoped for rest. Mansfield lay behind her as the home of her deeper attachments and the place where many wounds had been given and many kindnesses received. She did not yet know how strong either claim would prove. She only knew that she was leaving one world and moving toward another, with a heart that was at once lighter and sadder than it had been for many weeks.

Part 18

The journey itself began more happily than Fanny had dared to hope. William's company made everything easier. He was in high spirits, proud of his profession, pleased with his sister's visit, and ready to talk of ships, officers, ports, and future advancement from one hour to the next. Fanny listened gladly, because William's voice still had for her the power of childhood, and because his cheerfulness carried her forward when her heart might otherwise have turned back toward Mansfield. Even the road seemed lighter when shared with him.

There was one small change in the plan which pleased them both. Henry Crawford, being obliged to go to London for a few days, had offered William a place in his carriage for part of the way, and this spared him some fatigue. Sir Thomas approved the arrangement because the connection might be useful to

William, and Fanny approved it for a simpler reason. William would rest more easily, and any comfort to him was a comfort to her. She was also secretly glad that Mr. Crawford's own departure removed him, at least for a little while, from her thoughts.

After London, the rest of the journey belonged again to the brother and sister alone, and those hours were among the happiest Fanny had known for a long time. William had all his old affection for her, all his old wish to protect and entertain her, and all the pride of being now a young officer who could take care of his sister in the world. They talked of Portsmouth, of old days, of the younger children, and of the changes that time must have made in everybody. Fanny's imagination went before her eagerly. She pictured love, noise perhaps, poverty perhaps, but still love; and she trusted that whatever was poor or disorderly in the house would be made light by tenderness and by the joy of meeting again.

Yet as they drew nearer to Portsmouth, her heart began to beat less evenly. Memory returned in stronger and more broken forms. She remembered narrow streets, sea air, running children, and rough voices without being able to put them together into one clear image. Mansfield, with all its quiet order, its open grounds, and its regular habits, had for so many years been the visible shape of home that the older home now seemed almost like something half dreamed. She was going back willingly, but she was going back to uncertainty as well as affection.

The first disappointment came before she had crossed the threshold. No one was waiting for them with any prepared happiness. There was bustle, delay, and confusion rather than welcome. Her father was out or coming in and then out again, her mother was occupied, the children were in motion, and the whole house seemed too small to contain the number of people, voices, wants, and complaints that filled it. William met all this more lightly. He belonged there by long habit, and a sailor's way of accepting discomfort helped him. Fanny, who had been formed by quite another sort of household, felt the shock at once.

When she did see her father and mother, affection was there, but not in the form she had imagined. Mr. Price received her with rough good humor, and Mrs. Price with weak, complaining fondness. Neither had been prepared to make her comfort the first object of the hour. Each was taken up partly by natural feeling, partly by domestic disorder, and partly by personal habit. Fanny soon understood that she had not returned to a house where one person's arrival could quietly gather every thought around it. She had returned to a place where each new thing entered an old confusion and became part of it.

Susan, however, touched her more nearly. There was spirit, warmth, and strong feeling in Susan, though not always gentleness. She attached herself to Fanny at once and seemed ready to value her in the very way Fanny most needed to be valued. Betsey, the youngest, was merely noisy and uncontrolled, more pet than child, running where she pleased and taking what she liked. The boys came and went with the same restless freedom. Every person in the house appeared to speak at once, move at once, and require attention at once. Fanny had once lived among all this, yet she now felt it almost as a stranger would.

As the evening went on, the real manner of the house became clearer every minute. Mrs. Price soon left all thought of Mansfield and its inhabitants for the subject that lay nearest at hand, which was her servants. She complained of Rebecca, complained of the kitchen, complained of the boys, complained of the difficulty of keeping anybody in Portsmouth, and complained even while saying that she herself was the easiest mistress in the world. Susan joined eagerly in the charges against the servant. Betsey had more to say still. Fanny sat and listened with growing surprise, for there seemed no end to the fault-finding and no real attempt at remedy.

During this scene, another small event showed her even more painfully what kind of order governed the family. Betsey was holding up a silver knife with great satisfaction, and Susan instantly claimed it as her own. It had belonged, she said, to their dead sister Mary, who had left it to Susan herself. But their mother had kept it, let Betsey handle it, and would end by giving it to the wrong child altogether. Susan spoke with angry justice. Mrs. Price answered with weak reproach and with no true sense that a promise ought to be kept more carefully than that. Fanny was shocked, not only by the quarrel itself, but by the easy way in which feeling, memory, and right were all treated as if they were matters of no great weight.

The mention of little Mary affected Fanny deeply. She remembered her as a sweet child, perhaps the sweetest of them all, and the sight of Betsey brought her image back strongly. Yet she would not speak of it, because she saw that any feeling not mixed with noise or complaint would hardly find its place there. The house did not seem cruel; it seemed something more hopeless. Good feeling existed in it, but in a scattered, weak, and ineffective form. Promises were made and forgotten, children were loved and neglected in the same hour, and nothing stayed orderly long enough for tenderness itself to act as it should.

By the time she was allowed to go upstairs, Fanny was tired almost beyond thought. She had been fatigued by travel and then fatigued again by the very manner of the welcome. Behind her she left the boys calling for food, her father calling for his drink, Betsey crying for indulgence, and the servant absent from the place where she was wanted. Before her lay the room she was to share with Susan. It was small, scantily furnished, and close. The narrow staircase and narrow passage had already astonished her. Now even her own little attic at Mansfield, once thought poor and cold, seemed almost comfortable and spacious by comparison.

That first night taught her more than many speeches could have done. She had come hoping to find rest from pressure, and in one sense she had found it, because no one there cared whether Henry Crawford was accepted or refused. But she had not found peace. Mansfield had often hurt her, yet it had moved in a regular course. Here there was no regular course at all. Voices were loud, doors banged, feet ran, things were dropped, called for, lost, and found again, and no one seemed able to give calm attention to anything for long. Before she had been a week in Portsmouth, she felt almost tempted to say that whatever pains Mansfield had brought, Portsmouth could offer no real pleasure in its place.

Still, she was too just not to blame herself a little for these feelings. This was her first home. These were her parents, her brothers, and her sisters. If they were rougher, louder, and more disorderly than the Bertrams, they were also more naturally her own. She tried to remember this steadily. She tried to be grateful for affection where she found it and patient with faults that long habit had made almost invisible to those who lived among them. But gratitude and patience could not alter her senses. Every hour placed Portsmouth and Mansfield in stronger contrast before her mind.

Thus her visit began, not with the comfort she had imagined, but with a new education of another kind. She had come away from Mansfield thinking chiefly of escape. She now began to understand what Mansfield had given her besides pain. Elegance, quiet, regularity, attention to others, and a certain daily peace had all become part of her being there without her fully knowing it. In Portsmouth she learned their value by losing them. What she had once borne there with no choice now struck her as disorder almost beyond endurance, and the change in her own mind was perhaps the strongest proof of how deeply her life at Mansfield had shaped her.

Part 19

During the first week in Portsmouth, Fanny learned more clearly every day how much Mansfield had changed her. She had once lived in noise without knowing it as noise. Now she felt every raised voice, every sudden step, every door that banged, and every order shouted from one room to another. At Mansfield there had often been little kindness, but there had also been order, quiet, and regular attention to the feelings of others. Here there was affection in a rough form, but almost no peace. People called instead of speaking, complained instead of managing, and seemed unable to keep still long enough for comfort to exist.

Her mother talked endlessly of servants and yet changed nothing. Rebecca, the maid, was blamed for nearly every disorder in the house, and Susan and Betsey were ready enough to add their own complaints. But Fanny soon saw that the fault did not lie only in one servant. Nothing was steady, nothing was watched properly, and no one seemed able to insist quietly on what ought to be done. Her mother said she was the easiest mistress in the world, and in one sense that was true. She expected little because she had long grown used to confusion, and therefore confusion ruled everything.

In the middle of one such evening, when tea-things were only half removed and Mrs. Price was still thinking more of a missing shirt-sleeve than of her eldest daughter, a small event showed Fanny the whole spirit of the house more painfully than any general noise could have done. Betsey had a little silver knife in her hand and was trying to hide it from Susan. The moment Fanny asked what it was, Susan sprang up and claimed it as her own.

Then came a quick, angry struggle of words. Susan said the knife had belonged to their dead sister Mary, who had wished Susan to have it. Their mother, however, had kept it, let Betsey handle it, and now seemed likely to let the younger child spoil it or even keep it altogether. Betsey ran for protection. Mrs. Price, instead of setting the matter right at once, only complained that Susan was always quarrelling and that the whole subject wearied her. She repeated little Mary's dying wish with much softness of voice, but she did not honor it by fulfilling it. Fanny listened in real pain, because duty, tenderness, and simple fairness were all wounded at once.

Susan's temper was too warm, and she spoke with more sharpness than Fanny liked. Yet Fanny could not think her wrong in the substance of the complaint. A promise had been made, the promise concerned a dead child's last gift, and still it had been carelessly set aside only because no one in the house would act firmly for what was right. Mrs. Price tried to soften the matter with fond words to Betsey and sad words about poor little Mary, but she never reached the one plain action that could have ended the dispute. It was another example of feeling without order and love without justice.

Fanny said little at the time, because direct interference would only have produced more noise and no remedy. But the matter remained with her. The next day, when an opportunity came, she bought another knife with money of her own and quietly arranged that Betsey should have the new one while Susan kept the old one, which had truly been meant for her. It was only a small domestic peace, yet it had more moral meaning than many larger acts. Susan was deeply touched. She saw that Fanny had understood both her anger and her sense of wrong, and from that moment she attached herself to her sister more closely than before.

This was the beginning of their real friendship. Susan was very different from Fanny. She had less gentleness, less patience, and much less natural quietness. She was quicker, bolder, and more ready to complain. But she had a clear head, strong feelings, and an eager wish not to remain ignorant. Once she felt that Fanny respected her mind and cared for her fairness, she gave back trust with full force. Fanny soon found that in Susan she had the first real companion the house could offer her.

They began to spend more and more time together in the small room they shared. Fanny could not give Susan the early love of books that had once supported her own lonely childhood at Mansfield, because that taste had not grown in the same way in Susan. But Susan liked to understand. She wanted to know what she had never been taught. She listened to explanations, asked eager questions, and liked being corrected when correction was given kindly. In this, at least, Portsmouth offered Fanny one true comfort. She could guide another mind, and the guidance was welcomed.

Their talk was often of history, conduct, and little matters of daily sense. But it returned again and again to Mansfield Park. Susan wanted to hear of the house, the park, the rooms, the manners, the meals, the habits, the servants, the carriage drives, the balls, and the ordinary quiet order of the place. She had a natural taste for what was well arranged and genteel, and everything Fanny told her fed both her curiosity and her imagination. Fanny, though she sometimes blamed herself for dwelling so much on it, could not help enjoying such conversation. Mansfield was the home of her deepest affections, and to describe it was almost to be there again.

This made Portsmouth itself seem still poorer by comparison. The more she described Mansfield, the more plainly she felt what was missing where she now was. Her father was rough, inattentive, and made no effort to adapt himself to anyone else’s comfort. Her mother was weak, complaining, and always half lost among small domestic troubles. The younger children were noisy and uncontrolled. Meals were irregular, rooms untidy, and voices seldom gentle.

Nothing was meant cruelly, yet almost everything pressed upon Fanny's nerves until she felt worn out by evening. She had once thought that going home would bring rest. Instead, rest seemed the very thing Portsmouth could not give.

In the middle of this life came a letter from Mary Crawford. Fanny had expected the correspondence to slow, and it had slowed. Still, when the letter finally arrived, she found herself truly glad to receive it. This surprised her. She had imagined that distance from Mansfield would make letters from the Crawfords less welcome. In fact, the opposite was true. A letter from one connected with the world where Edmund lived, written with affection and some elegance of style, brought back for a little while the atmosphere from which she was now so completely removed.

Mary wrote in her usual bright and easy manner. She excused her delay by speaking of engagements and movement, and then she said that Henry was in Norfolk. She made light of the whole thing, half teasing and half careless, as she often did. But there was something else in the letter which shocked Fanny much more than any mention of Henry and herself. Mary hinted far too lightly at matters connected with Maria and Mr. Crawford. In her tone there was more curiosity than shame, more cleverness than principle. Fanny felt hurt and almost ashamed for her. What Mary chose to treat as amusement ought, in Fanny's judgment, to have been treated with seriousness and disgust.

For several days after that letter, she was restless and unsettled. She wondered whether Henry would write, whether he had indeed gone away only on business, and whether Mary had tried to bring about meetings that should never have been wished for. None of this touched her heart as love would have touched it, but it disturbed her peace. She was tired of Mr. Crawford's pursuit, tired of being thought of in that way at all, and tired of any subject connected with him entering a life that was already hard enough to bear. Yet no letter came from him, and in time the anxiety slowly weakened.

As that anxiety passed, Susan again became her chief occupation and comfort. Fanny resumed reading with her, explaining little difficulties, listening to her judgments, and discovering every day how much might have been made of Susan under better guidance. Susan was eager, grateful, and full of admiration for her sister. She even preferred Fanny's way of telling things to the style of the printed books themselves. That praise touched Fanny deeply, because it was given without flattery and with all the force of sincere dependence.

Thus, in the middle of noise, weakness, and disorder, one true bond grew stronger. Portsmouth was not making Fanny forget Mansfield, nor teaching her to value Henry Crawford more, nor easing her feelings for Edmund in the simple way Sir Thomas had imagined. But it was giving her one new duty and one new affection. The more she understood Susan, the less she could think of her visit only as a time of endurance. There was now someone there whom she could help, someone who received her influence with love, and someone whose future began to matter to her almost as much as her own peace.

Part 20

Life at Portsmouth had now settled into a pattern that was no comfort to Fanny, even when she had grown a little more used to it. Habit can dull pain, but it does not always make the cause of pain less real. The noise still tired her, the want of order still offended her, and the want of quiet attention to one another still struck her every day. Yet she no longer started at everything as she had done at first. She moved through the house with more knowledge of its ways, more patience with its confusion, and more affection for Susan, who had become her true companion in the middle of all the rest.

Susan was indeed the great blessing of Portsmouth. She was eager to learn, eager to hear, and eager to improve. She loved Fanny with a strength that was not silent, and this open dependence gave Fanny a kind of comfort she had rarely known at Mansfield. There she had been useful; here she was necessary to one person's mind. That difference softened many hours which might otherwise have been almost unbearable. Still, even Susan could not make Portsmouth feel like rest. The house was too full of disorder, the habits of the family too rough and broken, and every day too unlike the settled course in which Fanny had now learned to live.

Another letter from Mary Crawford had lately reached her, and though it had been welcome in one sense, it had also left her uneasy. There had been too much lightness in Mary's tone, too much allusion to things that ought not to have been lightly handled, and too much proof that the world from which Mary judged remained very different from the world by which Fanny tried to judge. Yet the letter had again brought Mansfield vividly before her, and with Mansfield came the whole train of thought she could never long escape: Edmund, his probable future, Mary's influence over him, and Henry Crawford's unwelcome perseverance.

She was trying one morning to return quietly to her usual occupations when a very unexpected disturbance came. Her father had taken a friend to see the dockyard, and the rest of the family were suddenly invited to join the expedition. Such an outing, in itself, promised little to Fanny beyond weariness, because even pleasure in Portsmouth was commonly noisy and ill-arranged. Yet she could not refuse to go, and she prepared herself for another day of movement and confusion. It was only when she came downstairs that she learned a new and far more serious surprise. Henry Crawford was there. He had come to Portsmouth.

The sight of him gave her a shock which all her self-command could scarcely conceal. She had hoped distance, discouragement, and time would at last have kept him away. Instead, he stood before her as if Portsmouth were only another stage in the same pursuit that had made Mansfield so painful. He greeted her with warmth but not with boldness. There was an evident wish to please, yet there was also more restraint than had once belonged to him. He had, or seemed to have, come with no fixed claim except to be near her and share for a little while in the life she was now forced to live.

Mr. Price was much pleased by his visit. A young man of good appearance, good spirits, and evident fashion was welcome enough to him, especially when that young man also showed civility to a naval officer and a ready interest in the navy itself. Henry could be agreeable to men as easily as to women when he wished, and on this morning he wished it particularly. He spoke well, listened well, and adapted himself so smoothly to the company before him that Fanny, in spite of herself, could not but see the improvement in his manner. What had once been vanity seemed now more like attention. What had once been cleverness for display seemed now, at least partly, cleverness used kindly.

They all set out together, and during the walk Henry managed more than once to place himself near Fanny without forcing private conversation upon her. This was itself a change. He seemed to understand that anything too direct would only distress her. Instead, he tried to make himself useful and acceptable to everybody around her. He was attentive to Mr. Price's talk, observant of Susan, patient with Betsey, and in every outward way easier, gentler, and better than Fanny had ever seen him at Mansfield. She had once found him only brilliant and dangerous. Today he was almost respectable.

The dockyard and the ships gave William and Mr. Price enough to speak about, and Henry had the sense to let them enjoy their own ground. He listened with lively interest when naval matters were explained and did not pretend knowledge he did not possess. That modesty also struck Fanny. He had been used to shining. Now he was content to stand aside and let others be important. Such conduct might perhaps have touched her more if she had not remembered too clearly how much charm he could throw over any situation when he wished to succeed.

There came, however, a short interval in which he found the privacy he wanted, and in that interval he spoke more plainly. He told her that the only reason for his being in Portsmouth was herself. He had come down for two days on her account and hers alone, because he could not bear a longer separation. The words disturbed her at once, because however improved his manner might be, the declaration itself remained what it had always been: a renewal of hopes she had honestly and fully refused. Yet even while she wished he had not said it, she could not deny to herself that he said it with more feeling and less vanity than before.

She answered as she was bound to answer, with gratitude for his kindness but with no encouragement. Still, this short conversation did not destroy all the good effect of the rest of his behavior. On the contrary, as the day went on, Fanny was repeatedly forced to admit that he really was improved. He was more considerate of other people's feelings, more careful not to speak where speech would wound, and more ready to take notice of Susan in a way that was proper as well as kind. The change was not imaginary. It was visible enough to trouble her, because a man who remains wholly bad is easier to refuse than one who is becoming better.

The strongest proof of improvement lay perhaps in his behavior to her father. Henry Crawford was not a man likely by taste or habit to enjoy a rough Portsmouth household, rough manners, or rough hospitality. Yet he showed nothing of contempt. He bore Mr. Price's freedom of manner, his loud voice, and his careless way of speaking with unforced good humor. He did not flatter grossly, but he adapted himself with tact, and that tact was kind rather than mocking. Fanny, who had dreaded from the first moment that he would see and silently judge all the deficiencies of her home, felt real relief on this point. His politeness did not seem false.

That relief became much greater before they parted. Mr. Price, in his easy way, invited him to dine with them. At the invitation, Fanny felt one instant of absolute horror. To have Henry Crawford at their family table, seeing all the defects of the meal, Rebecca's rough waiting, Betsey's manners, the want of order, the want of comfort, and the whole character of the house laid open before him, appeared intolerable. But he at once declined. He had already, he said, engaged himself elsewhere both for that day and the next. He would wait on them again tomorrow, but dinner was impossible. Fanny, in that moment, felt almost happy. She was not ashamed of her family as persons, but she knew too sharply how miserable their domestic scene would appear to a man formed in luxury and elegant habits. His refusal spared her more pain than he could have guessed.

When he left them, she found herself in a state she had not expected. She still wished he had not come. She still wished the next day over before it began. She still had no tenderness toward him and no change of heart. Yet she was obliged to admit that his visit had not been so dreadful as she had feared. The pleasure of talking of Mansfield had been very great. His notice of Susan had been kindly meant. His behavior to her father had not offended. And his improvement, though it could not win her love, made refusal itself more painful by taking away part of the contempt with which she had once defended herself.

Thus the first day of his visit ended in a confusion of feeling. Fanny was not drawn toward him in affection, but she was drawn into greater fairness toward him. She saw more good and more hope in his character than she had yet allowed herself to see. That discovery did not change her decision, yet it shook her comfort in the decision. She had always known that gratitude made refusal harder. Now she had also to admit that improvement made it harder still.

Part 21

The next day was Sunday, and the Prices were just setting out for church when Mr. Crawford appeared again. He had not come to make a visit in the common way, but to join them, and when he was asked to walk with the family to the Garrison chapel, he accepted exactly what he had wished. To Fanny this second day was harder in one sense and easier in another. It was harder because it showed that his visit was no moment of impulse. It was easier because she now knew better how to bear his presence, and because his conduct on the first day had not justified all her fears.

Sunday, too, gave the Portsmouth household an advantage it did not often possess. Clean clothes, a fixed object, and the custom of appearing in public all worked in their favor. Mrs. Price, who on other days looked worn, untidy, and almost broken by small domestic troubles, now seemed much more creditable. The younger children were neat, the whole family showed to better effect, and Fanny had the comfort of feeling that her mother did not look wholly unworthy of being Lady Bertram’s sister. Such relief may sound small, but to Fanny it was great, because she had suffered much from the contrast between the two households.

In chapel they could not all sit together, and afterward they went, as Mrs. Price always did on fine Sundays, to walk upon the ramparts until dinner-time. That weekly walk was her public hour. There she saw acquaintances, heard local news, and collected the little outward animation that helped her through the rest of the week. Mr. Crawford continued with the female part of the party and never allowed distance or division to separate him from Fanny. Yet even here he showed more patience than importunity. He seemed content to remain near her, to share her family's habits, and to make himself generally pleasant instead of forcing private notice from her.

This behavior affected Fanny more than she wished it to do. She had expected to be continually ashamed of her connections before him, and she had expected him to feel, however politely, the vulgarity and discomfort of the scene around him. Instead, he adapted himself with real ease. He was civil to Mrs. Price, observant of Susan, and respectful enough toward her father without any show of false humility. Most of all, he did not appear disgusted. Fanny, who had dreaded contempt more than open courtship, could not but feel grateful for this.

There was one earlier moment, on the previous day's walk in the town, when she had been especially frightened to present her father to him. Mr. Price had then met them in the street, and Fanny had believed that one look must cure Mr. Crawford of every thought of making himself connected with such a family. But the cure had not come in that form. Whatever Henry Crawford thought privately of dress, manner, or circumstance, he had shown nothing but good breeding and good temper. On Sunday, when her father appeared in his better clothes and at his best, Fanny felt the relief still more strongly. She saw that Mr. Crawford did not shrink from the connection when it was shown plainly before him.

As they walked on, she became more aware than before of the change in him. He was not merely agreeable, as he had always known how to be when it suited him. He was more gentle, more watchful of other people's feelings, and more willing to let others take the lead in conversation. There was less vanity in his success and more steadiness in his desire to please. He spoke of Mansfield when he knew it would please her, but he did not talk of it only to use it as an opening for himself. That restraint, joined to so much care of her family's comfort and appearance, made a strong impression on Fanny's mind.

Yet even under this impression, her heart did not move toward him. She was grateful, she was relieved, and she was more just to him than before; but she was not in love. She still could not forget Maria and Julia, still could not trust the foundations of a character once so lightly used, and still could not imagine peace in a marriage where esteem had to be built first and affection hoped for afterward. If he had been entirely unpleasing, refusal would have been easy. If he had been entirely transformed in her eyes, refusal might have become impossible. But he stood now in a middle place, improved enough to trouble her conscience, yet not enough to command her heart.

There was another reason why his presence did not become wholly painful. He brought Mansfield with him. He brought news, recollections, names, and tones connected with the only home that now truly held her deepest affections. To speak of the park, the rooms, the people, and the common habits of that life was in itself a great pleasure. Fanny had thought she wanted only escape when she left Northamptonshire. Portsmouth had taught her that what she had escaped from was not the whole of Mansfield, and that what she loved there was stronger than what had wounded her.

Before the walk ended, therefore, her feelings had become more mixed than ever. She still wished the visit shorter and the next day over before it came. She still wished that Mr. Crawford had come only for one day and then gone. But she was forced to admit that things were not so dreadful as she had expected. His attention to Susan had been especially kind and proper, his behavior to her father had not offended, and his whole manner had been that of a man really trying to deserve a better opinion than he had once earned. Such conduct did not make her happy, but it made refusal harder because it made refusal fairer and more painful.

When they at last parted, she did so with more real disturbance than the first day had left in her. He had not won what he wanted, nor had she granted him any hope. But he had won something else, which she would rather he had not won so quickly. He had compelled her respect more than before. He had shown that improvement was possible, that perseverance in right conduct was not beyond him, and that a man once merely brilliant and dangerous might become considerate enough to be sincerely regretted where he could not be loved.

After he was gone, Portsmouth seemed rougher than ever, because comparison had become sharper. The disorder of the house, the noise, the careless management, and the want of a calm rule in daily life all pressed upon Fanny again with renewed force. Yet along with that disgust came another thought which she could not wholly silence. If Mr. Crawford had gone on as he had behaved in Portsmouth, and if he had always been what he now seemed trying to become, then her resistance would have been less easy to defend even to herself. That thought was dangerous, and she knew it. She did not yield to it; but she could not pretend it had never arisen.

Thus the second day ended much as the first had ended, only with greater weight on her mind. She remained decided, remained clear in conscience, and remained free from love. But she was no longer able to think of Henry Crawford with the same plain contempt that had once protected her so completely. He had become more worthy of consideration without becoming dearer. He had shown enough good to pain her, not enough goodness to win her, and enough perseverance to prove that the trial of refusing him was not yet, in spirit at least, at an end.

Part 22

After Mr. Crawford left Portsmouth, Fanny hoped for quiet. She had seen enough of his improvement to feel more fairly toward him than before, but she had not seen enough to change her heart. She still wished the whole pursuit at an end. For some days, life fell back into its old course of noise, small troubles, and patient work with Susan. Yet even in that uneasy peace, her thoughts often turned to Mansfield, because any silence in her mind quickly filled with Mansfield again.

It was not long before letters came from Mary Crawford, and those letters disturbed her more than any direct visit from Henry had done. Mary wrote from London in her usual lively way. She spoke of parties, visits, meetings, and common talk with an ease that made everything seem light. Among these accounts was one thing that fixed Fanny’s attention at once. Henry was again seeing Maria, now Mrs. Rushworth, too often and too freely in company.

Mary herself did not seem alarmed at first. She treated the meetings almost as a lively accident of town life. She spoke of Mrs. Fraser's house, of people running into one another everywhere in London, and of little signs of attention which she seemed to think only amusing. But Fanny was not amused. She remembered Sotherton, remembered the rehearsals, remembered Maria's marriage without love, and remembered Henry's old vanity. Even before she had any clear reason for fear, fear had already entered her mind.

She tried to resist that fear. She told herself that London society brought people together in ways that meant little. She told herself that Maria was now a married woman, that Henry had lately spoken so earnestly of better conduct, and that perhaps her own suspicion was unkind. But such arguments did not quiet her long. There are moments when memory itself becomes warning, and this was one of them. She had seen too much of those two people together to feel safe only because a letter spoke lightly.

Then came worse news. Another letter arrived, and this time the lightness was shaken. Mary was now uneasy herself. The old meetings had not ended. On the contrary, they had grown bolder. Rumor was active, Mr. Rushworth had become suspicious, and what had first looked like folly was beginning to look like open danger. Fanny read with a beating heart and a sinking spirit. Before she had time to recover from that letter, the full disaster followed.

The scandal broke at last in the clearest and most miserable form. Maria had left her husband, and Henry Crawford was with her. There was no longer any room for doubt, excuse, or hope that ordinary appearances might still be saved. What had once been vanity, amusement, and selfish pleasure had now become public shame. Fanny was struck almost speechless by the news. She thought at once of Sir Thomas, of Edmund, of Julia, and even of poor Mr. Rushworth, stupid as he was. The pain spread in every direction.

Her sorrow for Henry was of a strange kind. She could not love him, and she could not forget his faults. Yet she now felt much more than simple dislike. He had come so near becoming better. He had shown her enough real change to make his fall more grievous, not less. If he had remained merely shallow and vain, ruin would have seemed only natural. But he had improved, and then had thrown improvement away. That waste of possible good made the whole thing sadder than Fanny could easily bear.

She was also deeply hurt by the thought of Mary. Whatever pain Mary herself must now feel as a sister, this event still showed too clearly that the Crawford family had never learned to think of such matters with enough principle. Charm, cleverness, and quick feeling were not enough. They could brighten life, but they could not safely guide it. Fanny had long believed this. Now the belief stood before her in the form of ruin.

At Portsmouth, however, such misery could receive only rough or imperfect sympathy. Her mother heard the story with surprise and complaint, but not with much true understanding. Her father cared more for the noise of the thing than for its moral meaning. The younger children scarcely understood it at all. Only Susan looked at Fanny with real concern and saw that her sister's distress came from a deeper place than mere surprise. Susan asked few questions, but she stayed near her with quiet affection, and that helped more than many words.

Before long, another trouble came. Tom Bertram was dangerously ill. His reckless life had at last broken his strength, and the alarm at Mansfield became very great. Fanny now saw that the whole house she loved was shaken at once. One son lay near death, one daughter had fallen into open disgrace, and the father who had so long stood strong above the family was forced to bear more than one heavy blow together. She could hardly remain still under such thoughts. Her own small sorrows disappeared in the presence of a wider family misery.

In the middle of this anxiety, Edmund arrived suddenly at Portsmouth. His coming was not announced, and when Fanny first saw him, she was shocked by the change in his face. He looked tired, grave, and worn by suffering. Yet the very sight of him, even under such circumstances, brought a rush of feeling too strong to be hidden at once. He took her hand warmly and said, "Fanny, I have come to take you home. We need you at Mansfield."

She did not ask a question immediately, because she already knew enough. Edmund then told her more fully how matters stood. Tom was very ill indeed, though there was still some hope. Sir Thomas was deeply distressed. Lady Bertram was helpless in trouble as she was in everything else, and the whole house wanted the one person who could be gentle, useful, and calm without increasing confusion. “My father wishes you to return with me at once,” he said. “He counts on you, Fanny, more than he would once have believed possible.”

No words could have made her more ready. She loved Susan and felt sorry to leave her, but every part of her heart had already turned toward Mansfield. To be wanted there, and wanted in such a way, moved her deeply. “I am ready,” she said. “I will go whenever you wish.” Edmund thanked her with a warmth that went straight to her heart, but there was no space then for private feeling. Grief had made them both more simple, and necessity left little room for anything but action.

Susan received the news with sorrow, yet not selfishly. She understood at once that Fanny must go and that Mansfield had a stronger claim than Portsmouth. Still, her grief in losing her sister was sincere and painful. She clung to her, helped her pack, listened to last directions, and promised to remember everything she had been taught. Fanny, in leaving her, felt almost as if she were leaving the one true gain her visit had brought. Portsmouth had not restored old home feeling, but it had given her Susan, and that made parting harder.

The household around them showed the difference between deeper and shallower attachment. Mrs. Price was sorry in her way, but much of her sorrow was mixed with the thought of losing help. Mr. Price accepted the change roughly and soon turned again to his own concerns. Betsey thought chiefly of immediate inconvenience. Only Susan’s grief had the tenderness and steadiness that matched Fanny’s own. This did not harden Fanny against the others, but it confirmed what she had already learned: that natural relationship alone does not make a true home.

They set out as soon as they could, and the journey back was very different from the journey out. Then Fanny had gone toward Portsmouth with hope. Now she returned to Mansfield with fear, pity, and a strange gratitude beneath them all. Edmund could speak only in broken parts of what had happened, and she did not press him. Enough had been said already. Before them lay illness, disgrace, and painful change. Yet as Mansfield drew nearer, Fanny knew with full certainty that, troubled as it was, she was going back not only to duty, but to the place where her deepest life truly belonged.

Part 23

When Fanny returned to Mansfield Park, she found the house changed in a way no outward description could fully show. It was still the same house, the same rooms, the same passages, and the same ordered life in form. But the spirit of it was gone. Sorrow, shame, and fear had passed through it, and though everything remained proper on the surface, everything seemed quieter, heavier, and older. Lady Bertram received her with real pleasure, because she was helpless in trouble and had missed the one person who could quietly do for her what was needed without increasing confusion. Sir Thomas welcomed her with more warmth and more respect than ever before, because in his distress he now saw plainly what he had long failed fully to value.

Fanny’s first feeling was pity. She forgot almost all smaller personal suffering in the sight of a family so shaken. Sir Thomas looked worn and deeply humbled. Lady Bertram was useless except in requiring comfort. The servants moved softly and spoke little. Even the rooms themselves seemed to ask for gentleness. Fanny at once took her old place, and more than her old place, in the daily life of the house. She read, listened, carried messages, soothed her aunt, and gave by her mere presence the sort of quiet support that strong sorrow often needs more than speech.

Tom was still very ill, though hope had returned. His danger had been so great that for a time they had expected his death, and this had thrown a darker shadow even than Maria’s disgrace over the house. Now there was less immediate fear, but he was weak, altered, and for the first time in his life really broken down by what he had brought upon himself. Fanny did not see much of him at first, but she heard enough to understand that his illness had not only frightened the family. It had also changed him. Pain and the sight of death had done what years of advice had failed to do.

Edmund, meanwhile, was more unhappy in mind than anyone except his father. He had not only the family ruin to grieve over. He had also his own private misery. Fanny soon learned from him, little by little, how everything had completed itself. Henry Crawford, after all his good appearances, had gone on with Maria until concealment was no longer possible. Mr. Rushworth had discovered enough to force an open separation, and what had begun in vanity and selfish pleasure had ended in public disgrace. Edmund spoke of Henry with anger and sorrow, because he had once wished to think better of him. But when he spoke of Mary, the pain was deeper still.

For at the worst moment Mary had shown him not only grief for her brother, but a dreadful wrongness of judgment. She had wished chiefly that Henry and Maria might marry and so quiet the scandal. She had thought more of hiding shame than of the real moral evil. She had even spoken as if a little more care and a little less public exposure might have made the whole thing almost tolerable. Edmund, who had long hoped that Mary's faults were only faults of manner and worldly talk, now saw that the fault went farther. The woman he loved did not feel rightly where right feeling mattered most. That discovery broke the last hope in him.

Fanny heard him with deep compassion and with that painful steadiness of sympathy which had always marked her love for him. She did not triumph. She did not inwardly say that she had been right. She thought only of his suffering. If she had ever wished for a change in his heart, she had never wished for it by such misery. The end of his attachment to Mary Crawford brought no joy while the wound was still fresh. To comfort him, to listen without blame, and to let him speak himself gradually free of illusion was all she wished to do.

Before the house had recovered even a little from one disaster, another shock came. Julia had run away with Mr. Yates. The act was not equal in guilt to Maria's, because Julia was still free to marry, and Mr. Yates, foolish as he was, was at least unmarried and ready to make her his wife. But the event still deeply pained Sir Thomas. One daughter had openly disgraced herself. Another had fled from his authority in secrecy and haste. It was one more proof that beneath the accomplishments, beauty, and outward breeding of his daughters, something had been wrong in their education from the beginning.

Julia's flight, however, came from causes that were not difficult to understand. She had long lived under Maria's shadow, long suffered from neglect in comparison with her sister, and now found Mansfield a place of shame, dependence, and dulness. Mr. Yates offered movement, escape, and the relief of doing something sudden and decisive. She ran away less from great love than from wounded pride and impatience. Yet because there was no insurmountable moral obstacle, the marriage took place, and in time even Sir Thomas was able to be reconciled to it more easily than he had first imagined.

Maria's case could admit no such healing. She was separated from her husband, cut off from respectable society, and left with the full consequence of conduct that had once seemed to her no more than exciting danger. Sir Thomas had to decide what was to be done with her. His feelings were deeply divided. She was still his daughter, and he could not abandon her. Yet he could not receive her again at Mansfield, where her presence would poison the peace of all and keep shame always before them. In the end it was determined that she should live in retirement and separation, away from the world she had ruined for herself.

Mrs. Norris immediately attached herself to Maria's side in this new exile. Whether from blind partiality, family pride, or the satisfaction of sharing injured importance, she chose to leave Mansfield and live with her fallen niece. In one sense the decision suited everyone. Mrs. Norris could not have remained in the house without constantly irritating Sir Thomas and constantly excusing Maria. Maria, on her side, had perhaps no companion better fitted to keep alive all the self-pity and bitterness that such a woman was likely to feel. Their tempers were not likely to make either truly happy, but they were well matched in one thing: neither was inclined toward humility.

This removal of Mrs. Norris made a great practical difference to Mansfield. A source of endless small irritation was gone. The house was still sad, but it was sad in peace. Sir Thomas, sobered by what had happened and chastened in his pride as a father, became more inward, more just, and more observant. Lady Bertram leaned more than ever on Fanny. Edmund, with his own disappointment still recent, turned more naturally and more gratefully toward the cousin who had always understood him. What had once been only Fanny’s quiet usefulness was now openly felt as a necessity to them all.

In those weeks Fanny’s importance in the family became plain in a way it had never been before. She had no brilliance, no display, and no power to lead a room. But she had judgment, tenderness, patience, and the habit of thinking of others. In times of ease those qualities may be overlooked beside beauty, wit, or fashion. In times of distress they become visible at once. Sir Thomas saw this fully now. He had once wished to make her grateful by raising her. He now began to feel grateful to her for what she already was.

Edmund still spoke sometimes of Mary Crawford, but always with a sadness that showed the subject was dying rather than living. He could not yet wholly give up a woman he had loved so long, nor could he immediately cease trying to excuse in part what had so deeply wounded him. Yet each time he returned to the memory, it lost some power. He saw more clearly that he had admired beauty, liveliness, and charm where he had hoped to find steadiness of principle too. The two were not joined. And once that truth was firmly known, love itself could not remain what it had been.

Fanny, without design and without hope, became the natural listener to all this change in him. She was near him every day, yet never forced herself upon him. She sympathized without urging, soothed without seeming to do so, and allowed time itself to work while she stood quietly beside him. Such influence is not dramatic, but it is often stronger than more visible forms of comfort. Edmund had long thought of her as his gentle, grateful cousin. He was now beginning, though he did not yet fully know it, to feel her as the person in whom tenderness, judgment, and moral feeling were most safely joined.

Thus the house, though still under a cloud, began slowly to settle again. Tom mended. Julia’s marriage, once the first anger had passed, seemed less dreadful than it had at first appeared. Maria and Mrs. Norris were removed from daily sight. Mary Crawford was no longer a real possibility in Edmund’s future, whatever memory still remained. And Fanny, returned from Portsmouth to sorrow instead of peace, found herself more at home than she had ever been before, because she was now loved, valued, and needed there not by accident, but with full knowledge of her worth.

Part 24

After Fanny's return, the deepest disorder at Mansfield slowly began to settle. Tom, though still weak for a long time, moved steadily toward recovery, and his recovery was not only of the body. Illness, fear, and the nearness of death had done what years of ease had failed to do. He became quieter, more thoughtful, and much less selfish. Sir Thomas, who had suffered so much through him, now saw with relief that one son at least might yet become worthy of the name he would inherit.

Susan soon followed Fanny to Mansfield, according to Sir Thomas's kind wish, and this proved one of the happiest consequences of those unhappy months. Susan, removed from Portsmouth and placed where better order and better example surrounded her, improved very quickly. She had spirit enough to profit by good guidance once she received it. Lady Bertram found another useful companion, and Fanny found the comfort of having near her the sister whom she had really helped and formed. What Portsmouth had failed to do for Fanny, Mansfield now began to do for Susan.

Sir Thomas, taught by severe experience, judged his daughters' former education more humbly than before. He saw now that accomplishments, manners, and outward polish had not been enough. Maria and Julia had been taught to shine, not to know themselves. They had been allowed too much vanity and too little discipline of heart. In Fanny and Susan, by contrast, he could observe qualities that had once seemed less important and now appeared of the greatest value—steadiness, modesty, gratitude, and a true sense of right. That lesson cost him dearly, but he did learn it.

Edmund, meanwhile, passed through a slower and more inward change. He still suffered at first from the breaking of all he had hoped for in Mary Crawford. Habit, memory, and affection do not die in a day. He had loved her too long to see her faults clearly from the first moment, and he still tried, now and then, to excuse what could not honestly be excused. But every such attempt grew weaker. The more he thought, the more plainly he understood that what had seemed a light fault in taste or tone was really a fault in principle.

In that state of mind he naturally turned more and more to Fanny. He had long been used to her sympathy, her judgment, and her gentleness. Now he found in them something even greater than before. She listened without vanity, comforted without preaching, and understood him without ever trying to triumph over his mistake. Her tenderness was not new, but its full worth became new to him because he now needed it in a way he had never needed it before. Many conversations passed between them in those weeks, quiet conversations in which she seemed only to soothe him, while in truth she was showing him every day what sort of woman she truly was.

He had once thought that no woman could replace Mary Crawford in his heart. But sorrow itself had put him into the very state in which truth could work most surely. The woman who had dazzled him was gone from his future. The woman who had always been near him, always trusted him, always answered his best self and never his weakness, stood before him in a new light. Her worth had been growing for years. He had helped form her mind, guided her reading, protected her youth, and been necessary to her happiness. Now he began to feel, not all at once but steadily, that she had become no less necessary to his own.

There was nothing violent in the change, and nothing hurried. It came as such a change ought to come. Affection, gratitude, esteem, and daily habit had long prepared the way. Only one thing had been lacking: his seeing clearly where his deepest peace truly lay. Once he saw that, the rest followed naturally. The person he had loved, guided, and protected from her tenth year upward had become the woman whose judgment he most trusted, whose company most rested him, and whose smile most quietly cheered his heart.

Fanny, of course, did not quickly understand all that was happening. She was too humble and too fearful in love to expect happiness. Even when Edmund's manner changed, even when he seemed to seek her more than before, even when his tone held something warmer and more dependent in it, she still doubted herself. She knew only that he was kinder than ever, more open than before, and more evidently at peace when he was with her. Hope came very slowly to a heart that had long trained itself to live without hope.

But Edmund did not leave her long in such uncertainty. Once he had fully understood himself, there was no prudence to delay him and no real obstacle before him. Her character was known to him completely. There was no discovery to make and no improvement to wait for. He loved her already as he ought to love a wife, and he had every reason to believe that the affection she had long shown him might become something deeper still. When, therefore, he spoke at last, he did not speak as a man trying a doubtful fortune, but as one who had at length reached the true object of his heart.

What that moment was to Fanny no description can fully say. To learn that she had been loved, not newly and lightly, but by the one person whose love she had valued above all earthly things; to know that all her long hidden tenderness had not been wasted; to feel gratitude, joy, amazement, and humility at once—such happiness could hardly be spoken even to herself. She had never ceased to love him. She had only ceased to hope. And now hope itself had become truth. The quiet girl who had been taken to Mansfield as a poor dependent rose at last, not by cleverness or beauty or ambition, but by goodness and constancy, into the place that best answered her heart.

Sir Thomas welcomed the match with sincere satisfaction. What had once seemed impossible or at least unlikely now appeared both natural and happy to him. He knew Fanny's worth at last, and he knew Edmund well enough to see that no marriage could better secure his future peace. Lady Bertram was pleased too, in her own easy way, because she loved Fanny after her fashion and liked the thought of keeping her still close. Even Susan had the happiness of seeing her beloved sister not merely honored, but loved exactly where she herself had always thought her most worthy to be loved.

Other changes followed. Dr. Grant did not live many years after these events, and by his death the living of Mansfield came at last to Edmund. Thus the future once meant for him was restored in a different form and at a later time. He and Fanny removed to the Parsonage, where they lived within sight of Mansfield Park and in the center of all the connections most dear to them. Susan remained for a while with Lady Bertram and was afterwards well established, much improved by all she had seen and learned. Tom, living chastened and more wisely, was a better son and brother than he had once promised to be.

Maria, shut away from the world, and Mrs. Norris, shut away with her, found no true comfort in one another. Julia's marriage turned out more tolerably than had first been feared. Mary Crawford remained brilliant, attractive, and incapable of being the wife Edmund had once imagined. Henry Crawford lost forever the happiness he might perhaps have gained if he had governed himself in time. Let others dwell on guilt and sorrow if they choose. For those who love this house best, it is enough to remember that after much error, suffering, and delay, Mansfield Park at last became happier through the very person who had once seemed least important in it.

Fanny had gone there as a timid child, poor, frightened, and made to feel that she was not equal to those around her. She ended there as the true support, comfort, and moral center of the family. Edmund had first been her guide and protector; he became at last her husband and the companion best fitted to value her fully. Their union was not the brightest in show, but it was the soundest in truth. It rested on long knowledge, tried affection, and likeness of mind. And because it had grown slowly, honestly, and through many tests, it promised the sort of happiness that lasts.