Mansfield End

by Ione

Summary

An alternate ending to Mansfield Park, beginning with Book Three, Chapter XV

Notes

See the end of the work for notes.

VOLUME THREE, NEW CHAPTER XV

Henry Crawford, idle in discontent, accepted another glass of champagne in hopes of shutting out the noise of the party. It had no effect; the meaningless chatter, the rattle of glasses on trays, the sudden gusts of laughter did not equal the noise in his head.

Why would Fanny not accept of Mary’s offer? It was a capital plan, one to benefit everyone, even Tom Bertram, dangerously ill at Mansfield. Though you would never know that there was any such person in the world, if one beheld Mrs. Rushworth laughing so immoderately on the opposite side of the room. Her diamond necklet flashed in the brilliant light of the chandelier as she tilted her golden head.

Their eyes met. She lifted her chin, and deliberately turned her shoulder. Recklessly he took another glass of champagne from the passing tray and drank it off, setting it down again before the footman had gone three steps.
He knew it was foolish beyond belief, that in pursuing Maria he brought himself no closer to Fanny. And yet he could not permit Maria, who had once lived for his smiles, to remain so cold. Maria Rushworth tossed her head, the feathers in her headdress floating. Surely she would smile back. Everything he knew about women predicted a smile; inside his head, he staked everything he owned against her smiling once more. He was ready for their flirtation to recommence.

She laughed at something said by the titled peacock with the four fobs stretching across his silken waistcoat. Then she stole a quick glance, and seeing him advancing, she flashed her eyelids up.

The effect of the champagne heightened the impressions—the manifold glow of crystal chandeliers, the wink of gems at necks and fingers and ears, the heady scents of pomade and wine—as the lady slipped among the groups of guests, every line of her back haughty.

Crawford recognized uncertainty behind his vexation, and knowing the cause vexed him the more. The one woman he had ever asked to marry him had refused. It was not coquetry: she had refused unequivocally, steadily, even turning down an entirely benevolent offer of a comfortable journey back to Mansfield and those she loved most. He had seen how Fanny was living now—and yet she had refused.

He was aware how much his ill temper was due to being unaccustomed to refusal. And here, hard on Fanny’s refusal, Maria Bertram that was took obvious pleasure in defying him. Each time they encountered one another in company, she gave him that cold countenance and walked off. It was maddening, it was deliberate provocation. Six months previously, when she was a miss in muslin, her eyes had turned his way whenever he entered a room, and she had amused him mightily with her indefatigable taste for rehearsing that absurd first scene as an excuse to press up against him winsomely.

Pausing long enough to stoke the heat of irritation with another glass of champagne, he started after Maria.

He walked past another drawing room, where the older generation played cards, and lost her. No, the feathers of her headdress vanished around a corner—into a conservatory. Had she an assignation, then?

Crawford knew that Rushworth was gone to Bath to fetch his mother, so she could not be meeting the husband he knew very well that she despised. He stepped inside the dim interior, breathing gratefully of blossom-scented fresh air, which seemed to heighten the effects of the champagne.

He took a step, another, and there she was, outlined against the glass by the light from the adjacent windows. She breathed fast, as if she had been running. Another step, and he closed the distance between them.

Maria whispered mockingly, “‘Dear Frederick! I was not prepared—’”

He put his arms around her as he had when they were Frederick and Agatha, anticipating a pretense of shock, a missish bridling; she might feign withdrawal, and he could feign pursuit, and so the flirtation would recommence, alive with unfulfilled enticement, passing the time that lay so heavily on him.

But however, in the enfolding darkness her hands slid up the fabric of his coat to twine around his neck. She pressed against him in a way that no mother ever had a son, and their lips met in a kiss.

The ready fire of desire leaped, though his rational mind balked; he set his hands on her shoulders and stepped back to catch his breath, looking down into her face in the reflected candlelight. She
gazed back up at him in exultation. No trace of defiance, no uncertainty, even, much less a pretense of outrage.

It had been a trap. A *ruse de guerre*. Though she was as beautiful as ever, her laughter sounded to him like gloating, and the fire cooled to ash.

“‘Oh, Frederick, your wild looks are daggers to my heart,’” she breathed—for this much she had planned during all the days and nights she had imagined this moment.

He stepped back once more. “We shall rejoin the company. This is not safe.”

She laughed again, giddy with triumph; she, too, had drunk of champagne in order to bolster her courage. “What does the landlord say? ‘A bed for this good woman—’”

But the words had not the effect she had hoped. He walked away, and she followed, at first furious, then she understood. Of course he wanted her alone, without the possibility of these fools breaking in upon them. She must follow at a discreet distance. Impatiently she thought, Why should we be put to the trouble of discretion, if we wish the same end?

Mrs. Fraser caught her arm. “There you are! We are about to begin the dancing, and there are three petitioners for your hand.”

Maria said something—she knew not what—and broke away, uncaring that she left her friends staring after her. She had one purpose, to find Henry, yet she had lost sight of him. She walked around the room, rejoicing when she saw him not. It was exactly as she had supposed. He had slipped out ahead of her, and she must catch him outside.

She had thought about this night in all aspects. She had even prepared a little case of things she would need to fly with him—for that had been her goal all along, to bring him at last to the point. She ran up to the guest chamber to find her case, then descended the back stair, its unfamiliar weight pulling at her fingers, but she dared not summon her maid, the spying wretch. She slipped outside . . . and found herself alone, except for the glow of the windows, and the noise of the guests. Where was he? Perhaps in the street. Or . . . had the coward dared to *abandon* her? Impossible. He was teasing; she must catch him up.

Afraid that her husband had given orders to her coachman that the fool might not obey her, she walked to the nearest hackney stand, and held up her necklace. Letting the diamonds swing in the light of their lanterns, she said, “I will give this to the driver who will catch my friend on the Richmond road.”

At that same moment, Crawford was tooling his barouche at a sedate pace through the empty streets as he breathed hard to clear the wine fumes from his head. How stupid he had been! He knew better than to whip up his horses, for it was quite nine miles from Twickenham to Richmond, but the desire was there to widen the distance between him and what could so easily have been disaster.

He let them run a little when they had passed the last houses, then slowed them to a walk when the road roughened. After a time he became aware of the thunder of horse hooves coming from behind. He turned, and made out the swaying twinkle of lanterns on a rocking coach.

He slowed, urging his horses to the side, wondering who was mad enough to travel hell-for-leather over such shocking roads, and stared in surprise at the hackney, for such it proved to be. It pulled up, horses stamping and steaming, and the quiet night air carried a high female voice, “That is he.”
Maria climbed out of the hackney, her case in hand.

The driver, mindful of those diamonds he wanted to keep, whipped up the horses at once, as Henry cried, “Wait! What’s toward?” Then he was distracted by the sight of a slim female form standing alone on the road.

Maria, in her moment of triumph, uttered the other phrase from the dear play that she had prepared. “‘But to desert me wholly, to wed another?’”

She had imagined many possible lines with which he might respond, and what she ought to say in return, but she was utterly unprepared for a flat, “What?”

Maria stepped closer, a moment of doubt seizing her. “It is Henry, is it not? This abominable darkness.” She perceived the outline of his shoulder in its greatcoat, limned by the lantern’s glow from either side of the barouche box. “I am come,” she said.

Henry stared, his wits flown. Never had he more bitterly regretted those few glasses of champagne: he could not think. “You must go back,” were the only words he could find. He seized his reins, longing to spring the horses, but he was not poltroon enough to leave a woman standing alone in the road.

What to do? “Get in,” he said curtly. And, once she had passed her case up to him and climbed nimbly to the box next to him, he gave the horses the office to move again.

Maria sat close beside him, smiling up at the soft clouds passing the moon. Everything she wanted most was at last in her grasp! Almost in her grasp, but really there was little more to do.

Henry Crawford’s thoughts were very different. He must not drive on to his lodging—that would be as disastrous as turning around and driving alone with her back to Twickenham, to pull up in front of all those eyes at this late hour, his horses no doubt injured beyond saving. An inn, yes, that would do. He needed a tankard of ale to clear his head, and to get the animals stabled. Then he would find a way out of this disaster.

The remainder of the journey was largely conducted in silence. It was enough for her to be beside him at last, in possession where other females had only longed to be. There was time and aplenty to coo the words of Lover’s Vows, so delicious with their double meanings. If only it was not so abominably cold!

By the time they rolled into a stable yard, she had the beginnings of a headache, and for the first time regretted not having eaten dinner. “Is this your lodging?” she asked, looking around at the unfamiliar lumps of buildings.

“No. It is an inn.”

Shrugging, she climbed down after him, and when the sleepy stable hands had come out to see to the horses, she followed him inside, where the innkeeper stood at the counter. The man had pulled a shapeless coat over his night gear but he had forgotten his nightcap still perched on his bald head, the sight of which caused a flutter of laughter behind her ribs.

She moved to the registry book, took up the pen, and began to write as she spoke, “Mr. And Mrs. C — “

“Collins,” Henry interrupted before she could get past the initial consonant. He lifted the pen from her fingers and added the name to the page with a few swift, angry strokes. He added an equally false direction, which surprised her. But she did not want to make a scene in this dreadfully
common inn room, and so she followed in silence as the innkeeper lit them upstairs with a flickering, stinking tallow candle.

This he set on a side-table, as he said roughly, “There’s beeswax on the sideboard, which is three shillings apiece if you light ‘em.” Not waiting on an answer, he shut the door, leaving them alone.

Henry set down Maria’s case, the sight of which vexed him further. When she stretched out her arms to him, he said as evenly as he could, “You shall have the bed.”

Surprised, she turned to this object, which sagged in the middle, and was covered by a counterpane that smelled strongly of mildew.

So he wished to wait until they were properly married? She laughed at the vagaries of men, lay back, and fell into exhausted slumber. He lit a candle, snuffed the disgusting tallow, then cast himself into the round chair beside a rough-hewn table. There he remained, gazing at the wavering glass into the darkness beyond.

CHAPTER XVI

The accumulation of detail in the full light of morning rendered the truth inescapable.

Henry Crawford’s head ached abominably, and he shut his eyes against the splinters of light reflecting from the gilt edge of the teacups, the silverware on the tray one of the inn servants had brought in, the scattering of coins on the table. But equally inescapable were the little sounds made by the room’s other occupant, and the mingled smells of coffee, burnt toast, and cold ham.

The strong light that he found so repellent looked very different to Maria Rushworth. She ate as she looked complacently from her ruined headdress, flung to the floor, to her case, exulting over each piece of evidence that her plan had succeeded. She would soon be quit of everything Rushworth, Henry Crawford was hers, divided forever from Fanny Price—not that she believed that had ever been a possibility. The absurdity of such a notion would be laughable, if the presumption on the part of Miss Price did not make her so very angry.

So why did her dearest Henry just sit there in that chair opposite hers, looking half dead?

Her cup clattered onto its saucer with a deliberate rattle, recalling to his mind the rap of the masters’ rods on the lectern at Eton. Crawford opened his eyes, to find her regarding him steadily.

“This inn,” she said, “was sufficient for the night, but paltry rooms displease me as much as the grime of travel. We must put our heads together. If you like not the idea of taking me to your lodging, then we ought to get the horses put to at once. How far is it to Everingham?”

Henry looked up wearily. “We can have you back in Wimpole Street by nightfall. We’ve only to decide—”

“Wimpole Street!” she repeated in surprise. “That is out of the question. I made sure of it by leaving behind a letter of quittance. I am very certain that nosy spy the old woman saw fit to hire as my maid has already opened it.”

“I seem to remember,” he said, pressing fingers to his temples, “a great deal was said last night. But nothing about letters.”

Where was the ardent Henry of Mrs. Fraser’s conservatory, of last night, the tender Frederick of
the sweet days of Lovers’ Vows? There had been very little of lovers’ vows last night, she thought with increasing dissatisfaction as she eyed him sitting there in his shirtsleeves, the ties carelessly hanging open, his hair lying disheveled on his brow.

This ought by rights to have been the first day of her honeymoon. She was seized by an impulse to punish him a little for the agonies he had cost her six months ago, when he rode away from Mansfield without a thought.

Maria attempted a playful tone. “I find men’s tendency to hide behind the bottle tres banale, as your sister would say. But however, though I drank two glasses of champagne, you can count upon me to recollect everything.”

A flush of anger glowed in her cheeks. She was as beautiful in the light of morning as ever she was under candlelight, her fair hair tumbled on her shoulders, and her wrapper draped over the evening gown that she had slept in. The idle—the dangerous—desire for flirtation had been thoroughly obliterated. He was now well-served for surrendering to impulse. He longed to shut his eyes again, and on opening them, to find himself in his own bedchamber, drinking down a mug of porter the faster to dissipate the fragments of a nightmare.

But he was here. And so was she. The wrapper served as silent reminder that she, at least, had premeditated this step. He had succumbed to a campaign as willfully carried out as any he had perpetrated heretofore. Only his campaigns had never gone beyond sweet words, languishing looks, the press of hand, the tender sigh; he had always quit well before he committed himself. That is, except for one—

Fanny. The urge to repair this disaster, to turn back the clock if he could, sent a sharp pang through him.

As if her thoughts paralleled, Maria said, “What start was this, setting us down as Collins? Perhaps it is better so. I do not pretend to know about such things. I am sure of one thing: the sooner we unite the Mr. and Mrs. with Crawford, the better. I expect Rushworth will be rapping at his solicitor’s door before the week’s end, and I wish him Godspeed.”

Not heeding her words at all, he got to his feet, and began to hunt about for paper and ink. “I’ll write to my sister. She’ll aid us; if I send you to her, she will attest to your having stayed with her—“

“Did you not hear me?” Maria’s soft mouth, which he had once admired, had tightened to a white line, and in the clear light, he perceived the faint lines in either cheek where brackets would one day be carved, unpleasantly calling her Aunt Norris to mind, as she said, “No. I am well rid of Rushworth, his horrid mother, and that old barrack Sotherton. It will cause a great deal of talk, but that cannot be helped. You ought to have thought of that last summer.”

Goaded, Crawford said gently enough, “But I was not in want of a wife last summer.”

Maria reddened. She had not intended to allude in any way to that girl, scarcely better than a foundling, whom she so despised, but the notion that Henry Crawford could prefer Fanny Price to her raised an overmastering rage, and she retorted, “You cannot have me believe you really intended to marry my mousy cousin, who has not two words to say for herself? You are not such a blockhead; you would be bored with her within a week. Sooner.”

Crawford recognized that tone. It was in that same voice that she had excoriated her brother Edmund Bertram the previous summer to give in to their wish to mount the play. Crawford and Mary had wondered over it, for neither would so treat the other; aware that he had no right to moral
outrage, he was still irritated enough to say, “I am bored now.”

“You may place the blame for that squarely at your own door.” Maria was watching him closely. Where once she had seen only beguiling smiles and the bright gaze of admiration, she perceived cold displeasure. The wish to punish him warred with the anxiousness to settle things as she wished, and she made a fair attempt at a softer, cajoling tone. “Pray, why should we begin our lives together on so disagreeable a note? What’s done is done. The world will condemn us for a short time—and it is I who must bear the worst of it—but neither of us cares a jot for the highest sticklers who moralize over everybody. If we retire to Everingham and live quietly, we shall be married by this time next year, by which time the scandal will have been replaced by something else. There are those in plenty who will shrug, and whisper, but they will come if we entertain well.”

The revulsion of feeling at the thought of her entering the house of his youth surprised him with its strength. He knew that she had no conversation besides commonplace. No topic interested her outside of herself, and everything bored her except flattery. Flirtation was her only mode, the quick exchange of compliment and coy withdrawal, the pretense of pique and woo, none of it more meaningful than the uncounted repetitions of Mrs. Inchbald’s absurdly sentimental words.

The skepticism with which he had been raised had convinced him that this false coin was what women expected to be paid, and in turn proffered; until he met Fanny Price, that had been enough to amuse him and pass the time. The word ‘love’ had no real meaning; it was an agreed-upon construct encompassing the threadbare sentiments of poets, and a polite term for base desires.

Fanny had taught him that only the truth would do, and though he might have ruined everything—the realization caused a pang so sharp he paused to draw breath—he must honor her by beginning with the truth.

“We are not going to Everingham,” he said. And at the white fury in Maria’s countenance, he said quickly, “I will undertake to drive you to my sister—to your sister—anywhere you like. Or it might be better if I send you by post chaise. If we are not seen together, we still might hush up what never should have happened.”

“It has happened,” she rejoined angrily. “I wanted it to happen. You wanted it to happen, or was everything you said last summer false? The result may be laid at your door. You made me love you. You shall not be quit of me; I am no mere drab on the town.”

As he picked up his coat, he said, “We are both of us too used to having our own way. We have no resources when flouted, and must attempt to learn. I will begin by admitting that I ought never to have engaged in our flirtation, and I am sorry for it. But in turn you must own your part: you ought to have sent me to the right-about, as an engaged woman.”

She tossed her head contemptuously. “You know very well I hadn’t a vestige of partiality for Rushworth.”

“She has taught me that only the truth would do, and though he might have ruined everything—the realization caused a pang so sharp he paused to draw breath—he must honor her by beginning with the truth.”

“Then we were both equally at fault, and the sooner we restore you to your family and smooth over this folly as best we may, the better for us both. If you will not choose a destination, then I must depart now, while we are still in charity with one another.”

“You cannot leave me here,” she said, trembling with rage. “You shall not. If you think,” she added with spiteful triumph, “that the so-pure and good Fanny would have you now, then you are a fool. At least I am spared that.”

‘At least.’ He could not imagine gentle Fanny with her face twisted in hate. He might very well
have lost Fanny through this criminally stupid debacle, but Maria’s words operated powerfully on him. Her bitter triumph, instead of bringing him back to her side, decided him otherwise.

“I will engage to pay down a sum for you to remain as long as you like, and set aside another sum for a post chaise whenever you choose to go. Order it to take you anywhere you wish— “

“Coxcomb! Poltroon!”

He pulled on his coat, picked up the last of his coins, and said, “Come, let us kiss and part in peace. I am off to repair what is left of my life. If you act quickly, you might do the same.”

She turned her back. He left, running down the stairs. He arranged things with the innkeeper, providing for ‘Mrs. Collins’ to remain until she had recovered from an unnamed illness; he mounted his barouche at last, and tooled down the road under a gray sky, his principle emotion an overwhelming sense of escape.

Maria remained where she was, believing to the last that he must return to her side. She had offered him the paramount prize, herself; it was impossible that she should mean nothing to him. Her earlier temper was nothing to the fury that possessed her when she glanced out into the courtyard and saw him drive away, not even looking back.

And so passed the rest of the day, bleak and cold under driving rain. She sat where she was, refusing the touch the bed they had not shared, and when the servant knocked, she drove her away again with angry words.

After an endless night, dawn revealed the muddy puddles of an empty courtyard. She opened the door at last to summon a hot breakfast, ink, and paper.

CHAPTER XVII

As Fanny could not doubt that her answer was conveying a real disappointment, she was rather in expectation, from her knowledge of Miss Crawford’s temper, of being urged again. A few days later, when the answer did arrive, she had the same feeling.

A most scandalous, ill-natured rumor has just reached me, and I write, dear Fanny, to warn you against giving the least credit to it, should it spread into the country. Depend upon it there is some mistake, and that a day or two will clear it up — at any rate, that Henry is blameless, and in spite of a moment’s étouderie thinks of no one but you. Say not a word of it — hear nothing, surmise nothing, whisper nothing, till I write again. I’m sure it will be all hushed up, and that it will prove but Rushworth’s folly. If they are gone, I would lay my life they are only gone to Mansfield Park, and Julia with them. But why did you not let us come for you? I wish you may not repent it.

Yours, etc

Fanny stood aghast. As no scandalous, ill-natured rumor had reached her, it was impossible for her to understand much of this strange letter. She could only perceive that it must relate to Mr. Crawford.

It was so very strange! She had begun to think he really loved her, and to fancy his affection for her something more than common — and his sister still said that he cared for nobody else. Very uncomfortable she would be until she heard from Miss Crawford again.

She could think of little else all the morning; but when her father came back in the afternoon with
the daily newspaper as usual, she was so far from expecting any elucidation from such a channel, that the subject was for a moment out of her head.

She was deep in other musing. The remembrance of her first evening in that room, of her father and his newspaper came across her. No candle was now wanted. The sun was yet an hour and a half above the horizon. She felt that she had, indeed, been three months there; and the sun’s rays falling strongly into the parlor, instead of cheering, made her still more melancholy; for sunshine appeared to her a totally different thing in a town and in the country.

Here, its power was only a glare, a stifling, sickly glare, serving but to bring forward stains and dirt that might otherwise have slept. Her eyes could only wander from the walls marked by her father’s head, to the table cut and notched by her brothers, where stood the tea-board never thoroughly cleaned, the cups and saucers wiped in streaks, the milk a mixture of motes floating in thin blue, and the bread and butter growing every minute more greasy that even Rebecca’s hands had first produced it. Her father read his newspaper, and her mother lamented over the ragged carpet as usual, while the tea was in preparation.

For Fannie was first aroused by his calling out to her, after humphing and considering a particular paragraph — “What’s the name of your great cousins in town, Fan?”

A moment’s recollection enabled her to say, “Rushworth, sir.”

“And don’t they live in Wimpole Street?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Then, there’s the devil to pay among them, that’s all. There.” Holding out the paper to her.

“Much good may such fine relations do you. I don’t know what Sir Thomas may think of such matters. He may be too much of the courtier and fine gentlemen to like his daughter the less. But by G—, if she belonged to me, I’d give her the rope’s end as long as I could stand over her. A little flogging for man and woman too, would be the best way of preventing such things.”

Fanny read to herself that “It was with infinite concern the newspaper had to announce to the world, a matrimonial fracas in the family of Mr. R of Wimpole Street. The beautiful Mrs. R., whose name had not long been enrolled in the lists of hymen, and who had promised to become so brilliant a leader in the fashionable world, having quitted her husband’s roof in company with the well-known and captivating Mr. C., the intimate friend and associate of Mr. R., and it was not known, even to the editor of the newspaper, whither they were gone.”

“It is a mistake, sir,” said Fanny instantly; “it must be a mistake — it cannot be true — it must mean some other people.”

“It might be all a lie,” he acknowledged; “but so many find ladies were going to the devil nowadays that way, that there was no answering for anybody.”

“Indeed, I hope it is not true,” said Mrs. Price plaintively. “It would be so very shocking! If I have spoke once to Rebecca about that carpet, I am sure I have spoke at least a dozen times, have I not, Betsey? It would not be ten minutes work.”

Fanny seemed to herself never to have been shocked before. There was no possibility of rest. The evening passed, without a pause of misery, the night was totally sleepless.

There followed hard on that news at last a letter from Edmund. It was brief.

Dear Fanny:
You know our present wretchedness. May God support you under your share. You may not have heard of the last blow — Julia’s elopement. She is gone to Scotland with Yates. I shall be at Portsmouth the morning after you receive this, and I hope to find you ready to set off for Mansfield. My father is able to think and act, and I write, at his desire, to propose your returning home. He is anxious to get you there for my mother’s sake. My father wishes you to invite Susan to go with you, for a few months. Settle it as you like — say what is proper — I am sure you will feel such an instance of his kindness at such a moment. You may imagine something of my present state. There is no end of the evil let loose upon us.

Never had Fanny wanted more a cordial! Tomorrow! To leave Portsmouth tomorrow! There is nothing like employment, active, indispensable employment, for relieving sorrow. She had much to do, that not even the horrible story of Mrs. Rushworth could affect her as it had done before. She had not time to be miserable.

Business followed business. The day was hardly long enough. The happiness she was imparting, too, happiness very little alloyed by the dire communication which must briefly preceded it — the joyful consent of her father and mother to Susan’s going with her — and the ecstasy of Susan herself, was all serving to support her spirits.

By eight in the morning, Edmund was in the house. The girls heard his entrance from above, and Fanny went down. He was alone, and met her instantly; she found herself pressed to his heart with only these words, just articulate, “My Fanny — my only sister — my only comfort now.”

The carriage came. Fanny’s last meal in her father’s house was in character with her first; she was dismissed from it as hospitably as she had been welcomed.

How her heart swelled with joy and gratitude, as she passed the barriers of Portsmouth, and how Susan’s face wore its broadest smiles, may be easily conceived. Sitting forwards, however, and screened by her bonnet, those smiles were unseen.

The journey was likely to be a silent one. Edmund’s deep sighs often reached Fanny. Had he been alone with her, his heart must have opened in spite of every resolution; but Susan’s presence drove him quite into himself, and his attempts to talk on different subjects could never be long supported.

Fanny watched him with never-failing solicitude, and sometimes catching his eye, received an affectionate smile, which comforted her; but the first day’s journey passed without her hearing a word from him on the subjects that were weighing him down. Just once, when they were disembarking, he took her hand, and said in a low, but very expressive tone, “No wonder — you must feel it — you must suffer. How a man who once loved, could desert you! But yours — your regard was new compared with —Fanny, think of me!”

It being some seventy miles from Portsmouth to London, Fanny knew the journey would require at least two days. She had not counted upon the state of the roads in spring, and she had to summon all her resources to possess herself in patience while they sat under downpours through two more days, before setting out again on the morning of the third.

It was nearly midday when they finally reached the metropolis, and disembarked at the hotel to which Sir Thomas was in the habit of giving his custom during his rare town visits. Edmund established Fanny and Susan in a private chamber upstairs, and then brought with him several waiting letters, the sight of which caused Fanny’s heart to beat.

As Susan wandered about the room, exclaiming in delight at everything she saw, Fanny anxiously watched Edmund.
From the speed with which he opened and read these, Fanny gathered that none were longer than a few lines. “Here is one from my father, left for us in hopes we should find it before leaving for Northamptonshire. He is gone to Richmond, where my sister is alone, at some inn or other. I can hardly make sense of these,” he said, looking back and forth from one letter to the next. “One prepares us for the worst news; in the second my father hopes things might not be as bad as he feared.”

“Oh, I pray it may be so,” Fanny exclaimed, as Susan looked up in interest; having no acquaintance with the principals in the business, and without any affection for these troublesome cousins, her heart remained untouched. But she perceived Fanny’s perturbation, and kept a prudent silence.

Edmund glanced down at the direction of the third, opened it, and then said with a conscious look, “I have received a note from Lady Stornaway, begging me to call.”

Fanny knew on whose behalf Lady Stornaway would issue her invitation.

Edmund’s cheeks were overspread with color. “I must go. She will possess the latest news. If it is as bad as I fear it might be, she must be feeling all the shame and wretchedness Crawford’s sister ought to feel. It is no more than duty to hear her out and thence to part in peace.”

Fanny hardly knew how to feel. She suspected that there would be no parting in peace; or that if peace was in being, another interview would be needed, and another. The only true parting would be in anger, which no woman of principle would wish on another; the alternative was to come to an agreement at last. This was her duty to wish for them both, if that would bring them happiness, though it would end hers forever.

So she said nothing—she would send no greetings she did not feel, and believed herself no longer constrained to the pretense.

As expected, Edmund found Mary Crawford sitting with her friend. When he was announced, Lady Stornaway greeted him, and talked the merest commonplace for five minutes, before inventing an excuse to go out of the room. She cast Mary a bright, derisive glance, then shrugging at the impenetrable vagaries of unmarried women in possession of large dowries, she went in search of fresh entertainment.

Mary Crawford thus found herself alone with Edmund, as she had alternately wished and dreaded. On Lady Stornaway’s quitting the room he rose politely, then remained standing, irresolute. Gravely he regarded her serious air, her hands clasping and unclasping in agitation.

“I believe the rumors flying about have assumed the worst,” she said with a fair attempt at a natural voice. “My brother is alone at Everingham; I received a note yesterday to this effect. I do not know where your sister is.”

Edmund took out his pocketbook, and extracted his father’s second letter. “Sir Thomas departed for Richmond, where my sister wrote that she had been abandoned by Mr. Crawford.”

Mary did her best to smother her vexation. What could that foolish girl be about? Making the best of it, she pitched her voice low. “What can equal the folly of our two relations?”

Edmund was shocked, the prepared words of forgiveness, of farewell, forgotten.

She saw it—her face changed—she took a turn about the room, her hands still tightly clasped, then she said, “I do not mean to defend Henry at your sister’s expense. Yet I must reprobate the folly of being drawn on by a woman whom he never cared for, at the risk of losing the woman he adores.”
She spoke quickly, smoothly; so much had been planned out. “And she! For women the cost is so much greater in discovery, how could she countenance plunging into such difficulties under the idea of being loved by a man who had long ago made his indifference clear? Did she think the world would not hear whispers, and put the very worst complexion on the matter, that which would afford the highest entertainment?”

He groped, as if for comprehension. “Am I to understand that it is the detection which you reprobate?”

“It is the willful, deliberate setting aside of truth in favor of her own desires, in spite of the imprudence, the want of discretion. Of caution. He acted on the idlest of impulses in going to Mrs. Fraser’s party—I will say nothing of her part, as it is unhandsome, but only this: he had no intention of running off with her, or with anyone else.”

He was silent. She felt that silence as reproach; he was only aware of a stunning sensation, akin to that he’d felt when at fifteen, he’d first fallen from his horse who had balked at a wall.

“Do sit, pray,” Mary said quickly, her tone caressing. “We must put our heads together. If we do not act, Henry will lose Fanny forever. This must not be. Loving Fanny is the making of him, and I am convinced it will be the making of her. If we do not act, he will have thrown away such a woman as he will never see again. She would have fixed him, she would have made him happy for ever.”

Edmund did not hear her invitation to take his place again on the sofa. He remained standing as he watched a fly bumbling against the window glass.

Into the pause—which must not lengthen into a silence—she went on rapidly, her carefully planned speech forgotten. “Why would Fanny not have him? It is all her fault, simple girl! I shall never forgive her. Had she accepted him as she ought, they might now have been on the point of marriage, and Henry would have been too happy and too busy to be idle, and attend parties where I am very certain he did not really wish to go. He would have taken no pains to be on terms with Mrs. Rushworth again. At the very most their connection would have ended in a standing flirtation, in yearly meetings at Sotherton and Everingham.”

Angered beyond reason by this imputation of blame upon the blameless Fanny, Edmund shook his head; sensing his anger, she hurried into a different attack. As quickly as she could speak, she outlined what Sir Thomas must do to quiet gossip. She extended herself to show him willing cooperation—Christian forgiveness—though she liked not the would-be object of it. She had cared nothing for Maria Bertram, and Mrs. Rushworth had not improved upon her. But she must bind the two families together in any way she could contrive.

In that, the customarily observant Mary Crawford misread Edmund entirely. It was her turn for shock when he spoke at last. “I did not think it possible, coming in such a state of mind into this house, that any thing could occur to make me suffer more, but you inflict deeper wounds in almost every sentence.”

“I?”

“Though in the course of our acquaintance I have often been sensible of some difference in our opinions, “ he said with grave deliberation, “on points of some moment as well, but it had not entered my imagination to conceive the difference could be such as you have now proved it.”

Mary Crawford stilled, her face pale around the sparkling dark eyes he still found fascinating. He looked away, as if to avoid the power of those dark eyes even now.
“The manner in which you treat the dreadful crime committed by your brother and my sister—with whom lay the greater seduction I do not pretend to say—but the manner of speaking of it . . . your considering its ill consequences only as they are to be braved, or overborne, by a defiance of decency and impudence in wrong . . . last of all. Above all. Recommending a compliance, a compromise . . . I do not think I have ever understood you before.”

“No.” She retreated a step, and clenched her hand upon the back of a chair, her rings sparkling with the beat of her heart. “You have not.”

He passed a hand before his face. “It seems to have been a creature of imagination, not Miss Crawford, that I have been too apt to dwell on for many months past.”

“How well do you purport to know anyone?” she countered. “Does not love cause us to see as we wish to see, as it causes us to act as we would wish to be seen?”

He was too angry to listen. “Could I have restored you to what you appeared last summer, I would infinitely prefer any increase in the pain of parting, for the sake of carrying with me the right of tenderness and esteem.”

Mary’s pale face reddened. She struggled against sensations she might scruple to express, then uttered a mirthless laugh. “A pretty good lecture, upon my word. Was it part of your last sermon? At this rate, you will soon reform everybody at Mansfield and Thornton Lacey; and when I hear of you next, it may be as a celebrated preacher in some great society of Methodists, or as a missionary in foreign parts.”

She tried to achieve careless detachment, but her voice shook.

He bowed, wished her well, and added as he laid his hand on the door latch, “I hope you might soon learn to think more justly, and not owe the most valuable knowledge we could any of us acquire—the knowledge of ourselves and of our duty—to the lessons of affliction.”

He closed the door behind him and ran quickly down the stairs to fetch his hat and gloves from the servant, yet he listened for her, as always; he was aware when the door opened at the top of the stairs.

He paused, and looked upward. There she was, framed in the doorway, her smile saucy and playful. “Mr. Bertram,” she said, half holding out her hand. “Must we part angry? Is this the duty you would have me learn?”

He stood irresolute: nothing of the pain he had felt before equaled that which he now felt. But duty bore him around again, that he might not see that sparkling eye, or the curl of her hair outlined against the satin wall hangings above the wainscoting, or that gesture of appeal.

The servant had opened the door. He took his leave, and yet as he walked back to the hotel, he was blind to the crowded street. Mary Crawford’s image remained before his eyes until he walked, infinitely tired, into their private sitting room.

Fanny saw in his face something of his suffering, but nothing must be said while Susan was there. Fanny despaired of any opportunity for private converse.

In Portsmouth she had grown accustomed to shutting out the eternal noise and bustle. But Susan relished those same sounds as something new; she had never been to London, and might not be again. Her quick ears caught the promise of variety, and she asked if she might just go down to the window in the lower saloon in order to watch the hurdy-gurdy man outside in the street.
Fanny reflected thankfully that there was little danger, and far more need to speak with Edmund. When she turned his way, and observed the hopeful lift of his head, she gave permission, and Susan, wreathed in smiles and oblivious to any thing outside of her own anticipation of pleasure, vanished in a quick patter of feet.

Edmund sat down on the sofa next to Fanny. In a low, wretched tone, he repeated the conversation, then exclaimed, “Sometimes how quick to feel! She felt my reproof from the start, but knew not the cause. Has the evil has gone too deep?”

Fanny knew she could corroborate with a word; she knew that Edmund in probability expected her to, as had largely been her habit all her life. But she had witnessed the evidence of quick condemnation and careless judgment, the pain resultant from a moment’s thoughtless impulse. “Evil?” she repeated. “ Might this be a case where love seeks excuse where reason must not go?”

Edmund turned her way. “Love? Her love, that is, love for a brother? Is that where you are? Because she was firm upon one point: that there was no love, only folly, on the part of her brother. She tried to pass it off as something not intended— but I must not speak of such things to you.”

When she might have spoken (though she hardly knew what to say) he went on quickly, in a firmer voice, “At least you have been spared pain; your standing resolute has been your protection; neither brother nor sister has known any principle to supply as a duty their deficiency of heart.”

Fanny had never contradicted Edmund, though she had discovered that she could feel differently from him, always on the subject of the Crawfords. “You have come to believe them both incapable of love?”

Edmund looked her way, caught by her tone. His color changed. He might think of words spoken before; he might be unwilling to disbelieve the Crawfords’ professions of love, because honesty then required him to examine his own motive.

“How can I answer that? This entire year has been a catalogue of errors,” he said. “It will be a great deal of time before I can restore any confidence in my ability to judge character. I was wrong, was I not?”

“I have seen,” Fanny said, laying down her stitchery that she might be able to concentrate wholly on choosing her words, “how at each turn, prompted by your ardent spirit, you always made exceptions for her.”

Edmund accepted this observation, too gently spoken, and yet too acute, to be a rebuke. “If you put that another way, you could say how weak have been my principles at every test.” He persisted with relentless logic, “Which implies that my own evil is very nearly the equal of hers.”

“I think,” she said slowly, “that you and I have formed the habit of referring to ‘evil’ in such a way that it comes readily to the tongue.”

He looked up at this, arrested.

“I have come to understand that there is not always one way to see every event.”

“Good principles must always stand fast.”

“Yet action, and motive, can be misattributed, to a painful degree,” she said, remembering her own assumption that Crawford’s courtship must have arisen out of the basest motives. But she must not be thinking solely of herself. “It is not fair either to underestimate the strength of your warm heart, or to overestimate Miss Crawford’s mercenary motives. She was not always so. She was very kind
to me, when it gained her nothing, far kinder than—“She broke off, unwilling to mention the wretched Maria, or heedless Julia. “And I do not believe she ever was motivated by cruelty.”

“No! Hers is not a cruel nature.”

“I believe she loved, perhaps for the first time.” When Edmund raised his head at that, Fanny went on, conscious of speaking beyond her experience, “Might it be that if love is not taught, it begins as in all things with a child’s instability, and simple understanding, and as such looks for guidance?”

Edmund wavered, and Fanny saw him waver. He might say he was done with Miss Crawford, but she had heard that before. What came new to her was the awareness of a general sense of grief in comparison to the summer’s sharp pangs of jealousy.

As always, Edmund did not see her inner turmoil. “Perhaps I had better occupy myself with ordering fresh horses for the morrow, and afterward I shall take a turn in the air, to clear my mind.” He picked up his hat from the side-table. His voice was uneven, his heart full as he said, “Thank you, Fanny, my dearest sister.”

Fanny watched him go, reflecting on his confident assertion that she had at least been spared much pain. Perhaps she ought to be grateful that he could not see how untrue that was, for she would not add to his pain by correcting his assumptions.

CHAPTER XVIII

Fanny knew she ought to find Susan, but she longed for the quiet of this room with no one moving about or speaking. She could compose herself the faster if she might be alone.

She picked up her needle again, and was shaking out the shirt she had not had time to finish for her youngest brother, when there was a knock at the door, and the maidservant let in a familiar diminutive figure who entered with quick step, shut the door without invitation, and cast her hat onto the very table where Edmund’s beaver had so recently rested.

“Please, Fanny,” said Mary Crawford. “You have always been generous; give me a moment of your time.”

The long habit of accommodation, even of submission, made Fanny sit down again, though she could not have expressed the extremity of her reluctance. Here was fine repayment for all her words about duty—if she had only gone to find Susan!

“You were always your cousin’s chief confidant were you not? You were a better sister to him than — you must have heard about my conversation when he called at Lady Stornaway’s today.”

Fanny could only nod.

Mary Crawford took a turn about the room, and then stood at the window, her head tipped. “Dear Fanny,” she began with laughing reproach. “Miss Price. Why could you not have Henry? Why must you remain coy, when everything, and everybody, was in favor of the match?”

Fanny’s head bent, and Mary scarcely heard the soft tones of her voice, in which the words ‘Mrs. Rushworth’ might be heard.

Mary Crawford made a dismissive gesture. “I discount her. There was no love there. Only the boredom of the young woman who deplored the match she made as soon as the bridal visits
ceased. And jealousy that you had succeeded in attaching Henry when she could not. She is not the first to find that no amount of money protects one from bad decisions. I can name you an hundred such cases, just within my own circles.”

A stirring of anger gave Fanny courage, even if she was not quite convinced of the truth of her assertion, or of her own motivation in feeling. “I think she loved, where he only trifled.”

“What do you know of love?” Mary Crawford took a quick step forward, and peered into Fanny’s face. “On every side we hear of your innocence of any passion, how we must wait for you to discover them.”

“One does not have to be practiced in any thing to be an observer,” Fanny said, avoiding those searching dark eyes.

“One has to know a little of what one observes for there to be recognition of what one sees,” Mary countered. “Have you been a hypocrite, Miss Price? Is there no love for my brother, though he is in love for the first time in his life, because your heart is already given?”

When Fanny did not answer, Mary gripped her own elbows tight against her and laughed mirthlessly. “I recognize myself now. I know where we are. We have been caught in a French farce. Though I have read any number of them, and sat through even more, I did not at first recognize the signs.”

Fanny flushed, hating Mary Crawford then as resolutely as so gentle a nature could ever hate another being.

“You do not answer.” Mary turned her back to the window, and its ceaseless noise. “Was it the curate, then? Or perhaps Cousin Tom, who never took notice of a woman in his life, except to run the other way if she smiled in his direction? I do not press for an answer; I am unwilling to believe anyone less was preferred to my brother.”

She glanced over her shoulder. “I will observe only this: that your cousin, Mr. Edmund Bertram, for all his pride in knowing you best of all, did not see that.”

Fanny was silenced.

Mary Crawford often felt confined, but that was woman’s lot, to move from room to room, and perhaps from room to carriage, with only sedate walks among flowers and trees to break the monotony. Once she’d tasted the relative freedom of galloping on horseback, but even then she must never be alone, there must always be a man to guard and to guide.

She found herself often at windows, but had learnt not to depend on their false sense of freedom. Reminding herself of that now—drawn back by the lengthening silence—she turned around to discover in Fanny Price’s averted gaze, her furrowed brow, a struggle against some strong emotion. Could it possibly be anger?

What had Fanny Price to be angry about, if she truly cared nothing for Henry?

A new idea, almost blinding in the light it shed on past words and events, gained possession of Mary’s mind. Was it possible that she and Fanny Price were in love with the same man? Idea followed rapidly on idea. Much that had puzzled her would be explained, but as rapidly as former questions closed, new ones opened.

Foremost was the astonishing thought that the angelic Fanny Price was as sly as any London miss. No. That was wrong; Mary knew it was wrong. There could have been no pleasure in the secret.
Fanny Price had not shown the smallest smile or artful sigh at being in the confidence of both Mary and her cousin; Mary recollected that Fanny Price had not invited confidences. She merely acquiesced when they were forced on her, as she acquiesced in every unreasonable demand of her deplorable aunts.

Mary recognized that she must speak carefully. She suspected from that averted face that only good manners kept Fanny in the room.

“It has always astonished me,” Mary began. “How frequently we hear about the values of gratitude, from the pulpit, from our elders, from the world. Gratitude has always reminded me of love. One can be ordered to be grateful, but that does not make one feel it. One can be ordered to love, when circumstances, and one’s friends, ordain that a match is perfect in every other respect. The hypocrite pretends it, and the good person struggles to find it in her heart.”

Mary’s reward was a brief glance, as Fanny’s flush died down a little.

“It has also astonished me that within a given group of people, gratitude is not expected of each to the same degree. The one who is most constrained to feel it might not be granted even the relative luxury of confiding in anyone else. Who can say something as inconsequential as ‘Stooping among these roses gives me the headache’ when all around one hears ‘You should be grateful you are here to do it’? Do you not agree?”

Fanny was bewildered by these sudden sea-changes in a conversation she longed to escape. One moment it seemed that the penetrating Mary Crawford was a heartbeat from speaking out the truth that Fanny had never disclosed to any being, but then she shifted away, her manner once again artificial, her tone idle.

Reassured by this seeming evidence that Miss Crawford was ignorant of deep emotions, Fanny said, “Gratitude is one of those sensations we’d all be the better for feeling.” It sounded like a platitude; as soon as the words were out, she despised herself.

“True. And one does feel real gratitude for kindness when one is used to indifference, or scolding, or cruelty. Gratitude in turn can inspire one to strive to be what the other expects, can reshape kindness into a semblance of love.”

Fanny blushed again.

“I say semblance,” Mary went on, though she’d received no encouragement; but neither had she heard invitation to quit the subject; “I say semblance because there is a danger in attempting to reshape oneself to another’s ideal, if that effort only goes one way. Hélas! Some matters of delicacy are easier to express in French: the danger is that he to whom one is grateful will appear the ideal in place of the actuality.”

The door rattled, and a bouncing girl entered, face flushed from exertion. She caught herself short when she encountered Mary, and executed a creditable, if abrupt, curtsey.

Fanny forced herself to speak. “Miss Crawford, pray give me leave to present my sister Susan.”

“Good morning, Miss Susan,” Mary said kindly, wishing the girl anywhere else. “How do you find London?”

“Oh, very well, thank you,” said Susan, turning to her older sister for cues, but discovering Fanny’s attention somewhere between the floor and their guest.

Susan shrugged, and dropped into a chair, intending to be virtuous by picking up her workbag.
After a little pause, Mary said, “I was on the point of departure. I wish you a very good stay, and —” She had been about to send her love to Edmund through Fanny, as had been her habit, but she caught herself in time, and as Fanny did nothing to delay her, she closed the parlor door on the sound of Susan’s saying, “Pray, sister, ought I to ring for the tea things? I own I am vastly hungry.”

Mary returned to her friend’s house, and did her best to resume the order of her day as if nothing had happened, for she would not have Flora detect any thing that might prompt questions, or cause exchanged glances and arch smiles between those who prided themselves on their penetration.

Everything irritated her: Flora’s chatter, and then her sullen silence when Mary did not take up her offer to speculate about Mr. Edmund Bertram’s intentions. Lord Stornaway’s hallooing voice, his habit of slamming every door in the house. Even the rattle of coaches over the cobbled streets, and the continuous cry of voices from the street, usually so entertaining, closed her in.

Consequently she begged Lady Stornaway to make her excuses to the ladies they had intended to call upon that afternoon, on the grounds of a very real headache. The close room, the chattering voices uttering the same words she had heard yesterday, and would no doubt upon the morrow, would be intolerable. She longed for a modicum of silence.

When the servant knocked to announce a visitor, it was at her tongue’s end to deny her, until she made out, “Mr. Crawford.”

She flew down to the parlor, where she found Henry having just handed his hat and greatcoat to the servant. Gone was his habitual easy manner.

As soon as the door was closed, he threw himself into the chair. “I cannot hide forever in Everingham.” He looked up, his face drawn. “I had to see you.”

“As an injured party, Henry, I take leave to inquire, what were you thinking of?”

“Nothing happened,” he said tiredly. “Beyond a stolen kiss.” His tone turned sardonic. “Who stole from whom, I retain enough vestige of gallantry not to say.”

“Nothing happened,” she repeated. “That is not what the world thinks. Who was it who told me directly after her wedding that Maria Rushworth had to be the most selfish being you had ever met with?”

“And the prettiest. Until that time, the prettiest. Mary, it was the impulse of the moment. But after that kiss, I ran—and she followed. I could not leave her standing alone on the Twickenham road. As for interest, I can safely promise that now I have even less,” he said, putting his head in his hands. “We parted with every evidence of hatred.”

“Better you had carried her straight back to Wimpole Street at the outset. I am convinced that a little less of the world giving way to whims of the beautiful Mrs. Rushworth would have done her good.”

Henry dropped his hands, revealing the tell-tale marks of several sleepless nights. “How did I not see her as she was? So selfish, so angry.”

“Were you really blind to the slights she gave her sister, starting with taking the part Julia ought to have had in that wretched play? To her derisive comments about Edmund when he was not by, when he held out against doing it at all? I thought her willfulness amused you.”

“Perhaps.” He had sat down, but he got up again, moving restlessly. “Yes. I cared nothing—then. Perhaps I enjoyed their struggle over my attentions.”
“Yes,” said Mary inexorably, “and this past month, you said nothing of her utter disregard for Tom, who lay desperately ill at home, when you discovered her everywhere.”

“I am not the first man to be so stupid. The question that puzzles me now is, what cause could she have for so vast an anger? Could it be catching, like a sore throat? For Maria’s chief supporter was her aunt, ready to scold and chivvy the rest of the family into agreeing with her every scheme. If anger begets anger, by rights it ought to be Fanny, Mrs. Norris’s primary victim, who should be possessed by rage.”

Mary would not be shifted from the topic. “What really happened? Did anger make Maria’s passion interesting? Idle you have been, but never trite.”

“Don’t.” He pushed aside the air with one hand. “Mary, don’t. It’s bad enough as it is. Candlelight and champagne should be banned.”

“I see what it was,” Mary said. “I know what happened. She showed you that haughty, cold manner, and you could not resist. Never mind that her eyes followed you everywhere you went, from the moment you first reappeared in London. Never mind that her coldness was as false as the most coy flirtation from a girl of sixteen. Oh, Henry, it must be a truism that the first sign of old age is when our motions, and our reasons, become predictable.”

When he did not answer, she added, “As for predictions . . . I must inform you that Edmund Bertram is staying where the Bertrams usually lodge while in town, though I believe Sir Thomas is somewhere between Richmond and here, chasing down one errant daughter, as the other is out of reach. You had better return to Everingham, and at once. I will never forgive you if you oblige either father or second son to call you out.”

“That is Rushworth’s business,” Henry said tiredly.

“Pray do not expect me to know the ins and the outs of these ridiculous rules regarding duels. It will be hideous enough, for he will most certainly bring a suit against you for criminal conversation.”

“I know.” He made a gesture of warding. “I know. Another reason I came to town was to visit my solicitor. I will contest nothing; I will pay anything, just to have it over as expeditiously as possible.”

Mary said inexorably, “I should warn you also that Edmund brought Miss Price with him.”

He raised his head at that. “You’ve seen them.” His voice altered.

“I’ve seen them both. First it was he. No great lady could ever have been blessed with a longer private sermon from her domestic chaplain. Though I would think she had rather more of flattery. Afterward, I went to call on your Fanny.”

“What did she say? How did she look?”

Mary’s habit of sarcasm was entertaining in company, and in private relieved pent-up sensibilities. Mindful of her discovery, she schooled the impulse now. “She said very little. And looked just as you might expect.”

He dropped his head into his hands again. “I did not think there was any hope: the Bertrams will unite in excoriating me, for which I can hardly blame them.”

“You could try to write to her, and I will send it,” Mary said, the impulse driven by her own need
for connection, to find some way to draw Edmund back. “I suspect that she has had too much of opposition in her life to rejoice in disdaining you with a pretense of angry virtue, as did one who perhaps is better not mentioned. Fanny might be constrained to read what you have to say.”

“And to forgive?” Henry cast her a mocking look. “When she has her own personal chaplain to hold her to the fire of Christian duty?”

“I should think,” Mary rejoined, “that a moment’s reflection would serve to remind you that Fanny is an unparalleled example of Christian charity. You once thought she might convince even the admiral that such a woman could exist.”

“I still believe it.”

“As for Christian charity, who is to say? I think she was very much shocked, and the more I reflect on how the fair Maria must have desired exactly that, the more I am put out of all patience with my own sex, as well as yours.”

Henry walked to the window to gaze into the street without seeing the lounging gentlemen, the flirting girls, the pie-men caroling their wares, and his own carriage horses being walking up and down the street by his groom.

The strong sunlight shone mercilessly on his profile, emphasizing the marks of unhappiness. His first experience with regret had been the summer previous, when he wished, for a short time, that he might have traveled the world as did William Price, striving for king and cause, testing his strength against the cruelties of nature and of man. He had enjoyed this brief exploration of a new sensation just long enough, before settling the question: he was very well satisfied with his own life.

That experience, so fleeting, had not prepared him for the sharpness of regret for the quagmire in which he now found himself.

“Of course I know how little you like to write,” Mary said, ready to excuse him, when she saw how distraught he was.

“I will do it. I will beg Fanny’s mercy,” he stated, turning away from the window, and pacing the length of the room. “So tender, so unable to cause any pain! She will have to forgive me.” His voice lightened. “Is it tawdry to hope that that tender emotion might erase the events of the last days?”

“Tawdry? Not to me.” Memory of Edmund’s words would obtrude; Mary threw her head back. “Consider, Henry. We could both write, to relieve the press of emotion—to explain and excuse and beg forgiveness. But neither of us could bear it if that forgiveness proved to be the sure road to matrimony for us both. It would do no good to any of us if you and I are expected to spend the rest of our lives enacting the role of penitents. Edmund, at least — I say nothing of Fanny— must become insufferable. A helpmeet who chooses us out of moral superiority? Jamais! We would come to hate one another as surely as have you and the foolish Maria.”

Henry laughed, and tossed away the sheet music he had picked up from the table. When he spoke again, it was with his habitual urbanity. “I gather you have settled it you no longer attempt to sink the clergyman in favor of the husband. Or had you other hopes?”

She sat down to her harp, and smiled. “In a proper French farce, Tom Bertram would die of his excesses, not regretted for long by anyone, including his much-tried parents. But the last report was, Tom is recovering, however handsomely a Sir Edmund might move about a London drawing
room.” She tightened a harp string. “However, that would not make him happy. He was not made for idleness.”

As she began to play softly, he said, “And your happiness? Could you be happy, if he knocks on the door tomorrow, hat in hand?”

“I have no expectation he will knock on the door tomorrow, or even next week. He was definite in his congé.”

“He was definite in his previous partings, was he not? Yet he returned, time and again.”

She played a few bars, head tipped to the side. “Though he held firm when I tried to divert him from his intentions, I flatter myself with the reflection that every time he returned, he was a degree more human. Do you know, I don’t believe he had ever laughed before we came to Mansfield? I owe it to the world to civilize him. Or at least all the old ladies at Thornton Lacey ought to be grateful to me.”

Henry made an effort to match her saucy tone. “Might he civilize you?”

“First we must agree on our definition of civilization,” she retorted with a smile.

“You said you would marry no man in orders. And yet here he is.”

“I have made many fine predictions.” She played through a few bars of one of Edmund Bertram’s favorite airs. Then, “When first we arrived at Mansfield, remember my first prediction?”

“That aside from our sister, you feared we would meet with bores and rustics.”

“When I returned to London, it was to discover that bores and rustics are preferable to what I find about me every day. In the past weeks I have discovered in me no lingering fear of being a clergyman’s wife, or rather, that clergyman’s wife. I might do very well as a little queen over a very small domain; doing good works could not be more tedious than another soirée in a hot, overcrowded room, listening to tonnish nothings. Life in Mansfield would satisfy me, if I could continue to educate him in how to laugh.”

Henry said shrewdly, “He would make the better clergyman for it.”

Mary ran her fingers along the harp, and began Dussek’s *The Lass of Richmond Hill*. “From me to you. Do you believe Fanny’s passion would be equal to her charity?”

Henry said, “I thought we were agreed that her devotion to William Price promised an ardent heart could one but waken it.”

“If . . . “ She abandoned the sonata, and busied herself with the tuning of a harp string.

Henry laughed shortly. “Delicate indeed, Mary. But I have been aware of her *tendre* for her cousin these several months. I was certain of it at Portsmouth, when I was granted the opportunity to speak to her without her having to look to Cousin Edmund after every utterance for his approbation.”

Mary’s hands dropped. “You never breathed a syllable of this.”

“Moreover,” he said, “in Portsmouth I also saw her look at me when she thought I was not aware. It was the speculative gaze of a young woman, in contrast to her looking anywhere but at me, as was her habit at Mansfield. I believe that her passion for her cousin is the adoration of a schoolgirl,
entirely understandable given that Bertram was her protector and guide in that family. She certainly had no friend in the sisters, and a positive evil in Aunt Norris.”

Mary abandoned the harp and came to sit beside her brother, chin in hand. “I do not know whether to admire your penetration or scold you for your slyness.”

“Neither,” he said. “I said nothing in hopes you would settle your business without mine becoming a condition, as there was no hope of Fanny turning to me until such time as her cousin were safely wed. The wait—you are not to think I lay blame for my regrettable impulse, my stupidity, at your door. But the wait, without a definite end, might have prompted my impulse at Twickenham as much as the champagne. I put the blame solely on my inability to tolerate being thwarted. No sermon could compass a clearer moral.”

Mary tried to laugh it away, but her throat hurt; “And so we reach the truth when it can do neither of us any good. Should we abandon the notion of writing, then?”

“The more I consider, the less I favor hiding behind ink and paper. I want to see her eyes when I explain myself. But she must be willing to listen.”

“And they surely depart tomorrow for Northamptonshire.” She spoke the words, breathing against the stricture around her heart. With a last pretense at carelessness, for nothing was left but pride, she said, “What will you do, when you are finished with your solicitor, return to Everingham? Or join the admiral, and revile with him against the weakness of the female sex?”

“I was thinking,” he said, “of buying a yacht.”

CHAPTER XIX

At first Mrs. Norris, on finding herself de facto mistress of Mansfield, thought of herself as having reached the pinnacle of felicity. Whether Tom suffered a protracted illness or succumbed at last, she must be in command of all.

This charming situation did not last out the first week. Tom, fretful and restless under the effects of fever, cried out in protest whenever he heard the voice of his aunt. It was Sir Thomas who, making polite excuses — protests against the possible spread of infection — forbade her going anywhere near Tom’s bedchamber. She would have confined herself to presiding over her sister Bertram’s sick chamber, but however, she met with unexpected resistance in Mrs. Chapman, Lady Bertram’s maid. To all Mrs. Norris’s hints, expectations, and commands, Mrs. Chapman stubbornly returned one answer: “I take my orders from my lady.”

Mrs. Norris might have shifted her campaign to ordering about the household, but here, too, she met with resistance: a silent but firm alliance between Baddeley, housekeeper, cook, and the odious Chapman. This left her with nothing to do but invent excuses to continue living on at Mansfield until such time as Lady Bertram must send for her.

So when the first express arrived from Mr. Rushworth, followed in sequence over three days by letters whose contents were so confusing and contradictory that Sir Thomas determined he must investigate himself, Mrs. Norris declared that nothing would keep her from sacrificing time and energy in service to the family in this new affliction.

Sir Thomas was deeply shocked by the news concerning both his daughters. He knew he must think, and act; aware that the invalids might do better without the noise and bustle of Mrs. Norris,
and thinking that a woman must be of use when he found his erring daughters, accepted of her company with thanks.

They set out with only as much delay as necessitated by Mrs. Norris thinking of last minute instructions in no way welcome by either the butler or the housekeeper; but these two, perhaps relieved at the prospect of her departure, offered no words to delay the impatient father.

On this journey, Sir Thomas thus was afforded an opportunity to peruse and re-peruse the various letters, and ponder how such extraordinary events could have come about.

The questions put to Sir Thomas by Mrs. Norris were so persistent that he found himself handing over the letters, that she might find answers for herself at least in part, leaving him a modicum of leisure for thought.

Mrs. Norris started out the journey very well pleased with her situation. She loved the bustle and comfort of a carriage ride for which she did not have to disburse a penny. Though Sir Thomas had made mention of troubling news about the Rushworths, so great was her conviction that her dearest Maria was secure in her enviable place in London society as mistress of vast wealth, that her emotions were no more severe than expectation of talking, doing, and the interest and excitement of an ever-changing scene.

No sooner had she possessed herself of the expresses’ contents then her spirits underwent a material change. She was stupefied with shock. Maria was her first favorite, the dearest of all; the match had been her own contriving, as she had been wont to say with pride. The wealth and grandeur of Sotherton — the splendid house in Brighton — the elegant home in Wimpole Street — all to be thrown away?

When she could think again, her first thought was a rush of anger. “This is the fault of Fanny Price. Unnatural girl! It is all her doing. Had she accepted Mr. Crawford, whose offer was far above anything she deserved, this could not have happened.”

Sir Thomas had been thinking much the same, but in a cooler, more deliberative manner, beginning with a recollection of his own conversations with Fanny, both in the East room and in his study. Fanny’s steadfast refusal to accept Mr. Crawford as a husband appeared in a far different light now; but if she, a girl of eighteen, had had the penetration everyone else lacked, why did she not admit to it, when he had put to her that very question?

Hearing in Mrs. Norris’s intemperate language the trend of his own thoughts prompted this response: “As yet, Fanny, unlike both of my daughters, has not run off with anyone. I believe we will do better to wait upon events. There will be time to pass judgment, and attribute blame, when we are in possession of all the facts.”

“Very true, very true,” Mrs. Norris rejoined. “It is just as you say, Sir Thomas.”

Yet no sooner had she drawn breath than she proceeded to restate, and at greater length, everything she had said previously. She continued in like manner, determined to carry her point, until it was time for a halt to change the horses.

Sir Thomas remained silent. If she had known the general trend of his thoughts, even she might have paused to consider. His opinion of her had been sinking from the day of his return from Antigua; in every transaction together from that period, in their daily intercourse, in business, or in chat, she had been regularly losing ground in his esteem. In thinking about her, he was forced to reflect upon how unfavorable to the character of any young people, must be the totally opposite treatment which Maria and Julia had always been experiencing at home, where the excessive
indulgence and flattery of their aunt had been continually contrasted with his own severity.

His must be the fault here. He saw how ill he had judged, in expecting to counteract what was wrong in Mrs. Norris, by its reverse in himself, clearly saw that he had but increased the evil, by teaching them to repress their spirits in his presence, as to make their real disposition unknown to him.

Here had been grievous mismanagement, and a more direful mistake in his plan of education. He feared that principle, active principle, had been wanting, that they had never been properly taught to govern their inclinations and tempers. They had been instructed theoretically in their religion, but never required to bring it into daily practice. He had meant them to be good, but his cares had been directed to the understanding and manners, not the disposition.

This conclusion was brought to him all the more forcefully when at last they arrived in Richmond. So extreme was the irritation of nerves caused by Mrs. Norris, that he insisted the first interview with his daughter must be conducted only by himself. He left her downstairs, and the last thing he heard as he trod up the steps was her voice as she put a great many questions to the innkeeper.

He found Maria alone in a private sitting room, angry and unrepentant.

“You shall make Crawford marry me,” was the first thing she said. And to all Sir Thomas’s subsequent objections, she returned to that point, without heeding him at all.

“Impossible,” he declared, aware of his pulse racing, its echo a pang in his head. “Impossible. It will never come to pass; it never would have come to pass. He had chosen someone very different, though that, too, must come to nothing—”

Maria could not bear to have Fanny brought forth, even by imputation. With every evidence of hatred, she said, “If you had only stayed in Antigua another month, I would have brought him to the point.”

The pain in Sir Thomas’s head redoubled. He took a moment to compose himself, to reflect that his must be the final decision. “Was it my appearance that drove him off, or the possibility that he might be asked his intentions?”

Maria was silenced, and for a heartbeat, Sir Thomas perceived fear in her wild gaze. But then came an insistent knock, and Mrs. Norris’s voice rising to be heard over the barrier of the door: “Sir Thomas! Sir Thomas! There is an express arrived for dear Mrs. Rushworth—the innkeeper wishes to know our intentions—may I be of service? I came all this way to be of service in this your hour of affliction!”

Maria, knowing her chief support was at hand, tossed her head, and the fear was gone. “I wish to speak to my aunt,” she declared, and opened the door herself.

Sir Thomas, hating the thought of all their business known to the inn’s occupants, acquiesced. As Mrs. Norris came in, the express on a tray, Sir Thomas, perhaps thinking of Mr. Crawford, picked up the letter.

Maria blushed, for she had the same thought, but even she would not dare to snatch a letter from her father’s fingers. “It is from somewhere in Yorkshire,” he said, looking at it carefully. “Is this not Julia’s hand?”

Maria sank back in profound disappointment. As her aunt drew up a chair and uttered a stream of questions, scarcely pausing to permit of an answer, Sir Thomas opened the letter.
Dearest Maria.

I just receiv’d yours, brought hither by Yates’ man, who was sent to London for the rest of my things. You left behind such an Uproar I knew the next from home would be to demand my return, to be forever Immured at Mansfield. You might have told me what you were about, though I would have done my best to dissuade you from such a Step! I persist in believing Crawford never thought of either of us. If he did make an offer to Cousin Fanny, Yates and I are united in thinking it a very good joke indeed, as he never paid her the least Heed. She must be more sly than anyone had any notion of.

But however things have turned out vastly well— Yates came to my Rescue, asking me to fly with him to the north that we might be married. We stop’t in York as his estate is there— though small, it is everything that is Charming— the Hall, though of Brick, is well-situated, and Yates speaks of extending the Garden and of planting an Avenue that, when full-grown, will hide the Mill— but I digress. His Mother insisted that I remain there, with her and his Sisters, and she sent him to his Cousin, that everything ought to be done Right. I wrote to Father before for Permission, and if that is gained, we shall be Married right here.

I hope when I write next, it shall be as Julia Yates!

Your sister, Julia Bertram

Maria took the letter as her father held it out in silence. She ran her eyes over the first lines, her heart crowding her throat as she made out the name Crawford, but when she read far enough to guess the content of the rest, she threw the letter onto the table, where Mrs. Norris picked it up.

Sir Thomas said tiredly, “I expect there is a letter awaiting me at home. I will order fresh horses. With luck, Edmund might have reached Mansfield by now, with Fanny and— “

Maria crossed her arms. “I will not set foot in that house if she is there.”

Sir Thomas scowled at his daughter. “For once, you and I are in agreement. I hope I will always do what is right by my children, but you shall not pollute my house, or the neighborhood with your presence. I was going to say, you may stay with your aunt at her house, until such time— ”

“I will not,” Maria stated, voice rising.

Mrs. Norris cut in, not at all liking the idea of supporting two in her house, which (she felt) was scarcely adequate for one. “We will do very well here, Sir Thomas. If I remain to add my countenance, there is nothing more respectable than a married woman with her aunt. You might send along her woman, that we have someone to wait upon us decently, until you can settle where we go next.” Here she believed she had triumphed: she had her own dear Maria, and whatever happened next, the charge must be on Sir Thomas’s purse.

Sir Thomas, with nothing else presenting itself to a mind overburdened with cares, agreed. By then the headache was extreme; by the time he climbed back into the chaise to depart for Northamptonshire, he thought he might never be warm again.

CHAPTER XX

“My dearest Fanny,
I was very sorry to have left you so precipitously, but however, orders had been sent out, and it was very good of Dr. Campbell to come for me. I shall begin my letter now, while we are still in sight of land, and pretend that you are sitting with me, and hearing what I say.

28 April

My apologies, Fanny. It has been a week. I got called away the wind having come to the northeast, we got underway with the fleet and got off Ushant for the second time, but next day it shifted to the westward again, carrying a storm that drove us back to Torbay again. It blew so hard that we bore away and scudded under our foresail—next day, in setting the close-reefed maintopsail, it still blowing hard, rain and hail, it blew to pieces. We are all agreed that a grampus has been following the ship these last seven days.

30 April

I am taking this moment to report that we have finally rounded Ushant. I have been meaning to write, but I have discovered that a second lieutenant, even aboard a sloop of war, is quite the Busiest man on the ship. I also draw the worst watch — but however you are not to think that I am complaining. I know to whom my gratitude is due for my being Made—I never neglect Mr. Crawford or the Admiral in my prayers— and I have only to look into the noisome Hole into which the midshipmen are stuck when we inspect of a Sunday, to remind me where I would have been but for their exertions on my behalf.

7 May, off L’Orient—

Our signal was made to proceed to the south—

12 July Aix Roads —

I know you will forgive me, but once again I was interrupted, and this for a longer time. I was called away by the captain ordering us to beat to quarters. I was directed to get three of our main-deck guns shotted and pointed as far ahead as possible; a square-rigged ship was seen coming straight at us.

There was little accomplished but a great deal of noise and smoke—the Frenchman altered his course and ran downwind, cracking on like smoke. The grand result of this brush with the enemy was an unlucky splinter Mr. O’Malley got directly under the collarbone. I had great confidence in Dr. Campbell, as did the captain, but the result was, all O’Malley’s duties fell to me, in addition to my own, while he lay abed.

The only part I will report is one afternoon, the lookout spied some chasse-marrées stealing along shore, and the boats of the squadron were sent after, ours with me in command. We captured two of them, laden with supplies, which was cheered almost as much as if we’d captured a French 72 worth thousands of pounds, for we were down to the beef caskets that had been twice to the West Indies and back, and our biscuit was more weevil than flour.

Sam and the boys were ordered to leave off hunting rats, at which they have had a capital time, what’s more they have enriched their pockets by selling said rats to the middies. But however the captain has ordered a stop to that.

23 August— Gibraltar

Well, as you have no doubt seen by the papers, we have met Monsieur, and he is the sorrier for it.
We are all eager for the packets to catch up with us, that we might see how our Battle is written up in the papers, and I am all the more eager as I have not received a single letter; we have been hopping about so much there is no knowing what we’d be about next. I have the satisfaction of knowing that when the mail does catch up with us, I expect a fat packet of letters, and count upon one containing news of your engagement with the gentleman I count upon as my Benefactor. He is the only one for whom I willingly give up our old plans of setting up a jolly house together, overlooking the sea.

Because *Thrush* is a mere sloop, I doubt the papers will waste any time on us, in favor of the noble ships of the line, which is only just. Now that I have gained liberty, I can lie up here as snug as you please, and write out the particulars.

We had previously heard of a French squadron of frigates full of stores and ready to slip out of the Basque Roads; we crowded all sail to cut them off, and at midnight got sight of them. Judge of our surprise as the daylight appeared to find they were a fleet of French warships: eight sail of the line, and one of them a three-decker of 120 guns. Two of them were flagships, with two frigates accompanying them!

They were thinking to catch us, but thanks to Heaven they were too late, as we were on different tacks. We continued our course and fetched into their wake, then put about and followed them. The signal was made to us to proceed with all haste to the rest of the fleet to inform the admiral of this fleet being there. But before the squadron was hull-down behind us, we spied another squadron of the enemy in sight, coming toward us, which caused our captain to order us to put about. We were thus nearly surrounded by them, yet we kept up our spirits, being determined to fight to the last rather than be taken.

As the wind was now blowing towards the land, the Commodore thought it very improper to come to anchor on a Lee shore to fight, but made the signal to prepare to do it with springs on the cables; the *Elephant*, mistaking the signal, ran in and came to anchor. As she swung around the frigates and batteries cut her severely, so that she was soon obliged to cut her cable and come out again.

Her fore-topsail was shot away, her sails and rigging much cut up, but she behaved gallantly. Hundreds of French people were seen standing on the quays gawping at us as we went in, but as soon as we opened our Fire they dispersed in an instant. Nobody was killed in the exchange, but we were hit by shot several times. One went into the bowsprit and another through the jib boom. Our noble commodore is as cool and steady as if no enemy were near.

The winds then favored us in bringing the rest of the fleet, and the Adm. and Commodore between them fixed up a ruse taken from the recent example of Lord Cochrane. My *chasse marée* was one of those ordered to be prepared as a fire ship. As our premier was still considered half an invalid—he must preserve himself for the coming Action—the captain gave me the order to fit her up. Mr. O’Malley told me in private he was heartily sorry for it, which did not lessen the work a jot, but made me feel the better for it all the same.

We made narrow troughs and laid them fore and aft on the ‘tween decks, and then others to cross them, and on these were laid trains of quickmatch; in the square openings of these troughs we put barrels full of combustibles, tarred canvas hung over them fastened to the beams, and tarred shavings made from bits of wood. We cut holes on each side for the fire to blaze out, and a rope of twisted oakum well tarred leading to the standing rigging. We placed Congreve’s rockets at the yard arms, but this was an unwise proceeding, as they were as likely to fly into our boats when escaping, after being set on fire, as into the enemies, so we were obliged to take them down again.
By then the Wind came up. She rolled so much alongside the boats as to endanger her masts being carried away against our rigging. She must needs drop astern, and hang on by a rope. When this vessel was ready, I returned on board, it then being four in the afternoon, not having broke my fast the whole day.

Lieut. O’Malley then took charge of her with the jolly boat and crew. He and Mr. Thompson got made commanders for this business, and I will not say that they did not deserve it. But it is very hard that I who had the sole charge of fitting them up, the most trouble, and my clothes spoiled by the stuff, had to stand by. But that is the lot of the second lieutenant!

The French ships of the line lay in two tiers across the passage, as they had not room enough to lie in our one line. The frigates lay to the eastward and a great number of gunboats to the westward across the passage.

At 8:30, it being very dark, and a strong tide setting with blowing weather right toward the enemy’s ships, the explosion vessels set off. The first soon blew up with a dreadful explosion. The other fire ships followed her in, and the elements were soon in blaze, the light all around giving us a good view of the enemy. Some thought they saw the enemy’s ships on fire, but it seems they had been prepared for this business, for as the fire ships closed on them, they slipped or cut their cables and ran their ships onshore. Then our line of battle ships began firing, and by Dawn three of the enemy had surrendered, and several more were run aground.

Mr. Thompson later told us he had a narrow escape. One of the cabin windows had been opened for him to get into the boat, after the fuse was lighted; but the swell was so high, and the sea so rough, they durst not venture near the stern of the vessel for fear of staving the boat against the counter. And not having a moment to spare, he jumped overboard. His boat took him up, half drowned, and he arrived safe on board.

My night was entirely taken up between decks, commanding the gun crews of my three guns, and so I worked around the clock four-and-twenty hours. The captain hailed us all as heroes, but as Lt. O’Malley said before he was ordered to take charge of one of the surrendered frigates, it is only the great men whose names will be printed. If Bonaparte keeps up this war for another dozen years, perhaps my turn will come!

You will laugh at us, I know; when I was a midshipman all I could talk about was being made, but now all we lowly lieutenants can talk about is one day achieving post. Once you are on the list, well, your worries are over.

Sam is here, standing beside me, and hopping from foot to foot. The boat is waiting to take us ashore, so I must put down my pen.

Sunday Evening—

The most maddening thing occurred: all of our mail was loaded onto the packet bound for Aix, but however it is expected to return tomorrow, at which time I may at last hear news of you.

In the meantime, I have a surprise for you! Determined to keep Sam from some of the unsavory haunts at Gib harbor, I took him to the new-built Trafalgar Cemetery, knowing he would find it interesting—and whom did I run smash into, but Mr. Crawford himself! I shook him by the hand, and introduced Sam to him.

He seemed very glad to see me, but when I asked for news from Portsmouth and Mansfield—news of you—all he said was that he had bought himself a yacht, following which the Admiral had put him to work carrying secret dispatches, under the guise of a gentleman sailing for pleasure. When I
put a question to him, asking him to carry my letter— for surely he might be seeing you— he was most apologetic, said he was bound for the Baltic next, or Africa, and did not know when he might next be at leisure.

I did not know what to make of this, especially when I asked for news from home, and he said there was little to tell—that your letters would soon catch up with me—and though he insisted on our being his guests at a spanking dinner, the talk was all of our battle, the war, and nothing of home. I do not pretend to be as penetrating as you girls, but I would take my oath he was not in spirits.

We parted on good terms, however, with mutual good wishes; he would not listen more to my professions of Gratitude, though he did promise to send my greetings to the Admiral, along with the details of our battle, which Crawford said he knew the Admiral would enjoy. As soon as the tide permitted, we took the boat out to Thrush, where I have just now sat down to add this to what I perceive is an unconscionably long letter. But I know Sir Thomas will not grudge the charge.

September 1, off Portugal

I have kept my letter open, for Mr. O’Malley being promoted into the eight-gun brig Ariadne, and two nephews of the rear-admiral, new-made as lieutenants being forced on the captain, he has given me a recommendation to Captain Wentworth of the Laconia, who has a great Reputation for Prizes.

We spoke a cutter last night—and here at last was the Packet, carrying your Letters. Sir Thomas dead! And by the same disease that nearly carried off the new Sir Thomas? I am all a-maze, dear Fanny—there seems nothing of good news here at all.

I will say nothing of Mr. Crawford in this letter, as you request, but I will take leave to ask you what you were about? No, I will not say what is in my heart. I will confine myself to asking how it comes about that you, who always insisted upon putting the Best face on Cousin Maria’s snubs of us, and Aunt Norris’s tyranny, cannot believe that a man in love might change for the better?

I will leave off, as I am certain you have more Cares than you admit. I am glad you have Susan by you, for I am afraid you will have no one else to watch over you, and I include Cousin Edmund, who is a capital fellow riding to hounds, but who takes you a great deal for granted, buttonholing you to prate forever about the Evils of M— C— , then neglecting you when chasing after her. Scrub I might be, but do not think I did not take Notice.

The packet is preparing to set sail, so I only have a moment to scribble this last line, professing my love. It seems we really will set up house together some day, and I do not know if I am glad or Sorry for it.

Your brother,

William Price.

Post Scriptum: Sam sends his greetings and Respects, and I am to tell you that he bought a Parrot at Gib, but I cannot get him to sit down to a letter.”

CHAPTER XXI

At Mansfield, Susan soon adapted as summer ripened and then began to wane. Like her Aunt
Norris, she was robust of constitution and determined to be of use to all, but in manner and mode they were altogether dissimilar.

She was by when Sir Thomas returned from Richmond, ill and feverish; she stood outside the bedchamber, ready to run errands, or to carry a tray as Sir Thomas demanded of Fanny, “Why did you say nothing?” over and over.

Though struck to the heart by her uncle’s restless accusations, Fanny insisted on taking the greatest burden of nursing, in which she was joined by Edmund, who sat tirelessly at his father’s side, reading or keeping silence as his father wished. Thomas, grown sober in his slow recovery, began to see to the affairs of the estate, consulting Sir Thomas when awake.

When Fanny and Edmund saw how these consultations pleased Sir Thomas, they made no attempt to forbid Tom the sickroom, even when they feared that his mental exertions would further endanger Sir Thomas’s exhausted frame. But all could see the comfort he took in Tom's attention to duty.

At Tom’s request, Edmund took it upon himself to read the post before his father saw it, that inconsequential and vexing matters might be kept from him. Matters concerning his daughters he must see, causing some anxiousness on his behalf. Sir Thomas directed Edmund to write granting Julia permission to marry Mr. Yates; her portion of his sorrow, and sense of failure, lightened a significant degree when it was discovered that Yates’ estate was rather more, and his debts much less, than he had feared.

When Fanny saw the easing of Sir Thomas’s spirits upon the news of Julia’s being married, she conceived an idea, which out of habit she took to Edmund first.

“I can see how much Maria’s situation weighs upon his spirit. I do not expect that my cousin would heed a letter from me, but perhaps if Lady Bertram were to write to her daughter, petitioning her to return home to help nurse her father, might not it be better for both? Might not my uncle forgive her, and in doing so find a measure of peace?”

At first Edmund frowned, gainsaying. He spoke of sin, and of situations impossible to forgive, but to every objection, Fanny steadfastly pressed her point. If Tom, whose manifold sins—causing Sir Thomas to travel halfway around the world—could come home to forgiveness, why should not a daughter be forgiven for one?

“Maria’s sin was so much greater—the stain cannot ever be removed,” was Edmund’s first response, echoing his father’s own words, but to this Fanny returned to her own point: why should a son be forgiven, if a daughter could not? Was not Mary Magdalen as welcome to the Lord as any sinner?

Edmund, who had never ceased to search his own heart, discovered that it was not so easy to lay all the blame upon Maria, when he himself could have acted at any time the previous summer to end the injurious connection with Crawford. But he had remained conveniently blind.

As spring ripened into summer, Susan took nursing duties so that they might walk in the fresh air. Their conversations invariably turned upon Mary Crawford’s faults, as if by thoroughly condemning the woman he loved, Edmund attempted to expunge his love, or condemn himself for loving her.

One day, perhaps inspired by yet another repetition of this theme, Fanny returned to her point: “If Sir Thomas can be brought to forgive his daughter Maria, and in that act, bring consolation to his own spirit, might not that spirit of forgiveness in turn be extended to others?”
Fanny observed Edmund gazing off through the trees in the direction of the parsonage, as was his old habit when struggling between inclination and judgment. Grieved deeply by the remorseless demands of justice, at last he said, “It might do him good, and my sister as well.” He said nothing of his own situation, but Fanny was satisfied.

“I will answer for it, my aunt would be happiest were there peace in the family,” Fanny said, and on returning to the house straightaway set about cutting her pen, dipping ink, and coaxing Lady Bertram through the letter, which went out in the next day’s post.

But here, Fanny’s plan met an obstacle: Maria refused to return to Mansfield. She wrote back to her mother, insisting that she, who had been sinned against more than she had sinned, would not be forced into a nursemaid. She was furiously angry with her father for issuing orders that placed her and Mrs. Norris in a distant locale, where she was not known, and there was little society to be had. If he were sick, it was no more than he deserved and she wished him well of it.

There arrived before her letter the news that Mr. Rushworth, at the angry urging of his mother, had indeed brought suit for criminal conversation. Sir Thomas had never suffered such a scandal in his family; he blamed himself foremost, and under that weight, added to the oppressive heat of August, his constitution at last gave way before the intermittent fever that he had never been quit of. On a sultry, thundery day he sank into insensibility; by week’s end, Sir Thomas was no more.

Sir Thomas was buried with Dr. Grant presiding, a man to whom he could not bring himself to speak outside of parish affairs after the events of spring.

His death cast the entire household into mourning, though of them all, it sat most lightly on Susan. She had entered the house to hear Sir Thomas blame Fanny for the scandal; while she knew of her uncle as a beloved and respected man, there was no time for her to come to love and respect him. Thus Susan was able to put her considerable energies to work in ministering to those she loved most. She became the sole support of the prostrate Lady Bertram. She also tended her sister, who for a time was lost in grief. She carried messages for Tom and Edmund, who were stunned by their father’s death, but upon whom all of the cares of the estate fell. They had not the leisure for retiring to a private grief.

For a time the mistress of Mansfield, Susan took silent delight in walking from room to room, and when the weather was fine, insisting upon Fanny getting exercise. She rejoiced in the beauties of Mansfield as summer waned into autumn.

Fanny received William’s letter in late October, before a series of storms. She could never be angry with William, but it must be said that his words at the end of the letter were startling. She read and reread the letter to herself, sharing aloud with the others everything but the last page. In the meanwhile, as if to lend force to William’s words, as she and Edmund walked under the brilliant leaves of scarlet, gold, and yellow, Edmund had once again reverted to his old habit of endless discussions of Mary Crawford. In the beginning he claimed a great relief in unburdening his soul, “For at last I shall have done.” And such had been Fanny’s habit of dependence on his words, that for five minute she thought they had done.

A few days after reversions to the same topic, the reward for Fanny’s patience was the discovery that she had gradually ceased to be troubled by it. At first she attributed this to her grief over Sir Thomas. That was only just; and it was a relief to discover herself entirely free of jealousy. And so she must accept that William's final words, that she had deemed mere (if understandable) partiality, were in fact true.

Month followed quiet month, bringing snows to cover the fallen leaves. The grounds stretched away, pure and white, very different from the black ice, the moss, the smoke and the dankness of
winter in Portsmouth.

Lady Bertram found that Susan could not be spared, and her visit extended indefinitely. Edmund spoke of removing at last to Thornton Lacey as his father had wished, for every Sunday he rode out to his church, winter making the journey as burdensome as his knowledge of his father’s expectations. But Tom begged him to stay a little longer—his help was invaluable—and so they continued on as they were, their excuse deep mourning.

Spring brought material changes, beginning with Edmund’s move to Thornton Lacey at the half-year mark after his father’s death. It was time to take up his duties wholeheartedly, which included fixing up the house and grounds.

At Susan’s urging, Fanny and she commenced riding to Thornton Lacey nearly every day the weather permitted. Susan loved to be doing—she gladly took responsibility for the making of new curtains and carpets. Everyone in the family had suggestions to offer, as the unfurling of spring green brought new life to Mansfield.

Fanny, with her fine eye trained by Mansfield tastes, gently reined her sister’s excesses, nodded at Lady Bertram’s ideas of Doric columns and old-fashioned circles of chairs, gently dissuaded Tom’s grand notions of throwing out all the old Chippendale, reserving her agreement for Edmund’s more sensible ideas of a plantation to screen the farmyard, and getting rid of a great quantity of century-old brick. To no one did Fanny put the question uppermost in her mind: in honor of whom was all this renovation in being?

Edmund, in turn, rode back to Mansfield on many a wet Sunday afternoon, and walked with his brother and Fanny while Susan chased Pug’s pups through the garden. When they were all together, they talked of great events and small, but in two of three hearts ideas were forming that had not been shared.

A week before Easter (which could not help but engender painful memories) Edmund and Fanny walked alone under the leafing poplars when he said, “Tom asked me in joke why I was fitting up the parsonage, if I had some lady in mind?”

Fanny’s heart began to beat fast. Two years ago, when she was seventeen, this conversation would almost have been too much to bear, for the intensity of her hopes. Now her heart beat fast for a different reason.

She felt rather than saw Edmund’s quick glance; she gazed downward, trusting to the protection of her bonnet’s rim to hide her face. But hard on the heels of that thought followed another, that even if Edmund did spy her expression, would he not misinterpret it, seeing what he expected to see? Over the past year they had talked endlessly about every change in Mary Crawford’s face, the expressive dark eyes, the turn of her head, what her smiles really meant, but Edmund had never perceived Fanny’s true thoughts.

And she had not wished for him to do so.

He said, “He joked about fine ladies, without mentioning names. That is over. You and I have talked endlessly about that, and no woman in England could have borne it as patiently.”

Fanny sensed in his pause that he expected a response. She murmured something—she knew not what—in which the only distinct word was “duty.”

Edmund tried again. “My father once dismissed my aunt’s fearful notion that by bringing a young girl into Mansfield, there might be danger to Tom and me. What ‘danger’ there could possibly be
in someone so steadfast, true, and good, has never been defined, but it does cause me to wonder if my house should be presided over by someone very different than the ‘fine lady’ Tom makes jokes about?”

Again a pause; again she sensed that he awaited a response. But that she was unable to give.

He said, “Fanny, we have always opened our hearts to one another, without reserve.”

She thought, But I have not, and a flutter of sorrow, of guilt, caused her to press her hands together, hidden in the folds of her skirt. Edmund had shared his heart without reserve, believing their thoughts united. She had permitted him to assume that—had struggled to make it true. But it was not true, because of the secret love she had harbored, without ever letting him know.

Since that time she had slowly come to question, not the nature of love—that was ineffable—but the definition of love, in specific hers for her cousin. She had come gradually to understand that it was compounded of gratitude for his kindness, admiration for the elder cousin who guided her tastes, and the singularity that was inevitable for a girl in her situation.

That love, she had discovered, had altered so materially that it mirrored her love for William: for the first time in her life, when Edmund called her sister, she felt she could respond, sincerely, with “brother.”

And now, hearing this new, tentative note in his voice, and perceiving his mood which appeared closer to resignation than ardency, she feared what must come next, and in accepting that it was fear, and not anticipation—that if he spoke, duty and gratitude must insure what must come after, instead of the love that she hoped some day might be hers—she gathered her courage, and said, “The truth must be confessed: I have not shared my inmost thoughts, not with anyone.”

There! It was done. Her heart beat faster at her daring. She scolded herself mentally. There was no Mrs. Norris by to excoriate, no Cousin Maria to look scorn upon her.

Edmund stopped, and she forced herself to lift her head, to look his way, though her glance was fleeting.

His expression was one of surprise, then his brow puckered in puzzlement, and concern. “What is this?” he asked. “Can it be that your heart did not escape untouched, after last year’s unfortunate events?”

She drew in a breath, knowing that to confess the truth would achieve nothing except to cause him pain. He had suffered enough already.

When she did not speak, he turned away, and took a step, without noticing whither he went. “No,” he said. “I will not press you, except to observe that the fact that you say nothing indicates to me that your emotions are materially unchanged from what we all had hoped at that time?” Another step, and another, and he said bitterly, “Ah, Fanny. Of what use is a steadfast heart when the object is out of reach? Ought to be out of reach, according to all principles we hold dearest?”

Fanny ventured an answer in such a low voice, she was nearly inaudible: “What are the two greatest commandments?”

Edmund looked quickly her way, but her gaze stayed on the path, mossy green on the northern verge, dotted with time-smoothed pebbles, and on the south new grass.

They walked in silence a few more steps until, welcome to both, the leaves above them rustled with the soft pats of rain. “We should go inside,” Edmund said, and in the little hurry of running up the
path and dashing through the door, of shaking out clothing dappled with droplets, and asking one another if each had taken cold— should they ring for the tea things— the dangerous subject was dropped.

CHAPTER XXII

It was not resumed. There was all the flurry of Easter, which for a clergyman is a busy season. Afterward when he had leisure to think, he had to consider how he had been given very new ideas. For the first time he comprehended that he had not known what Fanny thought and felt. He had assumed her thoughts and feelings united with his in all things.

It made him ponder his influence: deep was his regret that his efforts to convince Fanny to favor Crawford’s courtship might have imperiled her gentle heart; his own influence, so all-powerful with her, had been carelessly, even thoughtlessly used to his private ends. He had wanted Fanny to return Crawford’s regard because that might bring Miss Crawford closer to himself. Once again, he must accept of his own blame.

In that light, his evolving notion that Fanny might serve as consolation for the woman he wished to marry, that she would accept a proposal from him with instant gratitude, dealt him a severe pang of guilt. Hitherto he had regarded Fanny fondly, but as little more than an extension of himself.

“I am a blockhead,” he thought. “Worse, a coxcomb,” and he buried himself in his duties with renewed vigor.

A series of spring storms kept Susan and Fanny from riding to Thornton Lacey, and Fanny found herself not ungrateful. She knew her own heart well enough by now to have reached the conclusions that she did not want to marry Edmund; that a life of sitting together talking endlessly of Mary Crawford made preferable the prospect of single blessedness.

Whitsuntide saw Dr. Grant invited to London in hopes of a deanery. Directly following the Sunday, an express arrived, delivered while they all sat at breakfast, to report that Dr. Grant had suffered an apoplexy and death after three great institutionary dinners in a row, leaving his widow distraught and alone in London.

The new Sir Thomas promptly arranged for her return. He had cared nothing for Dr. Grant. Though he liked the friendly, hospitable Mrs. Grant, his dispatch on the part of the widow might have been due in part to his hope that she would pack up and leave the faster, clearing the way for Edmund to succeed to the living they never thought he would have for years yet.

Almost in the same post, among notices relating to quarterly demands and payments, came the news that Mrs. Rushworth in the company of Mrs. Norris had quitted their remote establishment, so was the place still required? With a sigh, Tom put an investigation in motion, to discover within a few days that they had gone into Yorkshire to live with Julia, but, Mrs. Norris having quarreled almost immediately with the elder Mrs. Yates, the young couple, in company with Maria, had decamped thence for Scarborough, to escape all their relations.

Tom turned up at Thornton Lacey a day later, a sheaf of letters in hand. Laying these down before his brother, he said, “What am I expected to do?”

Edmund read through them all, then gazed out his bookroom window at the thin twigs of his young plantation, which would soon fall under the view of his replacement—assuming the as-yet unknown incumbent did not have it all dug up again. The weight of what he had been taught was
his Christian duty toward sinners warred with Fanny’s remembered voice, so soft he had scarcely heard her, “The two greatest commandments.” Matthew 22, verse 39, reported Christ’s own words: *Love your neighbor as yourself.* He had not made distinctions between good or erring neighbors.

“I expect Father would have had Maria immured forever, out of sight, and out of mind, for to him, her name was inescapably tied to guilt, shame, scandal, and he felt he owed it to his neighbors to heed the rules of society. Yet a sister is still a sister.”

“So I ought to leave her be?” Tom asked, secretly relieved. “Or do I bring her back to Mansfield?”

“You could make the offer.” Edmund handed the letters back. “She will refuse. I will positively answer for it; you remember what Maria said against Fanny, carrying blame to an impossible pitch. If her sentiments are unchanged, well, if Julia, now a married woman, does not object to her sister’s presence, nor does whatever society they find themselves in, perhaps it is as well.”

Tom made a wry face. “Maria might not return, but I dread the prospect of having Aunt Norris back among us again.”

Edmund said, “She has her house, and six hundred a year, of which I expect she has never spent a penny. You, as Sir Thomas, have the power to speak up if she finds excuses to be worrying your servants or sponging.”

“It’s not the sponging, and I can give orders to the servants to heed her not. I confess the sound of her voice throws me right back into the sickroom, and her scolding me to drink some poisonous concoction.”

Edmund could not prevent a laugh at Tom’s expression.

Tom said, “My mother would never think to turn her away. Once she descends on us, we’re doomed. We will never turf her out.” Tom walked about, rattling coins in his pocket, then stopped, hand raised. “Stay! Why must she come here? Has she not another sister? From what you said about the house in Portsmouth, Aunt Price might do very well with Aunt Norris taking her in hand.”

“If you were to offer to pay for her to travel post, I suspect she would close with your offer at once,” Edmund said, and Tom laughed, rubbed his hands, and took his departure in order to write straight-away.

Edmund watched him go, and then made an effort to turn his mind back to his work. But his thoughts would stray; he could not help wondering what she would have made of his little plantation? No. He must school his mind. There was no use in daydreaming about Mary Crawford.

At Mansfield, as Fanny went about her day, her thoughts sometimes ranged in the same direction. She would then curtail them; she would not permit herself to revisit the painful past, as there was no happy resolution possible, but she found herself waiting impatiently for William’s next letter. Surely it was due.

A fortnight of steady rain kept them all closed in, but the very day the sky cleared, there was a hasty step on the stair outside the east room, where Fanny still liked to sit by the fireside when she wished to be alone. Edmund appeared, in an agitated manner.

“She is come. She is here. Mary Crawford is at Mansfield parsonage, and has been these five days.”
Fanny’s heart gave a leap—she could scarcely think, to know what to expect.

Edmund’s next question seemed to be wrung out of him. “Shall I call upon her?”

Fanny looked at his averted gaze, and as always, she knew what he wanted to hear; she knew what was proper, and gave thanks inside that for once the twain were in accord. “You have never avoided what you see as your duty,” she said.

“Is it my duty? Or do I want to see it as my duty? You know I have twice been to call upon the grieving widow. Nothing more is expected—nothing is owed Miss Crawford in the way of calls of condolence, for the loss of a brother-in-law—I had not thought to return until the inspection for depredations.”

Fanny ventured an observation, her head bent over her sewing. “You speak as if a polite call were an evil.”

“I used that word a great deal, did I not?” he asked, still pacing restlessly. “An ‘evil’ sounds satisfyingly grandiloquent, but the truth is, I can only see my calling as self-indulgence.”

“Edmund, it grieves me to see you so . . .”

“Honest?”

“I was going to say unhappy.”

“Repining is nearer the truth.” He gave her a rueful glance.

He prowled the perimeter of the room, knowing that he ought to quit the chamber and return to his duties. Fanny observed two, then three turns around the room, and when he passed the door yet again, she had her thoughts arranged in her mind. “Once you spoke of Miss Crawford’s deficiency of heart. If that be true, surely you have nothing to fear: you may meet, and utter polite nothings, and part without regret.”

“I spoke,” he said, “of her deficiency of principle.”

“Can she not learn principle?” Fanny countered. “We once deplored how ill she had been taught. Is that not what your calling demands, the guidance of those who might have strayed, the enlightenment of those who have received scant instruction?”

Edmund paused by the table, staring into the fireplace, before he admitted, “My heart is so full I cannot trust my reason. You said once, in another discussion, that we ought to remember Mathew 22:39. I have often wondered, Fanny, if you had another thought, that there could be another meaning. I have accepted that I have faults as great as hers, or nearly; you are the only one who was truly innocent of error.”

Fanny regarded Edmund as he played restlessly with the badly knotted fringe she had made to cover the battered old table when she was ten. She gave her head a shake. “I wish with all my heart that I was free of error. But however, I too must take my share of blame for what occurred.”

“How is that?” He turned to face her.

“Before he left Portsmouth, Mr. Crawford requested, even begged, for my interest, in the nature of a friend. I have since discovered a truth,” she said sorrowfully, for she would make no claims to wisdom. “The more self-righteously we stick to our point, the less we listen. Had I only agreed with him, and said, ‘Mr. Crawford, you ought to go to Everingham. You ought to do your duty’;
such simple words, no more than we would give an acquaintance; but I would not even grant him
the smallest credit for striving to do what was right. We know the result.”

“You cannot possibly take blame for a man of Crawford’s stamp choosing to err.”

“I can. He said, ‘When you give me your opinion, I always know I am right.’ A fine thing to
expect a new learner to go against years of habit, without the tiniest degree of encouragement! And
yet there was I, standing so resolutely on my point, without seeing my own ill-natured self-
righteousness.”

“Not ill-natured. You have never committed that error.”

Fanny, recollecting clearly how at times she had looked for Mr. Crawford to err, which would
justify her rejection of him, only shook her head; Edmund dropped the fringe, his expression
abstracted as he drew his chair near hers. “In this very room Miss Crawford once asked if I only
intended to preach to the sinless. But I would be an insufferable coxcomb were I to present myself
to her in the guise of preceptor.”

Fanny could not forebear laughing. “I think that would be the very worst sort of suitor.”

An unwilling smile briefly eased Edmund’s countenance. She was again reminded of his serious
nature, and how much success Miss Crawford had had in encouraging his sense of amusement.

“You believe me still a suitor, in spite of everything?” He straightened in his chair, his brow knit
with perplexity.

“I do not think you have ever ceased being a suitor, and I believe that in no man beats a more
steadfast heart.”

“A fine compliment, Fanny, and I thank you,” but the happiness she hoped to see was not there in
his voice, or in his eyes. “I have been a blockhead, and worse, but I will not be a hypocrite: she said
once that she would not dance with a clergyman.”

“She said many things that perhaps she did not mean, or that might have changed.”

“I can pretend to call as the clergyman with his disinterested human sympathy, and not as a man
with a nearer hope, but there should be no pretense. If she cannot accept of both, I believe I ought
not to go at all.”

She could think of nothing to say to that, and Edmund pressed her hand. “Thank you, Fanny.
Thank you. In no way do I wish to cast aspersions upon my own sisters—surely mine was the
error in our dealings—but you have been as loyal a sister, and as true, as any man could have
wished. I envy William.” His voice ended on a note of resignation that caused a pang of sorrow,
and then he was gone, his footsteps running down the stairs.

So much for her vaunted wisdom! She had failed utterly, and bowed her head over her stitchwork,
trying not to give way to tears.

She had not set another dozen stitches when there was an unfamiliar tread on the stair outside the
room, one slow and steady, casting her back in memory to that terrible day after Mr. Crawford first
proposed. But it was not the specter of Sir Thomas at the door, it was Tom, red of face, who still
had occasions of breathlessness when he mounted more than one flight of stairs too quickly.

“Prepare yourself, Fanny,” he said with a roll of the eyes. “I have news I hardly know how to
deliver, but Mrs. Grant’s sister has arrived to comfort her, and to carry her off.”
To his surprise, Fanny received this news with neither repulsive looks nor tears.

“I thought we had done with these Crawfords.” Tom looked about as he spoke, finding nowhere to sit. “At least Crawford does not drive his sister, I am told. She arrived by the admiral’s post-chaise.” This had once been the schoolroom, used when he was very small. The sturdiest furnishings were those fit for infantine bodies, sturdy and much-battered, mixed with spindle-legged French chairs in the old fashion that his father had always disliked, believing he might crush if he attempted one.

When Fanny vouchsafed no reply, he said, “I am come to discuss whether you think it better to prepare Edmund, or should I? I would prefer to say nothing, but then there is the risk of a sudden encounter.”

Fanny said, “I can only return a question: what comes next? What might be the result if Edmund sees Miss Crawford again?”

“I fear,” Tom said, “that his feelings are unchanged.”

“I know it to be so.”

“And yet you appear to express no disapprobation.”

Fanny said with a troubled air, “You question me closely, Cousin.”

“I ask only what I wish to be told.”

“Very well, then give me leave to observe that, should the heart of the lady in question be as steadfast as I believe my cousin’s to be, well, each might very well find their happiness in the other.”

Tom leaned on the table, gazing at her in surprise. “Then . . . But what of her brother? Once before, there was a hullabaloo in this very house about whether or not you would accept of Mr. Crawford’s hand. If the sister is come, might not the brother be far behind? If he should attempt calling on you, am I to kick him down the steps as a rascal?”

Fanny said with mild gravity, “I believe I can safely say that I have no expectation of requiring you to kick anyone down the stairs on my behalf.”

“Well, that’s something, at all events,” Tom said, rubbing his chin as he made a face. “Hey day, I cannot see for the life of me what gets people simpering and sidling and troubling themselves over wooing. Give me a friend or two, and a bit of fun with no expectations, and I am a happy man. I shall leave Edmund to it, then, and get over to the stable, where Wilcox is waiting for me. At all events, whatever troubles horses give, they don’t include speech among ‘em.”

Fanny was left to the turmoil of her own thoughts. Mary Crawford again at Mansfield parsonage? Was it possible her brother might not be far behind? Oh, but what if he was? What had happened last year must put him forever beyond reach.

On that thought, she heard her own voice admonishing Edmund about “greatest commandments.” While it was true that Miss Crawford had not run off with another man’s wife, Fanny also had a fairly good idea who had been the instigator of that episode. But she did not place the entirety of blame squarely upon Maria. Fanny had arrived at the discomforting conclusion that if she herself had not been so very resolute in snubbing Mr. Crawford—she had only to speak the word “duty” as she had just done to Edmund—he might not have been fallen in Cousin Maria’s way at all.
Fanny set aside her work, and stretched out her hands to the fire. She could tell herself that events since Portsmouth had not afforded her the leisure to examine her heart, but that excuse was no longer true: why indeed had she been so ill-natured?

She remembered every detail of that Sunday walk upon the ramparts, the sky and sea so brilliant, everyone looking their best. Jealous of her secret love for her cousin, she had not been willing to acknowledge, even to herself, that her secret approbation had included Mr. Crawford.

She had grown up at Mansfield observing well-dressed young men while riding, or moving about in a drawing room. The attractions of a young man walking with her family, and paying them those attentions that might be perceived as due to those far above their deserts, had acted powerfully upon her at Portsmouth.

She had despised Henry Crawford for being everything to everybody, without his finding anyone essential to him; in learning that she was become essential to him, and in a way that all these others had never, could never have been, she had turned from him, professing his love unbelievable, or unworthy, or anything else because her heart was (she supposed) forever given.

What was it Mary Crawford had said, that day in the London hotel? *There is a danger in attempting to reshape oneself to another’s ideal, if that effort only goes one way.* Fanny had dismissed Miss Crawford’s words out of resentment and jealousy, but those feelings were gone. “She knew,” Fanny said to the leaping flames.

Hard on that came guilt, and then a painful spurt of laughter at how very self-righteous she had been at the advanced age of eighteen, how much she plumed herself on seeing into everyone’s heart while no one penetrated the secrets of her own. Mary Crawford had as good as stated that she was aware of Fanny’s hidden feelings for her cousin, and yet she, whom Fanny had dismissed as heartless, as immoral, if not amoral, had been charity itself in saying no more.

Impulse seized her. She threw off her apron, took up her bonnet and the shawl that William had brought from afar, and descended the stairs as rapidly as ever Edmund had.

**CHAPTER XXIII**

Mary Crawford knew it was dangerous to come hither, but the danger was only to herself. To the indifferent world she was sister to a widow, offering herself as companion in affliction, and aid in all the bustle of removal.

There was really very little for her to do. Mrs. Grant’s servants had already begun the labors of packing and cleaning; anticipating that, Mary brought both her maid and one of Henry’s men, knowing that they would be as welcome to the servants as herself to Mrs. Grant.

Born to love and to be loved, Mrs. Grant was not conscious of being dilatory, it was just that she had so many particular friends in the parish, and must needs take the time to visit with each who called in spite of the inclement weather. The laboring servants must stop again and again to open doors, fetch and carry coats and umbrellas, and to prepare and serve the tea things, and then clean them up before returning to their packing.

Mary Crawford saw at once that her sister was in want of no aid, only sympathy. She was profligate with tender words; she did not define, even to herself, her reasons for bringing her harp to a house in mourning, but discovered it was a welcome diversion for the guests who came to sit with Mrs. Grant, when she played soft airs suitable for a widow.
Five rainy days had blended into one another without the arrival of the single visitor Mary awaited. At first she found excuse in the weather, in imperfectly imagined parish duties and the aftermath of the holiday, but she could not prevent herself from remembering that there had been a time when even thick snow had not kept Edmund Bertram from calling.

Her expectations had been painful on arrival; they could scarcely be more so as her hopes diminished, and she began to long for the day her sister declared herself ready to quit the parsonage at last.

Presently the sun rose on a clear day. Mary, refreshed by sunlight in the windows, sat to her harp though Mrs. Grant was upstairs, sorting through the linens, and it was too early for parishioners to call. Mary had not completely surrendered hope. Enough remained that she had a care to the disposal of her shawl about her shoulders, and the disposition of her skirts in graceful folds. As she began one of her favorite airs, her mind traveled down familiar paths, imagining what he might say, and what she must say in return. Though she despised studied wit and attempts at cleverness, it had become important to express herself with exactitude, to retain control both of herself and the conversation, as she had not during that last, infinitely regretted rencontre.

As she finished the air, she glanced once more through the French doors. A flicker of pale gray caught her eye, the dappled shadows rippling over a plain gown of half-mourning.

Mary paused. When she recognized Fanny Price, her hands dropped away from the harp and she rose to her feet, astonished. As she watched Miss Price—was she still Miss Price?—walking up the path, Mary discerned a change in her countenance, difficult to define except as an air of determination, almost of assurance that could not be put down to Fanny’s appearing a good deal less thin, her complexion brighter.

Aside from Fanny obviously gaining materially without her Aunt Norris resenting every bite she ate, might this new expression be pride of possession? Mary had watched the newspapers for announcements of forthcoming marriages, but Sir Thomas’s illness and death could have precluded public announcement of hymeneals, and that bonnet might have done for a modest bride.

She opened the door herself, rather than call the maid, and controlled her impatience as Fanny spoke her condolences. Mary said everything that was proper, and then, with an air of question, “Will you sit down? I can ring for tea.”

“There is no need, thank you,” Fanny said. “I do not intend to trespass against Mrs. Grant’s good nature a moment beyond a quarter-hour.”

Mary heard the hint, but did not offer to fetch her sister, and in the little pause that followed Fanny’s words, she was aware that Fanny had not asked further for Mrs. Grant.

So Mary spoke: she thought it safe enough to approach Mansfield by offering her own belated condolences upon the death of Sir Thomas. Fanny accepted with grave sweetness, sounding very much like the Fanny Price Mary had known.

Mary then inquired after Lady Bertram, and Fanny replied briefly; both tried to find a way to broach the subject closest to their hearts, without knowing quite how to begin.

Mary, whose experience rendered her impatient with her own inability, in this instance, to smooth the moment with social nothings, rose up and seated herself once more at her harp, as if its solidity were a bastion. “My sister,” she said, raising her hands to the strings, “was grateful for the attentions of the new Sir Thomas, and Mr. Bertram.”
There. It was done. She had named him.

Though Fanny’s experience in company was limited, she had had always been a close observer. She saw in the stillness of Mary Crawford’s hands on the harp strings, in her averted gaze, her studied lightness of tone, that she wished for the dangerous topic at least as much as Fanny.

Emboldened, Fanny said, “If a visit now from the gentleman in question would be welcome, I offer myself as messenger.” She knew Mary would take her meaning; no one thought of Tom.

Mary tossed back her head, her dark eyes derisive. “And so the gentleman must needs speak through an intermediary?”

Fanny understood that she had made a misstep, and blushing deeply, said, “He does not know I am here.”

Mary studied Fanny, who, in spite of the blush retained that calm demeanor she had always found so inscrutable, bare as it was of the tricks of hand and eye that Mary was accustomed to young ladies of fashion employing to communicate what must be unsaid. “And yet he does not call himself.”

Fanny said, “I speak only to gain understanding, and in no way am I to be considered envoy. But it is my belief that a lady once had occasion to declare that while a man might be a welcome caller, one in holy office might not. So what is to be done when the twain are united in the same being?”

A quick glance, full of wariness and hope, and then Mary said, in a low voice, “It seems that a lady once said a great many stupid, heedless things. Further— “ She strummed a chord. “— further, one could be forgiven for the assumption that another young lady, who had made plain her interest in that combination, might welcome attentions from such a quarter.”

Fanny said calmly, “She might have done, once, had those attentions been paid.”

Mary had begun to play an old Irish air, her eyes closed; presently she became aware that her audience neither recognized the old melody, nor Thomas Moore’s new lyrics, but she listened with an obvious attitude of pleasure. How Henry would have loved educating Fanny! She drew the song to a close, murmuring, ‘You may break, you may ruin the vase if you will/ But the scent of the roses will hang ’round it still.’” She tipped her head. “And so, what of my brother?”

Fanny blushed again, vexed with herself for doing so when there was no reason. “I beg pardon?” she asked, not trusting herself to repeat even the word ‘brother.’

Mary strummed a triumphal chord, her head still tipped. “I believe it is human nature to expect more than we are due, and that includes forgiveness. Since you are no envoy, we shall lay aside what may or may not be a question of mine own forgiveness. To speak more plainly, is there any for my brother, who, in finding his heart insufficient in all important respects, fell back into the error of long habit, due to the machinations of one entirely heartless? An error that was so immediately regretted, that nothing actually occurred in the way that the vulgar world is so apt to believe.”

Fanny had forgotten how quick Mary was, and how her playful tone could touch subjects Fanny never would have dared broach, then flit away, light as a butterfly. It was the sweetness of her tone, the sportive words that masked penetrating observations, that had so bewitched Edmund.

How to answer? Fanny knew no arts of dissimulation, and felt herself a plodder by comparison. But she was here, and she would speak the truth as she understood it. “My cousin,” she said carefully,
“I do not believe was heartless.” That brought back vivid memories of the summer of Lover’s Vows: Maria’s passions, and Henry’s idle encouragement of them. No, whatever must be the result, Maria should not bear all responsibility. Even if Fanny had known of her cousin’s rancorous animadversions against herself, she would still believe Maria had suffered enough.

“Perhaps,” Mary Crawford said. “But as my mother was used to say, I’ll stake my reputation that heart knew more of anger and selfishness than of love. However, rather than trespass further against your good nature in my attempt to carry my point, I must assume then that my poor Henry remains unforgiven? You do know that he left England immediately after the events we will not name, carrying secret dispatches for the admiral? I believe at one point he met your brother.”

In mentioning William, Mary knew she was safe; William’s having gained his step was entirely due to Henry’s exertions, and before Henry had entirely fallen in love. She saw the truth of that in Fanny’s averted gaze, and heard the words ‘never forget his goodness’ in the soft murmur that followed.

“I have not had a letter since, though I have written, and I expect it is the same for William. I know from the papers that the world is full of great doings, owing to Napoleon Bonaparte’s rapacity,” Mary said as she picked out the opening chords of ça ira. “At all events, I believe we are united in agreeing that we may safely leave hearts to their own negotiations.”

It was an invitation for a safe return to social nothings, or perhaps a few arch words about tender passions without much meaning, but Mary had forgotten her audience.

Fanny raised her eyes, saying with a troubled air, “I think that the heart is no negotiator, which leaves reason and principle to . . .”

Mary was a little stung. Was this a hint? “You will say, no doubt, to unite in exhorting one to duty?”

Fanny gave her head a shake. “My thought was, to harness the passions in tandem.” She caught a glance of surprise, and reddened a third time. “You will say what can I know of passions? And I will answer, very little. But I see my quarter-hour is up, and I will not trespass longer. I wish you a good day. Pray carry my best greetings to Mrs. Grant.”

Fanny dropped a little curtsey, and whisked herself out the door. As Mary watched her vanish up the pathway, she sighed with impatience. So much—and yet so very little!

But after all, she had seen enough: Fanny had not come in a sacrificial mood to hint of Edmund’s sentiments being unchanged, which Mary would have despised. Fanny’s schoolgirl passion had subsided. Her motivation appeared to be entirely good will, and she believed Edmund still loved.

Once Mary Crawford had railed against the sense of confinement, airless London salons as well as society’s dictates. Impetuously she quit the room to change her shoes and fetch her bonnet. Who was to stop her from going herself? There were no nosy London servants to gossip about her daring, no drawling friend to scold her back into fashionable flirtation with those whose wealth and rank made their supercilious nothings no less stale.

Mindful of boxes and trunks, she had only brought the admiral’s great berliner carriage, and Mrs. Grant did not ride, but Mr. Grant no longer was in need of his pony trap, and his placid gelding was doing nothing but eating his head off.

Before the sun had reached midday, she was tooling along the fresh-washed lanes, avoiding the puddles on a well-tended road. She encountered only a farmer with his cart, and a pair of
Edmund, hearing the unprecedented noise of her arrival, came to the open doors of his study, still in his shirt-sleeves: when the smart bonnet turned as her elegant gloved hands pulled up the old horse, and he recognized the wind-brightened face and bewitching dark eyes, he ventured out half a dozen steps before he remembered he was not properly dressed. Yet to retreat to find his coat would be craven, and so he stood there, red to the ears, as the lady swept up her skirt in one hand, and with the other gripped the sideboard so she could hop lightly down.

Edmund’s man stepped to the horse, as Mary trod around the puddles, her skirts still held high. He said with as much dignity as he could muster, “Pray step inside? I will return in a moment.”

She stopped directly before him, and gazed up searchingly into his face as he regarded her with question, and hope, his heartbeat thundering in his ears.

Then she laughed, because she saw what she wanted to see in those eyes that had never lied to her, and said gaily, “And so there must be a respectable bustle, and a talking, as we each must give a little.”

Edmund forgot his coat, and the puddles, and the curious servant slowly leading the horse away. “I am as you perceive. Can you be happy?” he asked, his hands turned out.

“I know not,” she said honestly. “You know how I was raised, and what I am accustomed to. But I have learned that that there is no place for me in that life, no happiness. Can you be happy with me?”

Edmund was too delirious to consider. “All I know is that I love you,” he said.

“I think,” the lady said, “that is as good a place as any to begin.”

CHAPTER XXIV

Before the week was out, the news had spread all through the neighborhood. Mrs. Grant was nearly as happy as the betrothed couple, for this meant she must not leave Mansfield parish after all. Fanny, watching from a distance as visits were carried between one place and another, thought herself also the gainer, for no longer did the lovers seek her out to speak of the other. She had no idea what was said, but she believed that if Edmund and Mary were equally united in goodwill as they were in heart, their understanding must grow by degrees and become the making of them both.

When summer’s heat eased, a year after Sir Thomas’s death, there was a wedding at Mansfield, presided over by no less an august figure than the dean, and attended by Mr. and Mrs. Yates as well as all the countryside. Significant absences were Maria Rushworth, who scorned to come, Mrs. Norris, who would have liked very much to see that everything was done properly, but for the fact that those heedless, harum-scarum young people had not thought to include the cost of a post-chaise with the letter announcing the wedding (and then there was the vexation of a bride-gift), and all of Mary Crawford’s particular London friends, who would not go into the country to be bored...
for less than a viscount. It can be fairly said that none of them were missed, but Fanny was heard by Susan to sorely regret the absence of their brother William.

Another brother who might also be missed was not mentioned, but Mary had found the time to write a long letter to Henry. She watched for him in hopes as her wedding drew ever nearer, even to sparing a last glance behind her as she and Edmund departed on their wedding-journey to the lakes; in spite of all his faults, Mary knew Henry would never fail her, if he but knew.

He did not know. Though the sisters each believed their brothers thousands of miles away, Henry Crawford sat over an indifferent meal not two hundred miles directly north of the lakes, while his post was somewhere between the North Atlantic and the North Sea.

The principle inns at Leith were frequented chiefly by the navy, and Henry had discovered that such custom favored quantity over delicacy. He occupied himself as best he could while waiting; he had walked all around the harbor, toured the new fort and inspected the old gateway, which was all that was left of the ancient fortress, until he was driven indoors by foul weather, to get the time on as he might.

Having finished eating, he retired by the fire with the first volume of a German novel by Augustus La Fontaine, which he had found on a bench in Sweden. He had slipped it into the pocket of his greatcoat, and then promptly forgot it, until he had occasion to don a winter garment during the North Sea storm which had so damaged his yacht.

He was thus occupied when he heard a familiar voice, and looked up to discover William Price advancing on him, his face overspread with smiles.


Henry thought of the days he wasted in Sweden waiting on great men, then similar days in Norway, the fogs, twice being chased by big Danish frigates, then shrugged. “My yacht sprung a mast in the last blow. As you can see, there is here a kind of depot with some naval stores, of which Admiral Vashon is understandably jealous, but no dockyard. As it takes three days for a letter to reach London, and another three to return, well.” He lifted his hands. “Behold me tied by the heels until the Admiralty can be got to direct the Admiral to repair her. And you?”

William exclaimed in delight, “I brought in not one prize, but two.” He hooked his thumb over his shoulder. Henry perceived the edge of a dirty bandage where William’s sleeves gaped above his wrist. “The Laconia being sent to the channel, and then to the North Sea against a planned attack. First we spied some Danes cruising for merchants, and didn’t they regret it when they met with us instead! Some hot work before they surrendered, and the captain sent me off with a fine prize. We were overtaken by that very same blow, and here was an old Danish brig trying to run . . .”

Henry had been reflecting as he walked over the fort and listened to his Scots guide detailing historical attacks. The Italian Pierro Strozzi—the French commander d’Oysel— the English General Monck — he could not but think back to the stories he had enjoyed when young, of knight challenging knight along the forested English roads. On this larger scale, it was baron or prince taking one another’s castles, with no more reason than those old knights challenging one another because that was what they knew how to do. How much of this infernal war was just this sort of occupation, by men who might otherwise as soon be left to tend their land, or their cattle, or their looms, if they had not been plucked away and taught the skills of war?

“ . . . the abominable habit of tying the helm hard a-lee in a gale. Captain Wentworth says that old system has injured countless of our ships by getting sternway, before any Frenchman ever nicked
the horizon, and indeed she was already half-swamped. They were throwing the guns overboard when we hove up. I’d no sooner taken the captain’s sword than I gave orders for her to forge ahead under storm staysails, under control of the helm, and her motions became so easy that her own crew gave a cheer. And so I carried in two prizes, and though I know the second is not worth two-pence . . ."

Henry marveled at William, whose nature was neither braggart nor bloodthirsty. And yet here he sat, cheerly recounting what must be considered an act of legal piracy; the taking of this poor Dane’s trade ship would not add a jot to the success of this war against Bonaparte, which seemingly would never end.

Henry had set out to test himself, perhaps to witness greatness in person. He had subsequently sat at the back of enough councils of famous men to perceive that none of them truly knew what might happen; he had been left in a cold palace antechamber to await a dilatory consul, where he had had occasion to read a great stack of copied dispatches, including a number from the famed Nelson himself.

Henry had been amazed to discover that Nelson could be as jealous of attention, as petty, as grandiloquent as any village alderman parading his consequence. He signed a great many of these dispatches “Nelson and Bronte” as if that duchy had not been a useless pimple on the side of a volcano, awarded by a king reviled as cowardly, stupid, and profligate.

Of course it could be said that Nelson had earned the right, paid in blood, with fearful wounds, but how many uncelebrated lives were included in the cost? Henry had not comprehended how many of Nelson’s forays had been ill-considered, until he read some of Lord Keith’s acrimonious rejoinders.

“. . . and so, in short, here we sit until orders come in. Hey day, what book have you there?” William asked, taking up the volume Henry had laid aside. “A Village Pastor and His Children—is there not a better in this whole town? Ha-ha, that puts me in mind of something. Have you news from home?”

“Not for months,” Henry said. He would not admit out loud that he avoided newspapers; that when his last post had finally caught up with him (and he had not made it easy) it had contained only two letters from his sister, written six months ago, a more recent one from his solicitor to say that the divorce had been granted and his part of the suit settled, and one from Maria Rushworth, which he had pitched unread into the fire.

William chuckled. “When we touched at Portsmouth before sailing up the channel, Sam got liberty for the day, and who did he find had attacked and carried all before her? Aunt Norris! She’s in command, and even my father must moderate his words, and put on a clean collar before sitting down to dinner. Sam was out as fast as he went in, you can be sure, but before he left, he found out there is a marriage in the family!”

Coming so suddenly, William’s casual words struck Henry an invisible blow. Habit kept him smiling. “A marriage, you say?”

“We shall soon have our own village parson and his children, ha ha, through the efforts of my Cousin Edmund and your sister.”

Henry had so expected to hear the words my sister that he did not at first comprehend. He had mentally consigned Fanny to her cousin when he first departed English shores, telling himself that it would be the best for them both, that it was inevitable. He could do better—there was no dearth of bright eyes cast his way—and yet he kept himself as far from England as he could contrive, yet
he had never succeeded in outrunning memory, regret, and endless imagined conversations.

It was not until ‘Miss Crawford’ reached his ears that he strove to catch William’s quick flow of words. “. . . and so, what does that make us? Cousins-in-law? Is there such a thing? If I did not think I would sound like a coxcomb, ‘my uncle-in-law, the admiral’ would sound very fine, would it not, for Sam?” William laughed at himself. “No, no, I would not for worlds. Sam will take his chances, if I cannot look out for him, he knows that very well. But however, I meant to say, when we reach town again, I shall write a note to wish them happy, unless I can send it by you?”

Henry stared. Why should he wait? He was bound by no orders; what he did was entirely voluntary, and there were plenty who would be glad to take his place.

He said to William, “By all means. Write your letter,” and remembering that lieutenants were perennially impecunious, “while I see about practical matters. Beginning with ordering a dinner to celebrate your two prizes.”

CHAPTER XXV

Tom’s wedding gift was the honeymoon at the finest inns along the Lake District. Upon their return, Edmund and Mary discovered Mrs. Grant’s gift: she had overseen the finishing of the parsonage, complete to fresh papers on the walls and the new furnishings that Mary had bespoken. Even the stable did not escape widening in expectation of a larger family someday.

They returned to be feted everywhere. If Fanny had retained any of her old passion, the last of it must have been cauterized by witnessing Edmund’s happiness. Every time his gaze lit on his bride, he smiled, and Fanny must smile to see him so cheerful.

As for Mary, Fanny had never pretended to understand her, but the way she looked up at Edmund, laughing when he smiled, her habit of reaching to touch his hand, or his arm, as if she could not bear to be long apart: they reminded Fanny of the mirror behind the sconce, the candle light reflecting back to make a greater whole.

They made a contrast to the other young married couple. Fanny would not trust herself to pass judgment, even in her own thoughts, but Mr. Yates appeared to be more attached to his wife than she was to him. Fanny tried to make excuses—no one ought to compare newlyweds to those married a year—and yet it seemed to her that Julia, in returning to her home, did her best to take up her life exactly as it was before she left. She wished to be doing every night, especially if there was dancing, and an evening at home, if no company arrived, was cause for sighs and yawns.

Fanny was surprised to discover that it was expected of her to resume the old habit of almost daily intercourse between the parsonage and Mansfield. Julia would not go alone.

The first day, as soon as the gentlemen had departed for the stable, Fanny found Julia swinging her bonnet by the ribbons, as she waited by the doors to the terrace. “Fanny, what are you about? We do not want to get there so late that we sit cheek by jowl with the butcher’s wife and the chandler’s spinster aunt and all the rest of the bride-visit callers. We may only be sure to have Mary to ourselves in the mornings.”

Fanny would no more think of denying her cousin than she ever had, and so she put down her work at once and went to fetch her shawl and bonnet. The two set out together, Fanny uneasy—was she expected to talk?
Julia, for her part, was well-disposed toward Fanny, who she was astonished to discover had somehow turned quite pretty in the time she had been away. Her good looks added consequence to the Mansfield party when they went out, which pleased Julia—she very much liked arriving in a bustle, all eyes turned toward their party in admiration—but as a companion Fanny was sadly lacking. She had read nothing interesting; she knew no scandal. Julia whiled away the walk by talking of London, York, and Scarborough, and Fanny’s alarm subsided when she realized the only utterances expected of her were polite nothings that Julia took as corroboration.

When they reached the parsonage, Fanny was forgotten. Julia had cared nothing for Miss Crawford except as sister of Henry during the summer of Lover’s Vows, but once she had reached London, she had discovered the benefits of knowing the wealthy Miss Crawford with so many friends of the first consideration. She had modeled her behavior on Miss Crawford’s, divesting herself of what she was pleased to scorn as country-town manners as fast as ever she could.

Therefore Julia came to the parsonage to be pleased, and Fanny was as happy to sit quietly and listen to Mary play her harp, as she took music where she could get it.

That visit was repeated the next morning, and then two days after that; Fanny’s sense of duty gradually exchanged itself for pleasure. Nobody expected her to talk, and it was more agreeable than not to walk with Julia, whose cheerful chatter never required more than a brief word in answer.

Mary did not share Julia’s approbation as the visit from the Yateses lingered on; she did her best to hide her impatience when Edmund told her that Yates had been encouraged by hospitable Tom to stay for the shooting season. Mary did not dislike Julia, but she regretted her added presence. She wanted Fanny to herself, to sound out on the subject of her favorite project: her brother’s happiness. She was defeated by Fanny’s shyness as well as by Julia’s indefatigable talk.

As rain set in again, preventing them from enjoying the garden, Mary acquitted her callers of wanting always to hear the harp, and hit upon the notion of reading aloud her favorite passages from among her many novels of fashion, now lining bookshelves in the library.

Novels—forbidden by their governess and argued against as unnecessary expense by Mrs. Norris—had seldom come in Maria and Julia’s way until they left for London, and though Julia, at least, had enjoyed them as much as Mr. Yates enjoyed a play, no one ever thought that there might be a young lady at home who would read them if she could.

They read aloud in turns, Fanny proving to be far more satisfactory as an audience than as a talker. Julia ascribed Fanny’s interest to wonder, but Mary, more perceptive, descried in Fanny’s countenance a not-quite hidden amusement that went unexpressed.

Fanny was as unused to her opinion being sought as her comfort, so she kept to herself her astonishment at the lengths these novels reached to keep apart the lovers—all of whom had only to behold their beloved the once for Cupid to dart arrows of eternal passion into the hearts of each. And then there were the equally astonishing behaviors: such faintings, rivers of tears, and agonies must surely cause such delicate fine ladies to expire before the banns were ever cried. She pronounced herself well entertained, but secretly agreed with Tom in preferring comedy over tragic rantings, near-murderous abductions, and deathbed speeches.

Mary, watching closely one stormy morning, paused in her reading on hearing the church bells ring at noon. She closed the first volume of A Winter in London, saying, “I wish we had Henry by. Nobody reads as well, even absurdities such as this.”

Julia, with no idea of ever seeing such a being again in the world, exclaimed handsomely, “Very
true. Absurdities indeed! Why, I recollect he even made Shakespeare tolerable, a thing I had not thought possible."

Without a tremor in her voice, Mary thanked her on behalf of her brother, and then, seeing in Fanny’s averted gaze and compressed lips a laugh that must not be let escape, was satisfied, and changed the subject.

The house at Mansfield once again resounded with voices. Tom had altered enough to attend to his responsibilities, but he was happiest in company, and hit upon the notion of honoring the bride by hosting a ball. It was voted so material a success that it initiated a round of social engagements in the neighborhood.

Mary led the way with grace, danced with every young blade in the parish and many of the old, but she kept an eye out for Fanny, who would fain have retired to sit among the dowagers had not the young men of the neighborhood had other ideas. The beautiful, soft-spoken Miss Price who danced so well always had more partners than she could want.

Miss Price’s situation was well known. She would have no dowry but what the erratic new Sir Thomas might think to give her. Fanny, whose universal sweetness was shared equally among parish children, the old and infirm, as well as her handsome young partners, encouraged no one, nor did she possess persistent suitors.

Fanny knew naught of these matters. To be included in these invitations was new, and she enjoyed herself more than she had ever expected, scarcely aware that she, who once was knocked up by midnight, had gained so materially in health that she bounded down the last dance with nearly as much energy as the first.

She did think of Susan, who was introduced at Tom’s ball as “Miss Susan Price, not yet out.” As yet unaware of the subtleties of the out and not-out, Fanny was at first perturbed to discover that Susan was not universally included in the invitations flooding Mansfield.

One evening, as they gathered in the vestibule while waiting for Wilcox to bring the carriage around, Julia watched her husband tugging at his cravat as he eyed himself in the pier glass, turning his head from side to side. Irritated that he looked at his own reflection more than he looked at her, she began, “I wonder if Charles Maddox will come. I hope he does not, for he is certain to quiz me again about being married, and I shall not know where to look.”

“Oh, ha ha,” Tom said, laughing. “That he will! Among all the quizzers in the neighborhood, Maddox is the worst.”

Fanny, little interested in a conversation in which she could not take part, spied Susan carrying Lady Bertram’s pug downstairs.

Fanny crossed the floor to her sister, tousled the little dog’s ears, then said, “I am sorry for it, Susan, if you wished to be going with us. I cannot think how it comes to pass you were not included. Ought I to speak to someone about it?”

“No, Fanny,” Susan said earnestly, as she stooped to tie a ribbon around Pug’s neck for her nightly walk on the terrace. “No indeed! I am much happier here. I have no interest in balls or dancing. Perhaps if I’d grown up to it,” she said, as the carriage drove up and Baddeley opened the door. “I liked to hop it as much as anyone, when the fair came to Portsmouth. But minding my steps in a ballroom seems more disagreeable than not. I thank you for thinking of me, but I am very well occupied at home.” She said this last word with happy consciousness: her only ambition was never to return to Portsmouth, where she knew Aunt Norris now presided.
CHAPTER XXVI

Mindful of her position in the parish, on the afternoons she had no callers, or had not to return calls, Mary began to apply her energies to those who were not invited to balls, picnics, concerts, and soirees. In this she was taught by Mrs. Grant, who carried right on with her old duties, glad to be of use; she rejoiced to see her pretty sister so popular among the humbler inhabitants of the village.

In her turn, Mary found herself charmed by the universal admiration she met with, and the little gifts of game, and last fruits, and baked specialties that made their way to the parsonage in thanks for her attentions.

Midway through the month, the sisters were returning from inspecting the village school building, which had begun to fall into neglect during the tenure of the Norrises, when they discovered a familiar barouche being backed into the new stable.

“Henry is come,” Mary declared, and flew down the path, leaving her sister to follow as she might.

Mary arrived in time to find Henry in the vestibule putting off his greatcoat, and advancing to shake hands with Edmund, who had come out of the bookroom to greet him.

“Welcome, Crawford,” Edmund said, as his wife danced in to hug her brother, and greet him with glad cries.

Henry put her back so that he might look her up and down. He smiled, saying, “Marriage suits you well, I see! I am only here for a moment. I sent my man to scout accommodations at the inn.”

Mary turned expectantly to Edmund. He, aware that he had once desired this very thing, said (albeit consciously), “Nonsense. You must stop here. Send to Norfolk for your hunters—as you see, we now have room. Stay as long as you like. Mary’s brother becomes my own.”

Henry thanked him, and that having been settled, everyone parted to dress for dinner, as the servants laid one more place.

Mary perceived Edmund’s furrowed brow, and followed him into his dressing room. He, on perceiving her there, thought about what to say. He had seen Mary’s delight at her brother’s arrival. His own reaction had been a glad surprise, though he knew his father would have felt very different.

Unaware of the protracted silence, his thoughts broke when she said, “If you truly wish Henry elsewhere, I can find an excuse to send him away on the morrow.”

“No, no,” Edmund said, taking her hands, and drawing her to him. He still could not believe his luck in gaining her as his wife, the more because in his secret heart, he worried about the future; he could not let himself believe she would not find herself bored with the life he had chosen. “No, I spoke the truth. He is now my brother. I have always liked and esteemed him. His part in my sister’s disgrace . . . I have come to believe that the blame is not entirely his own, or hers. I know I could never have got my father to understand my own culpability there, and it only would have grieved him had I tried.”

Mary hid her face against his shirt-front, and murmured something unintelligible, in which Edmund heard the word “Fanny.”

“Fanny,” he repeated in accents of surprise. “What are you thinking? Surely you are not looking
for a re-awakened interest there?”

Edmund gazed down at her, unwilling to give voice to his fears. While he still acknowledged a partiality for Crawford, that was as a friend. He had no idea of Crawford as a husband for someone such as Fanny, whose innocent heart he was afraid had already been hurt.

Mary said playfully, to hide her own chagrin, “Surely anything we might say will have no effect, except perhaps to drive him to do the opposite—and dear Fanny, you know, will always do what she believes is right. I will say one more thing, and then have done: I once thought, and still do, that marriage with Fanny Price would be the making of him. I would not have my brother tread the same path of the admiral, if I could prevent it.”

“That,” Edmund said, “is two things. Neither of which I have any quarrel with.” And kissed her, letting the subject drop.

The meal was very lively, Mary entertaining her brother with a description of the wedding and the subsequent festivities. After dinner, she quite properly withdrew along with her sister, but the gentlemen joined them almost immediately, and then it was Henry’s turn to be the principle talker, as everyone wished to hear about his travels.

He could not help but remember a time when he had envied William Price his wide experience in the world. Henry laughed inwardly at his old self, without offering any comment upon the circumstance; he exerted himself to divert the company by describing the chase by a Danish frigate, which measured the distance every half-hour or so with its long nines as he watched through his field glass.

“What?” Mary exclaimed, as perturbed as if the news of the chase had just arrived. “A frigate, of perhaps thirty-two guns, in chase? I trust you had thought to arm the yacht?”

“I did think so once,” Henry replied, smiling. “But her timbers could only support a carronade, and you know, its range is so short that by the time my shot might tell, anyone could have blown me out of the water. And then a carronade would have brought her by the stern, interfering with her speed, which was her most splendid point. No, all we could do is chase through gray waters under a gray sky, and look upon one another through our glasses, until the wind changed.”

“You could see the other captain?” Mrs. Grant asked, her hands clasped to her breast.

“Quite well, as I know he saw me. A fine-looking man about my age, with an intelligent face, and he wore his uniform with an air. We had occasion to watch one another a good three hours and more, causing me to reflect on the fact that war is in every way an absurd pastime. Tragically absurd; given other circumstances, we might have sat down to enjoy dinner together, talking of Leibnitz’s theories, or debating whether Mozart’s operas were preferable to the Italian.”

“But how do we stop Bonaparte else?” Mrs. Grant asked, looking troubled.

Henry said, “I do not say it is unnecessary. I do not set out to rob the brave of their glory. I merely speak of individual encounters such as these, and it was a fleeting observation in any case. The wind changed, bringing even higher waves, giving us both something else to think of, and we soon lost sight of the frigate.”

He went on to describe the striving against sea and storm, and finally introduced William Price into his narrative. On finding his audience eager to hear of his exploits, Henry obliged them with a truncated account of William’s battle with the French ships of the line.
He ended, “Perhaps you will be interested to know that Samuel Price has been promoted to midshipman, and has already gained a couple dozen pounds in prize money. At this prodigious rate, he might become an admiral before he turns twenty, if Napoleon Bonaparte can just be got not to sue for peace again.”

They laughed, but in spite of this opening no one introduced Fanny’s name; Mary gave Henry a meaning look, and, puzzled to interpret it, he passed easily from there to his diplomatic duties, ending with, “And so, by the time your good news caught up with me, I was at Leith. I posted down to London at once, where I chanced upon your letter before it could be numbered among the dispatches sent to Sweden, but between delivering my dispatches, arranging for my yacht to be brought down the coast, and buying new clothes to replace everything ruined in the tempest, I was not able to depart until now.”

As Mary handed around the tea things, the conversation broke up into generalities, and Edmund offered to take Henry on the morrow to Tom, that he might be included in the day’s shooting party.

Henry accepted with spoken thanks, and silent wishes that his generous-natured brother-in-law might be anywhere else, so impatient was he to speak to Mary alone.

But scarcely had he schooled himself to wait than the door knocker was heard banging. Edmund was soon wrapping himself in coat and scarf, to ride into the village at the urgent behest of a family with an ailing grandmother.

Mrs. Grant, seeing at a glance that her brother and sister desired nothing more than to be alone, made her excuses. Henry gallantly lit her upstairs, and then ran lightly down to find Mary awaiting him in the drawing room.

He paused, looking at her askance. “I remember once that you despised the idea of Bertram running off to minister to some toothless old woman when he might be making speeches in Parliament, or leading a battle in the Peninsula.”

“I hope,” she rejoined, “I might be credited with learning a little wisdom.”

“If wisdom it is,” Henry said, “I salute you with all my heart.”

Mary flushed. She had never laid aside her taste for irony, but of late there had been only admiration and attentiveness for the pretty bride of the handsome young minister of Mansfield parish. Her pleasure at seeing her brother was undiminished, yet she found herself on the defensive under his questioning eye.

She threw back her head, daring him to become satiric. “At all events,” she said, “I know the old woman in question. She gave us a basket of ducklings, and her nephew works under Robert, who is to plant a new garden.”

“Ducklings! Garden. Does Bertram read you his sermons?”

“Yes,” she said, with spirit. “I made it a condition of marriage that he would never resort to Fordyce.” And when she had gained the expected laugh, she continued. “He reads them to me, and I tell him where I find them boring. He rewrites them, and I must say, there is a lot less nodding off, and more attention paid in that church than ever was during my late brother’s day.”

Seeing her serious, Henry altered his expression. “Mary, I can see that marriage so far suits you admirably, but is this life going to make you happy?” He looked at her searchingly.

His seriousness was worse than satiric skepticism, and she laughed unsteadily. “You doubt me, I
see. It is no more than I doubt myself. I wish I might always be this happy. But sometimes I wake up believing it to be a dream, that I will find myself in London again, with nothing to do but yawn over the latest French novel, and to listen to Flora relating the latest scandal.” She spread her hands. “I am aware that I am playing a role, but how much of life is just that?”

“All of it,” he replied, and there was the old sardonic smile.

“Exactly. *You* understand me. We are both of us lacking in moral center.”

"Yes," he said. "Until relatively recently I would have argued that there were no moral truths, that our society is built upon hypocrisy. Having awakened to a different possibility, I find I am drawn hither."

"Moths to flame?" Mary gained the expected laugh, and she said quickly, "I think about that very thing most every day, as I go about in my new role as minister’s wife, handing out compliments and nostrums. I marvel at myself in choosing to do what seems to be in my sister’s nature, as it is in the nature of one we have yet to speak of. Did you know she sewed for the poor, contributing what little she had, and no one thought to acknowledge it, much less give her the credit for it? I can only assume that her sisters refused to notice, that they might not be expected to contribute equally."

She paused at this oblique offer of the subject of Fanny, but Henry said nothing as he leaned against the mantelpiece, one arm draped along the marble.

She continued. “So I have learnt that one *can* choose the moral path, even if it is not in one’s nature. Even if it goes against one’s nature. I take immense satisfaction in it. I do know that I was not happy in London.” She glanced at his intent face, and uttered another laugh, though her heart was full. “And yes, I am aware that village life might become stale. But I am ambitious for Edmund: I would see him dean of Westminster. He would do very well there, yet can still minister to all the old ladies he wishes."

Henry answered with the expected smile, and then cast himself on the couch beside Mary. “Tell me about Fanny,” he said at last.

“She has only gained in beauty.”

“I am almost sorry to hear that,” he replied.

Mary laughed at him. “You regret her beauty? Did you imagine her ruling cruelly over all of Northamptonshire’s heart-struck suitors?”

Henry only smiled, one hand at his breast. “I should like to gain all the credit of a steadfast heart without the incentive of Fanny’s beauty.”

Mary’s smile faded. “Henry, you are more welcome than anyone in life, but if you are not serious about Fanny, I’ll wish you to go away again. We spoke once of what we believed might lie in her secret heart. I still do not know if her heart was bruised by my marriage. I think not, for she came to me herself, and as good as gave me permission to advance my case. I detected no sign that she was sacrificing herself, like the noble heroines I loathe in novels, which makes me determined: I will not see her hurt.”

“Do you think she could be hurt?” he asked, evincing surprise. “She was used to watch me go away with the same tranquility with which she greeted me.”

“I know not. Here is what I have seen. I have witnessed her blossoming, with the absence of those who oppressed her most. And still no word of reproach for that Easter’s *débâcle*. Julia tells me that
Fanny campaigned the family to have Maria forgiven, and restored to their bosom.”

The name caused a spasm to tighten Henry’s features, and he moved restlessly, rising to stretch his hands out to the fire. He looked back to say, “I left the country in part to get as far from the memory as I could. But one cannot escape memory anymore than one can the effects of one’s own cupidity.”

“Maria refuses to return,” Mary said calmly. “I suspect she would only do that if she could sweep up the drive in triumph, with a ducal coronet on the side-panels of a coach drawn by six white horses, and diamonds at her throat.”

“Let us not speak of her at all.”

“You could scarcely make a request I would be happier in obeying. I cannot think of her without anger, born so fair, given every advantage, yet Julia says she is never satisfied unless she is quarreling. Permit me return to my point. Once you confessed very idly that you wished to engage Fanny in flirtation, for you thought it might do her good. Then you wished to make her love you. And now?”

“And now . . . I hardly know. I cannot promise anything. There were days in the Mediterranean when the sun blazed overhead causing the air to shimmer, and nights in the North Sea so cold that my breath froze as it left my lips, when Fanny seemed as ephemeral as a fever dream. But I never stopped thinking about her, and talking to her memory. Perhaps I will meet her, and wonder what it was I ever saw. If she meets me with her customary indifference, then it is only just. I will return to Everingham again, and we will get on with our lives.”

“Very well,” Mary said.

“So let me ask you this. I bring with me a letter from William. I despise using it to storm her defenses, as I know I once did in petitioning the admiral to gain him his step. Ought I to contrive to see her alone, give it to her, and leave?”

“I will not dictate to you. Let me condition only for this: that you first meet her in company.”

“I had thought to meet her alone, for I remember well how much she disliked being scrutinized by others’ avid eyes. Is it that way still?”

Mary nodded slowly. Fanny was no longer tormented by her aunt, but habit was strong. Everywhere they went, though Julia moved with confidence into the center of attention, rather more like a young lady on her preferment than a married woman, Fanny always sought the remotest corner. “They are used to paying her no attention. If you do not take special notice of her, I think you will do very well. My suggestion is, give your letter to Baddeley, to be included among their post. Go, be as pleasant and charming as ever, but do not single her out in any way.”

“So be it,” Henry said. “Edmund said something about shooting.”

Mary nodded. “They breakfast later than we do. If the two of you walk up directly after ours, you shall probably find them sitting among the egg shells and the rinds of ham.”

**CHAPTER XXVII**

By morning word had reached Mansfield of Henry Crawford’s arrival.
On hearing Tom exclaim the news given him by a stable hand who had a brother at the parsonage, Julia sat down to breakfast with a return of the old resentment. She stole a look at Fanny to see how she received the news, but Fanny was reading a letter, and it was clear she heard nothing said.

Julia shrugged. She had never believed that gossip about Henry Crawford and Fanny, of all people. She cared nothing for Crawford, whom she had heard of in London as a desperate flirt; it had mollified her slightly to discover that she numbered among many who had felt the effect of his soft words followed by disinterest. She was not the only one to feel the effects of his cruel flirtations. Her sister’s disastrous plot to secure him had gone further to convince Julia that she was well out of what might have been a terrible scrape.

She decided that he was not to think she was waiting to see him, and, tossing her head, said carelessly that she was sick to death of the walk to the parsonage. “It would be a crime to let this weather go to waste. Let us ride after breakfast,” she said to her husband, and ignoring his and Tom’s manifestations of surprise at this suggestion from such a quarter.

"I thought you misliked riding," Yates said.

"This charming weather is strong motivation," she said, for she very much wanted Crawford to arrive only to find everyone gone.

This was her charitable plan; she was left looking a little silly when Edmund and Henry walked in as the muffins were in passing around the table for the second time.

Fanny had just reached the last scrawled words of William’s letter— And I write in haste, for I must get back to directing the repairs aboard my prizes, and I believe Crawford is going to return to London, having handsomely offered to bear any message— when Henry Crawford himself walked in.

She was so astonished she had no time speak when he said so politely, “Good morning, Miss Price,” and turned immediately to greet the next person at table. She could not prevent a furious blush, but at least no one was looking her way. Crawford was the center of attention as he approached Lady Bertram, and engaged that lady in conversation.

Lady Bertram knew something of what had happened to her daughter Maria, and though she had been sincerely shocked, and had concurred with all Sir Thomas’s decisions, her own indolence and native objection to fatiguing emotions prevented her from reacting with anything but a vague surprise to see entering her home the very young man with whom Maria had been caught in sin. She turned to Edmund, who was smiling, and accepted that things had been smoothed over somehow, and she was content.

Julia studied Crawford as he exchanged inanities with her mother. He seemed somehow taller than she remembered, decidedly leaner, and very much swarthier. She pronounced him uglier than ever in her mind, yet she could not turn away.

Fanny, daring a glance when he was safely talking to her aunt, was amazed to see what a difference wind and weather made in his features. Perhaps William might look so, when next she saw him. She looked immediately down at her letter, refolding it carefully to be tucked into her pocket for rereading in private.

As there was plenty of room at the table, and both Edmund and Crawford insisted they would take only coffee, there was a little shifting, and scraping of chairs, and then Julia announced, “We were on the point of departure. We are going riding.”
Henry turned his smile her way. “A capital idea, Mrs. Yates. It is a beautiful morning, Bertram and I were agreeing on our walk. If I may be permitted to make a suggestion, why not combine two parties? I can send a message to the parsonage, for my sister might like to join us. Are there horses enough? I would have no one left out.” And here, he sent a meaning glance down the table at Fanny, whose downcast eyes revealed no expression.

Julia said carelessly, “Of course there are horses enough. We sent for our own, when Tom asked us to stay.” She did not want Crawford thinking the Yates family remiss in any point of style.

When the last muffin was eaten and the coffee drunk, everyone was in motion. Fanny lingered, unsure. Was she included, or not? Julia never thought of her. That much Fanny could have predicted. Crawford’s mention of horses was said in her direction, but she was not going to assume that he was in charge of the party.

She was turning toward the opposite door in order to fetch her workbag when Edmund stepped up to her side. “You will enjoy a ride, I know. I have sent orders to have your mare saddled. I trust you do not disagree?”

Fanny did not know where to look or what to say, but she was aware of more approbation than fear in her heart, and she had courage enough to reply, “Thank you.”

Now she must hurry. She would not keep anyone waiting. She sped upstairs to change into her habit, and consequently was the first one downstairs, to discover that Edmund and Mr. Crawford were already at the stable with Tom, who invariably dressed in riding clothes. Now she must wait again, for she would not be the only woman at the stable.

She had to laugh at herself for her unnecessary bustle. She walked out onto the terrace to look at the last roses of the year while she waited; Yates was never swift as dress was important to him, and Julia, for reasons best known to herself, had summoned her maid to have her hair rearranged again.

Consequently Mary had already ridden up the path to join them before Mr. and Mrs. Yates came downstairs. Presently they were all mounted, and set off in a group across the fields toward the shady lanes clad in russet and gold.

Who among the party enjoyed the beauties of nature at the height of autumn? Fanny, to be sure. She could not look at the burst of scarlet among the golds, yellows, and fading greens without thinking of her favorite poetry; from childhood habit she turned to Edmund to see if he shared her thoughts, but he rode beside his wife with Mr. Crawford on Mary’s other side, the three conversing easily. Fanny would not hasten to hear what they talked of, as Julia did, but she did not believe it was nature.

Fanny rode between Mr. Yates, who twisted from side to side in hopes of spying signs of sport, and Tom, who called across to Yates, pointing out a covey here, and a rabbit there. When they had descended the last hillock toward Mansfield common, it was generally agreed that the place was perfect for a gallop.

They set off, the grouping entirely broken up. Yates and Tom led the way, the latter hallooing, Crawford at first keeping pace, though as they approached a narrow bridge over a stream, he reined up that they might ride easily two abreast as the bridge did not permit of three. He paused, his horse prancing, waiting for his sister and Edmund to cross, and then his horse fell in step beside Fanny’s mare, Julia having fallen back in pique, though she admitted only that she liked not the idea of the wind and the motion taking her hair and hat every which way.
Henry's maneuver was adroitly done; as they progressed into the trees on the other side, no one but Julia was looking their way. Fanny knew not what to say. She was aware of her heart beating fast, which was not entirely due to the exercise.

Mr. Crawford broke the silence first. “I trust you received your letter, Miss Price. Have you anything to ask about William? I shall begin by assuring you that he looked well, and further, he spoke the same of your younger brother Sam. I saw them both at Gibraltar. Sam appears to have taken to naval life.”

He waited, breath held lest she bridle, or assume a haughty air, or give him a cold look—any of the harmless tricks employed by young ladies determined to exert their powers, which he had seen a hundred times and more.

Fanny’s gaze was the clear one he had remembered, her voice soft as she said, “I should like very much to hear about Gibraltar.”

He had held so many conversations with her in imagination that he found all the right words ready. He spoke well, watching her minutely—the lift of eyelid, the contracting of the soft, severe lips—for reactions. He could not be more intent watching her than she was to hear every detail of her brothers, and so they were occupied until broken in upon by Julia, who could not contain her curiosity at what could possibly keep Crawford at Fanny’s side so assiduously.

It was all very well to remain aloof, but only if the object noticed; she worked her horse between their two, catching the words ‘ship of the line’ and ‘harbor.’ Far from flirting, Crawford was boring on about some battle or other, which was exactly what might have been expected to entertain Cousin Fanny!

Laughing at herself for how wrong she had guessed, Julia said gaily, “Have you seen which direction my husband rode in? I cannot make out where anyone is gone.”

“I believe I saw them last vanishing beyond the close, in the direction of the river,” Henry replied, pointing with his whip.

“Oh, well, then. I shall never catch them,” Julia replied. “We shall see them again some time or other. So where have you been this age? I have not seen you these ten ages, at least? Your sister would only say that you had gone to sea, or some such thing.”

Henry returned a trivial answer, after which Julia took over the conversation, taking it upon herself to retail everything she knew of mutual acquaintance in London.

They were thus occupied when they caught up to the rest of the party watering their horses in a shallow pool. And so, with every evidence of good humor, the parties recombined, and turned toward home. By the time Mansfield’s chimneys appeared above the treetops, they were agreed to meet again for dinner, Tom insisting upon hosting, and Julia with sudden inspiration, “Now that we have an even number of men and women, for nobody ever thinks of Tom, we might even try a dance or two, if we can find someone to play to us. Fanny, has Susan learnt the instrument?”

“No, no,” Tom said with a laugh, before Fanny could speak. “Susan does not know a pianoforte from my uncle’s hat. Leave her to my mother, and both will be perfectly happy. I’ll send to Jasper at the inn. I know he’ll come out and fiddle for as long as you like to hop it.”

Julia had no particular animus toward Fanny, but between Aunt Norris and her elder sister she had been raised to think in terms of competition, and as she had not paid the least heed to whether Fanny danced or not at Tom’s ball and subsequent gatherings, she thought to lead the way in this
small company.

But here she had counted without Mary, who, after exchanging a few quiet words with Tom, saw to it that the fiddler played only round dances, and at most Sir Roger de Coverley.

Fanny was very ready to dance. As her cousin Edmund kindly asked her first, any nerves she might have felt were done away quickly. And so her eyes shone, her cheeks brightened, as she skipped in time on light feet; by the third dance, when all had changed partners twice, she was prepared to dance with Mr. Crawford.

Six dances all told, and then they were all agreed to sit down. Six dances with six people plenty— still warm in the evenings—so much better to invite nearer neighbors for an impromptu dance— seemed hardly worth it to have so small a line to dance down. All these excuses and more were offered out loud as Mary secretly wished Julia otherwhere, and Julia hid her disappointment at having to dance with her husband four times as she would not dance with her brother, and Crawford had shown no inclination whatever to dance with Julia more than twice. She could not detect any special attentions that he paid Fanny, she only saw that he, while perfectly polite and ready to enter into every activity, demonstrated not the smallest inclination to flirt.

In fact, Julia could not penetrate his smiling exterior. She only knew as they walked upstairs that she was thinking about him far too much, an exercise which could go nowhere. Once before she had removed herself when she sensed danger, and so, when they were private, she said to Mr. Yates with a fair assumption of carelessness, “If you have shot all Tom’s birds, I think we ought to go home. The company is all the same people I have known forever, and the tedium is insupportable.”

Mr. Yates, who remembered well the events of that summer, and had his own private thoughts as he watched his wife, had experienced all the jealousy she could have wished. “Very well, my love,” he said promptly. “Name your day, and I will settle everything.”

While Julia had been preoccupied with Crawford, he and the newlyweds had been thinking about Fanny. As they walked through the chilly night air, Edmund and Crawford each carrying a lantern, there was little talk. Edmund had seen Fanny’s brightened countenance, which he was not certain was entirely due to the exercise, and did not know what to think.

Mary contained her impatience at her brother’s silence.

Crawford paid no attention to either of his companions. He could still feel the light touch of Fanny’s hand in his own, could hear her soft voice asking intelligent questions about William’s North Sea battle, which had been scanted in his hasty letter. Of course she would understand the difference between cannon and carronades, the importance of the weather gage, and even how a ship was stripped to fighting sail, and by whom. She had been corresponding with William since they were children.

He never knew what she was going to say, because she never spoke commonplace. She employed no arts to compel attention, but she laughed and danced as gracefully as any London miss. He was never bored in her company; when the evening ended, there was still so much more to talk about. In short, she had gained so materially in a year that he found himself resenting the trappings of social engagement that required them to part. He would remain at Mansfield if he could.

When they reached the parsonage, Mrs. Grant, who had chosen not to go to Mansfield in favor of staying at her own hearth, had the tea things ready, the water having been ordered to be simmering on the hob.
While she set about its preparation, and Edmund went to speak to the servants about some household business, Mary walked her brother into the parlor, faced him, and said, “Well? Is there any danger?"

“I am in danger of being as bewitched as I ever was,” he breathed.

Mary laughed in delight. “Leave it to me,” she said, and as they heard their sister in the passage, each sat down, occupied with their own thoughts.

At Mansfield, Fanny sat in the little white room that had been hers for so very long. It seemed so small and cramped now; she was ready for something different, though she could not name what that might be. She could only think clearly on the past, good things and evil, but most of all, Mr. Crawford’s warm voice, his tone so very different from the smooth flirtation of the summer before when he had said, “It is he who worships your merit the strongest, who loves you most devotedly, that has the best right to a return.”

*I have to know,* she decided. She would not understand her own heart for certain until she truly understood his.

The next morning, at breakfast, Julia said, “I have woken with the head-ache. Pray carry my excuses, will you, Fanny, and my compliments?”

Correctly assuming that this was mere polite nothing, Fanny would have promptly given up any idea of her visit in favor of her usual employments, had not Lady Bertram said, “If you are walking down to the parsonage, Fanny, will you give Mrs. Grant a message? Cook says she would very much like the last basket of apricots, as ours turned out to be wormy.”

Fanny assented, and took extra care in dressing, choosing her best walking gown. She even glanced in her little looking glass to see that her hair was ordered, before she put on her bonnet.

At the parsonage, Mary had her plans made. Edmund, she knew, had church business; she recruited her ever-obliging sister to engage Julia, if the two came together, and sat at her harp to await events.

Fanny walked alone. When the parsonage emerged between the autumn-clad trees, her heart began to beat fast. There was Mary at her harp, but Fanny had scarcely put off her bonnet and delivered her aunt’s message before Mary said, “I will carry it up to my sister at once. There is someone who wishes to speak with you, dearest Fanny. Shall I let him in?”

Fanny could not utter a word, but she did not turn away when Henry Crawford walked into the room.

“Good morning,” he greeted her.

She responded in kind, and sat down as he took the chair opposite hers.

He said, “I feel, since we are alone at this moment, I ought to begin by begging your forgiveness for my part in last year’s *contretemps.*”

He would have said more, but she made a quick, inadvertent gesture, and when he abandoned his speech, flushing in chagrin, that uncomfortable sensation was chased by surprise when she said, “No, no, I feel it is I who must beg pardon.”

“You?” he said in amazement. “If there is anyone who has nothing to regret with respect to my stupidities after I left Portsmouth it would be you.”
“Not so, not so,” she said, her distress real. She could not quite bring herself to speak the word ‘Portsmouth.’

“I am striving to understand,” he began slowly. “How could you possibly want regret? I am not quite coxcomb enough to assume you regret turning down our offer of a ride to Mansfield. I quite understood that in planning what we thought would benefit everyone—to bear you away from Portsmouth, which anyone could see had not put you in health—we had overlooked the possibility that you could not endure my company for the length of that journey.”

Fanny shook her head, vexed almost to tears; she remembered well her primary motivation for refusing so generous an offer was to keep Mary Crawford and Edmund apart. She could not possibly explain; she knew not which was worse, the one he assumed or the one she would fain have forever hidden. “Oh, Mr. Crawford,” said she. “Pray do not. That is—"

Seeing her distress, but unable to divine its cause, he said gently, “I beg your pardon. When I return to London, I would be honored to serve as courier, if you have any letter you might want dispatched to your brothers through the admiralty. I carried a great many such correspondence myself, and I can assure you it puts no one to the least trouble. One more letter is never noticed in the aggregate.”

She was surprised enough to raise her eyes to his. “Do you return to London so soon, then?”

“I had not thought—there are no plans in motion.” He half-smiled, adding, “A part of my offer was to determine, if I could, how strong might be your desire for me to take myself off.”

Fanny blushed, and in spite of her distress, she laughed a little. “Mr. Crawford, I would never dictate anyone’s movements.”

“But your opinion matters to me,” he said. “It has ever since it was my privilege to know you a little.”

She blushed again, and when she did not speak, not knowing what to say, he continued. “I have held imaginary conversations with you over the past year, and you were there in spirit when I met your brothers, but I would not distress or overwhelm you for worlds. A word—a sign—and I will have done, but first and foremost I believe I owe you some explanation for my movements after Portsmouth. Not excuses. There can be none.”

He paused, but as she said nothing, nor moved—she scarcely breathed, so overpowering was the conflict between dread and a need to know—he went on slowly, “I have always been idle, having nothing to consult but my own pleasures. Until this past year, when I thought to try myself another way, my motives were no more, and no less, than thoughtlessness and pique. But my heart, it had not changed.”

Fanny struggled against the habit of years, but managed a few words, in which ‘my cousin Maria’ could be heard.

Henry said, “Your cousin’s motivation was not so very different than mine,” he said. “I can attest to that with some confidence: that, and a consuming dislike of having her will crossed. Your own memories should furnish you with corroboration of that. Desire, yes, we were both wrong in our sailing too close to the wind, as it’s said, but love—real love—there was not. In either of us.”

Fanny was silent, aware that, uncomfortable as this conversation was, she had no wish to change her place, or even for Mary to enter.
Henry, seeing some of this in the intent expression of her lowered eyes, ventured one more point. “I know you were taught differently—but I would not lie to you, Fanny. To me, passion is only a sin when there is no love in it. Real love, born in joy. Anything else swiftly becomes its own punishment.”

At that she raised her eyes. She knew not what to say, for she had no experience in such a conversation. She was aware that he had abandoned his habit of beguiling compliment, the empty flattery of flirtation—even of courtship—that she had so mistrusted, even hated.

A thought would obtrude: in Mary's and Julia's novels, the heroine at a moment like this would either faint or dissolve into impassioned weeping. The flutter of laughter tickled behind her ribs—she suppressed it instantly, but Henry, so quick, said, “What is it? My attempt at honest discourse inspires you to mirth?”

“No!” She put out a hand, shaking her head vehemently. “No, no, not at all. It is just that I do not know what I ought to say, and then I could not but remember the novels we have been reading, and how the ladies therein might respond.”

Henry’s brows lifted and he responded with a rueful laugh. “That would serve me out, if you were to expire right there upon Mary’s new carpet, because of course I must be the villain of the piece.”

This time Fanny could not prevent a laugh from escaping. The sound, so soft, so genuine, captivated him anew, and it took all his self-control not to throw himself at her feet right then.

He had no more idea than she what the next moment might bring, but that, too, had its allure; she was no longer afraid, for in spite of a lifetime of habit she had come to understand that she no longer had anyone to fear, and he, jaded for so much of his life, felt himself young and callow.

“Shall we begin again?” he suggested. And, rising, he made a correct bow in form. “May I have the honor of presenting one Henry Crawford to your notice?”

Fanny knew exactly how to respond to that. She rose, curtseyed, and replied, “Pleased to make your acquaintance, Mr. Crawford. I am Fanny Price.”

CHAPTER XXVIII

Who can doubt of the outcome?

Henry Crawford had been born to wealth and admiration. His first courtship had been an accident, come after an indolent wish to capture yet another heart. It had met with all the resistance so idle an intention deserved. His second courtship possessed all the good qualities the first had not, and none of the ill.

Fanny Price, with two years of experience gained after their first meeting, was equal to anything. She began this courtship knowing that his heart was hers, should she choose to take it; he, in his turn, was not at all certain of his lady’s heart, except in his belief that the lucky man who secured the love of Fanny Price would be forever blessed.

Mary delighted in exerting all her considerable skills to forward this courtship. Morning visits at the parsonage (and Fanny gradually found it necessary to walk over every day that Mary and Henry did not appear at Mansfield first) began with readings. In replacing the now-departed Julia with
Henry, everyone was the gainer; they began with Shakespeare to everyone’s complete satisfaction, working through all of the romances, and the histories, ending with the farce of *Cymbeline*. Thenceforth everyone proffered their favorites in turn, which carried them through the cold of winter.

Henry made a welcome addition to the neighborhood balls and routs, the local young ladies at first agreeably aghast at having so well-known a flirt come among them. But when it became obvious by the third of these festivities that Mr. Crawford, though agreeable to all, reserved his gaze to following the movements of the beautiful Miss Price, he was given up with a shrug, their mothers all agreeing it was a shame he must throw himself away on a portionless girl, but that was the way of the world.

Fanny was too well-bred to watch after any gentleman in a room, but she came to regard her dances with Henry the best of any evening. The light touch of his hand, the smile over his shoulder when they turned, the whispered words from something they had read that never failed to surprise a laugh out of her: she found she could never have enough, and dancing until dawn became her favorite pastime.

By spring, when Mary discovered the necessity to scour out and repaint the nursery unused for two generations, it was generally decided that she would make a last trip to visit the admiral. It seemed natural to everyone that Fanny must accompany her as a companion, and Henry would drive them.

By then Edmund had seen enough to allay the last of his fears on Fanny’s account. What the future might bring—whether Crawford’s passion endured—was a question that echoed his own private worry that his once-wayward wife would grow tired of her quiet country life with him. But he had learnt a measure of wisdom: no croakings about ‘tomorrow’ would ruin the happiness of today, and he would rather cut out his tongue than dim the glow of happiness he glimpsed in Fanny’s honest eyes.

And so he sent the three of them off with smiles and good wishes, and if he prayed an extra hour in his own closet that his wife would come back to him, that secret lay between him and God.

I make no claim to interpreting the wishes of Providence. I can only report that the spring journey was a resounding success. The admiral met Henry’s Fanny with urbane pleasantries, reserving his skepticism for when she was not by, but within two days he was brought to admit that her manners were as gentle as his half-remembered grandmother’s, and by week’s end he was obliged to congratulate Henry heartily on having found one woman in a thousand, nay, a million, and advised him (with a hearty clap on the back) that he’d be a fool not to hang onto her.

Fanny, who believed herself nothing out of the ordinary, was spared the hearing of this coarse encomium. She and the admiral parted each with sincere affection.

Since they were so close to the metropolis, it seemed natural to venture into London for a day or two at most, that Henry and Mary might take Fanny to see her first real stage play, and perhaps a concert as well. They took Fanny to see Grimaldi at Drury Lane, and Kemp’s “Musical Beauties of the Works of Shakespeare,” both of which Fanny enjoyed so thoroughly that the Crawfords were able to find pleasure in Fanny’s obvious pleasure.

The success of these ventures prompted them to attempt an opera at the King’s Theatre; though Mrs. Billington was ill, and Henry’s favorite, Mozart, was not represented, they saw Holcroft’s “The Follies of the Day,” which was another success.

The theatre accounted for their evenings, but the days were filled with calls and invitations. Maria had not been remiss in reviling Henry to anyone in her old life who could be got to listen, which
made his friends intensely curious to witness for themselves the spectacle of Mr. Crawford and this mysterious young lady.

Miss Price, they generally agreed, was every bit as beautiful as her cousin. Some found her dull, but those with rather more penetration pronounced her sweetness as genuine as her interest in everyone she met. By being interested, she became interesting; in London, the wit and charm that insist on being first in company are everywhere to be met with, but far rarer are those who listen and appreciate. So many invitations resulted that their departure was put off thrice.

It was Mary's insistence that they stay, for she knew well whose whispers had drawn the curious hither, and she hoped that news of Fanny's popularity would reach Bath, where Maria was said to be residing. But however, this agreeable situation was not to last; at a soiree Mary noticed Lord Stornaway—farther gone in liquor than usual—pressing some warmish compliments on a puzzled Fanny, and she and Henry decided it was time to bring the visit to a close.

By then, Mary had had a revelation: being in London again, with nothing to do but sit in interchangeably beautiful rooms, listening to the same round of on-dits that she had yawned over before, engendered in her a longing for the fresh air and verdure of the country. She found herself among the select company at the Countess of A—and the Duchess of D—thinking not of her noble surroundings so much as whether or not Hetty the milkmaid had safely been brought to bed of what were thought to be twins—if old Mrs. Matlock was recovering from her ailment—if Mrs. Grant could manage the repairs of the village school all on her own.

They left London to travel into Everingham, where Mary was glad to rest before the last leg of their journey home. She took to her bed as Henry conducted Fanny over his house, pointing out the improvements he had put in motion, and now meant to carry forward again.

Fanny looked, and listened as she walked through empty rooms awaiting new furnishings. When they stopped in a venerable library, and Henry explained who had brought which books from Italy, Germany, France, she became aware of a change in him: an uncertainty in the quick glances he darted, the tentative questions, surprising in the assured Henry Crawford of London. When they left the library and began to ascend the staircase to inspect the bedchambers, it came to her that to walk through his home was in a sense to see another side of him that he shared with few. Though his words were light, even careless at times—the place was fallen into ruin, he had never stayed longer than a month—his manner belied those words.

She said at last, “Why put yourself to the trouble of renovations, if you never intend to bide here?”

They had stopped on a wide landing painted overhead a celestial blue and fitted with statuary in the splendid style of another era, though tarnished with time. Light slanted through the bank of high windows, catching glints of gold in the soft tint of Fanny’s hair, and lighting her eyes; Henry turned to her, the impulse so natural it was irresistible, and possessed himself of her hands.

His thoughts moved at such a wonderful velocity he was scarcely aware of what he did until he had done it, but she did not pull away.

When once Henry would have taken her hand, she would have withdrawn in distress, but never indifference. Since that time, Fanny’s emotions had undergone so complete an alteration that as his fingers closed on hers, she took an inadvertent step nearer, enough to feel his breath stir her hair, and to see the rise and fall of his breathing along the muted gloss of his silken waistcoat. And then, quite consciously, she stepped nearer still.

“Fanny,” he said, soft as a whisper. “I could make this house my home, were you living in it.” When her gaze lifted to meet his, he let the words tumble heedlessly: “Once before I offered you
my hand, and everything I possess. I was arrogant enough to assume that you would accept, if not then, with a very little encouragement. I will not say I know you now, because you surprise me each day. This time, I offer you my heart . . .”

The cataract of words dried up, leaving the last, and deepest, communication in gaze meeting gaze.

He saw his answer there, and expressed his wordless joy in a manner that she met, and matched, the tide of happiness overwhelming both.

When Mary emerged from her bedchamber, somewhat refreshed after a short slumber, she discovered the two hand in hand. A look, a smile, and she said, “I have nothing else to wish for, except to be at Mansfield once again. Henry, order the horses put to. We must get you both back to Mansfield, but on the way, you are to tell me everything that happened, leaving out no tender gesture or word.”

Even the passions of lovers cannot waft three people over a hundred miles in an instant. They reached Mansfield the next day, the road carrying them near the parsonage first, where they set Mary down. “Go, go,” she said, laughing as she waved them on. “Settle everything. I condition only for it to be soon, as I have no wish to be lying in at the church door.”

Edmund, inside, had been daily listening for the noises of a carriage in the driveway. He heard it at last, and he who had consciously cherished every moment of felicity of the past year, as would someone conscious of how soon it all might end, felt the sharpest joy of his life when Mary cast aside her bonnet, walked straight into his arms, and sighed, “Oh, it is so good to be home.”

Mary’s wish for an expeditious wedding was nothing to the united desires of the betrothed couple. It was generally agreed that Mr. Price’s permission could be as easily secured by letter in preference to a visit to Portsmouth, for nobody expected anything but assent. Even Fanny had no fears there.

Indeed, Mr. Price’s consent was so prompt that it arrived by express, though Fanny, gratified, was not to know that no small part of her father’s motivation had been to sting his sister-in-law. After receipt of Henry’s letter, Mrs. Norris had rendered the household hideous by her tireless animadversions against Fanny’s slyness and the worthlessness of the young man. Mr. Price had learnt not to engage directly in argument with her for she was (he said) worse than a d— d bosun’s mate for noise, but, knowing her passion for economy, sent off his letter the most expensive way he could contrive.

A June full of blossoms was the month that saw Fanny joined with Henry. They traveled to the seaside, but he promised, once the war ended, he would take her to Italy, and Vienna, even to Paris if it was not knocked up too badly after more than twenty years of constant strife.

Fanny was too happy, and too busy, to do more then regard that promise as a possible felicity at some distant date. As Mr. and Mrs. Crawford they traveled to Everingham, where Henry put in motion all his renovations. But he was not the only active one. Fanny’s quiet efforts in aid of Mrs. Grant had taught her how to look out for the welfare of villagers and tenants alike, to the benefit of all. Henry, happy in his bride, gained the pleasure of observing her transformation into the mistress of a considerable estate.

Twice a year they left, in spring to visit the metropolis that they could see the latest plays, hear the latest music, and collect the latest books, and then in the early summer, they visited Fanny’s beloved Mansfield. And after Bonaparte was safely ensconced at St. Helena, Henry kept his promise, and they traveled in his yacht for the good part of a year, after which there arrived in a steady stream the fruits of their visits in all the splendid art that part of the world could offer.
As for Mary, so materially had she changed that her “nothing more to wish for” was very nearly true. Her ambitions had become intertwined with Edmund’s rising popularity. She could envision the deanship ahead, and how graciously she might preside at the manse that would come of it, and if Tom could be got not to notice Susan so conveniently living to hand that he might marry without the least exertion, she had a fair chance of seeing her firstborn Thomas (prudently named for his uncle) one day attain the pinnacle of “Sir.”

Maria, at the age of thirty—still beautiful—caught the eye of an aging marquis sent to take the waters to aid his gout-ridden body. He, long a widower, was easily flattered into marriage, and bolstered by her exalted title, she re-entered London society once again, where she presided over a brilliant series of soirees, balls, routes, concerts, and dinners, each as glittering and empty as a hollow crown.

She could not help but hear of the popular Mr. and Mrs. Crawford who came down every spring to London, and once was curious enough to send them an invitation. Henry Crawford wrote across the back the word, “No,” and sent it straightaway by footman. Fanny wrote her own letter, hoping for a peaceful amendment between the cousins. This Maria read all the way through, in the solitude of her enormous, splendid room, and for a time she gazed at the blurred letters, struggling with loss, sorrow, regret; she hated regret. There! Ready anger steadied her. She dashed away the tears and looked once more at the letter, seeing only the glee she knew she would have felt in parading her triumph before the woman who lost the man she loved, and Fanny's words dwindled to hypocritical cant.

Maria hurled the letter into the fire.

Thereafter communication ceased, though Maria never ceased trolling her sister Julia for gossip in hopes of being the first to hear of Mr. Crawford’s straying, that she might have the pleasure of putting it about; though she gloried in her wealth, it could not buy the changes she wanted most, and the years slipped by, a coal of resentment burning in her heart that no such news reached her ears.

The Yateses were frequent visitors when the Crawfords were in town, as Julia had put aside her old resentments, and Yates suited himself easily to whatever company he found himself in. They became welcome fixtures at the summer gatherings at Mansfield, so that all their respective children grew up together, mingling as friends. To these were added the robust, laughing off-spring of the dashing Captain Price, who had married a red-haired Irish beauty. He was often away, but Mrs. Price and her lively children were frequent visitors at both Everingham and Mansfield, where her husband’s world-wide adventures beguiled many a rainy night with exciting retellings.

Thus, with so much true merit and true love, and no want of fortune or friends, the happiness of these couples must appear as secure as earthly happiness can be, and I can lay down my pen, leaving a lasting picture of openhearted bliss.

End Notes

Knowing from James Austen-Leigh's memoir that Cassandra Austen begged Jane for another ending, I wrote this with Cassandra in mind, and I used as much of Austen's actual prose after my cutoff point as I could.

I wanted to base William's (and Henry's) sea-going experiences on Austen's brothers' letters,
but from the scarce info I could find, "Fly," (Francis, lively and bright as a boy) had become grim in his stately career process (missing Trafalgar as his was the ship sent for supplies before the battle happened; he returned to the wreckage and borrowed glory), and though Charles, who sounds most like William, saw action fighting slavers, and evading pirates, I could not find a trace of his actual words, and so must resort to my collection of printed memoirs of actual sailors of the period.

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