A Lady of Standing
by dafna

Summary

About thirty years ago Miss Fanny Price, of Portsmouth, had the good luck to join the household of Sir Thomas Bertram, of Mansfield Park, in the county of Northampton, and to thereby be raised with his daughters, her cousins, with all the comforts (if not the consequences) of an handsome house.

Notes

Thanks to triplexpoint for the beta. All mistakes, errors, etc. are of course mine.

About thirty years ago Miss Fanny Price, of Portsmouth, had the good luck to join the household of Sir Thomas Bertram, of Mansfield Park, in the county of Northampton, and to thereby be raised with his daughters, her cousins, with all the comforts (if not the consequences) of an handsome house. Then but ten years old, Fanny was content to hide behind her older cousins and the subsequent years saw little alteration. The eighteen-year-old Miss Price was thought by observers to be a serious well-mannered girl and of course, a great help to her aunt.

Although briefly the object of neighborhood interest as the sole young person in the house, Miss Price faded again from view as the scandal of the Bertram daughters eclipsed all. Miss Julia eloped! And Mrs. Rushworth, Miss Bertram that was, well, one could hardly talk about it without blushing. Poor Sir Thomas, they said, with his heir so ill, and daughters such as these.

Few were surprised when Miss Price resurfaced as the bride of the younger Mr. Bertram. The eldest, Tom, might yet possess the lure of a baronetcy, but the scandal had so materially damaged
the family name that Mr. Edmund Bertram was judged very sensible to discover he was, after all, in love with his own cousin.

The couple gratified the hopes of Sir Thomas and produced four children in quick succession. Edmund, Frances and Mary were born at Thornton Lacey, and the family was just beginning to think the house not quite big enough when Dr. Grant had the grace to die some 15 years before it could really be expected. Mansfield thus acquired more Bertrams, and the family expanded again with young Arthur the following year.

Fanny appreciated being at the Parsonage and the increased income was certainly no hindrance, but there were times, she told her sister, that she thought an extra distance from one’s home was no great sorrow either.

“You will think this very vain, Susan,” she said, “and no doubt it is, but I did feel quite useful at Thornton Lacey, and much listened to by the ladies of the parish. And it is sometimes quite difficult, now, to sit quietly when Sir Thomas speaks of how we should arrange the children’s education this way or care for the poor of the village that way and not to feel, well, again, I know this is horrible pride, but to feel that perhaps I might have one or two ideas of my own, and that I might know something of how to do things.”

Fanny was holding a teacup as she spoke, but the expression of what had hitherto been idle thought so shocked her own sense of propriety that she put it down again without drinking. Susan, observing this, handed her the plate of biscuits and urged her to attempt one.

“I do not think this vanity at all, dear Fanny,” she said. “You have always underestimated your own good sense and the opinions of Mrs. Edmund Bertram must be of even more value than those of Miss Fanny Price. Your husband holds one of the most important livings in the area, why should not his wife be one of the most respected? And know, too, that while the happenings at Mansfield Park must ever be observed and commented on by the populace, the conduct at the Parsonage must always serve as a nearer role model.”

“I suppose you are right,” Fanny said. “Not that I aspire to such a role, and of course the children take up much of my time, but I suppose that being a much lower person than Sir Thomas and Lady Bertram must also make me more suited to the task of ministering to the less fortunate.”

That was not quite Susan’s meaning, but she had by this time enough experience of her sister’s poor self-esteem to accept such progress as had been made. In the weeks that followed, she pursued the topic as much as she was able and claimed a small victory a few months later when Fanny decided to discuss with Edmund whether she might take on leadership of a small group of church women. Edmund saw no objection and appeared puzzled by Fanny’s apprehensions. “Surely you must know that my father has many things to consider apart from the church, and that his regular attendance at the Parsonage is only to offer every assistance in the rearing of his grandchildren.”

For his part, Edmund found the transfer to Mansfield an unalloyed improvement. A larger parish gave him more to do and more help in doing it. The location too was a help, being on a good road to Oxford and the intellectual attractions therein. Early in his career, Edmund was mindful of a certain young woman’s jibe about “indolent clergymen who leave all the work to their curate” but as the years wore on, the memory faded.

Tom Bertram was as equally glad to have his brother near at hand as Susan Price was her sister. Although fully recovered from his illness, he was still attempting the recovery of his character and sought instruction from his younger brother in matters temporal as well as spiritual. In particular, he worried about his own marital state and the state of his father’s property in Antigua. Sir Thomas
insisted that all was in order, but Tom, living as he did at home, could not help notice that much less was being spent than before. And when Fanny’s brother, William, spent part of his leave at Mansfield in 182-, he heard further evidence to doubt his inheritance’s security.

William, now a post-captain in the West Africa Squadron, was proud of his small ship and of the slaves it had freed, but admitted that the Royal Navy’s efforts at a blockade must ever be somewhat limited. Edmund, who now spent several days a month at Oriel College, reported that copies of Wilberforce’s treatise on West Indies slavery were passing back and forth at Oxford and even Fanny admitted to Tom that some of her acquaintances were taking part in the sugar boycott.

“I am sure that Sir Thomas could never do anything wrong,” she said to Tom. “But I was persuaded by some friends to attend a lecture by a Mrs. Heyrick of Leicester, and I could not help but be swayed by some of her arguments. As Christians, we must feel something for the plight of the abused and it does not seem such a big thing to drink one’s tea with only milk. Although, perhaps Sir Thomas could provide us sugar from only his estates? I am sure he treats his slaves as well as any Englishman.”

Tom agreed that this was so but declined to enlighten Fanny further. Later that day, however, he spoke to his brother on the subject and expressed his determination to put Mansfield Park on a firmer footing.

“I must find a rich girl, Edmund. I cannot aspire to the highest set, of course, but there are plenty of tradesmen’s daughters who will look kindly on the heir to a baronet, regardless of what his sister did a decade or so ago. And I should marry, really.”

Edmund agreed that he should, but he had said so before, to little end. In his experience, Tom still was better at decisive thought than decisive action. But the threat of losing the Antigua rents must have been larger than he realized for it was not two months later that his brother returned from Birmingham engaged, and not six months later they were married.

Six months after that, Sir Thomas caught a chill and even Fanny’s devoted nursing care was not enough to prolong his life by much. The village wept at the passing of such a man and turned out in large numbers for the funeral. (The uncharitable might suggest that they were hoping to see if she would appear, but as she did not, let us assume they were there to honor the deceased.) Lady Bertram retired with her pugs (and Susan) to Bath and the new Lady Bertram took her place. And thus was the former Miss Sarah Robinson, mercer’s daughter, installed as the new mistress of Mansfield Place.

Fanny had supposed that with her mother-in-law and sister both gone, she must spend less time at Mansfield Park than before. But the new Lady Bertram would have none of it.

“My dearest Fanny – I may call you Fanny, may I not? – I know we have known each other only a short time, but really I feel like we are sisters already. I have always wanted a sister, you know, and all I had was Papa and a set of the most horrid tutors imaginable. I am sure they told Papa the worst lies about their background and so you must watch me when we are at balls and parties and tell me if I bow to the wrong person or say the wrong thing. For you know, Tom would never think to chide me and I’d be afraid to have your husband do so – he seems so stern. And I confess I am a little in awe of Mrs. Yates, but you are like me – of Mansfield without being born to it and so you must be my friend and help me chuse new colours for the drawing room. (Tom says there is another sister, but she must very live far away to not come to the wedding or the funeral and so I have put her quite out of my head.) Oh and next week I shall go down to open the London house and you must come with me to look at the new hats.”

And so Fanny’s world expanded again, at first into a few small London circles and then into the
mainstream of society as the young Lady Bertram was discovered to be charming and possessed of a very fine dressmaker. Moreover, she put on excellent dinners, and it was decided that there was little to be gained in investigating too much into the details of a newer fortune or an older scandal.

Fanny found London far less terrifying than she would have guessed even ten years ago. All those church groups and lectures had taught her that there were many people outside the Bertram family who thought her very well read and her opinions worth attending to. And with her boys away at school, her daughters capably looked after by a nanny and Edmund so often at Oxford, it was no surprise that Fanny found it easier and easier to accompany her sister-in-law on her frequent London excursions.

Tom had succeeded to his father’s seat in Parliament as well as to his title and was always glad to see Fanny in London. He adored his wife, but was also conscious that a man married to an heiress some 20 years younger must ever be at risk of looking a fool. He trusted her, but he trusted Fanny more.

For his part, Edmund was glad for Fanny to have more opportunities to shine beyond their little world. If it also made him easier about his own extended stays in Oxford, well surely that was no great crime. The intercourse of a couple married for such a long time must necessarily be less interesting than that of those newly wed.

Fanny found in Sarah Bertram a most perfect companion. She liked to shop and to dance and to be admired but there was none of the false manner in her that Fanny had seen in others accustomed to city ways. True, Sarah was rarely wholly serious, but she read the newspaper avidly and found politics equally as interesting as a new hat.

“Really, Fanny if you had to listen to Papa and his friends talking about the foreign cloth markets, you’d find discussions of the repeal of the Combination Act positively riveting in comparison. And sometimes it seems as though half of Birmingham is caught up with the reformists. It does appear as though people in London are far less interested in these things, but I suppose there’s simply more to do here. Did I tell you we’ve been invited by Mrs. Baylor to hear that new soprano everyone’s talking about? But yes, by all means, if you’d like to go hear Mr. Clarkson speak, then let us do that as well.”

“You don’t think Tom would mind if we went to an anti-slavery lecture?”

Sarah turned around from the mirror and brushed her maid’s hands away from her hair. “It’s been three years since he sold the Antigua property and as far as I can tell, he was never much fond of it. I was just grateful not to have to go out there myself. I doubt he is ready to join Mr. Clarkson’s society, but then he is not coming with us, is he? Parliament is sitting late again, so we shan’t even see him until after dinner.”

The lecture hall was crowded and stifling, but Fanny’s ideas of staying in the back were swept aside by her sister-in-law. Sarah spotted an acquaintance from Birmingham in the front row, and by the time she had clasped her friend’s hands and introduced Mrs. Lloyd to Mrs. Bertram two additional seats had been found and Fanny found herself not ten feet from the famous Quaker Thomas Clarkson.

Most of what she knew of him came from William, to whom Clarkson, Wilberforce and the other campaigners behind the Slave Trade Act were heroes. It was their cause that he and his shipmates were fighting for on the African coast and William believed deeply in it. Fanny resolved to remember everything about the evening so she could write a long letter to her brother. So engrossed was she in Clarkson’s denunciations of slavery in the West Indies that it wasn’t until the end of the lecture that she looked around at her neighbors and noticed the woman sitting four seats
Mary Crawford had recognized Fanny immediately. Her clothes were finer and her mien more assured, but it would take another lifetime before she mistook any member of the Bertram household. Why she was there, Mary could not fathom. Had quiet, shy Fanny become political? Surely not. And though it seemed a long time ago now, she could still remember the disruption brought upon by the arrival of Sir Thomas from Antigua. Did Fanny perhaps not know that Antigua was in the West Indies? Moreover, she was in the company of a younger woman of fashion, who inexplicably also seemed to know one of her own companions, Mary Lloyd. Did Fanny even know that she was among Quakers? Surely Edmund must think … but no, she cautioned herself, it had been 20 years. She had no way of knowing what Edmund thought of anything and indeed, it had been at least 10 years since she cared. At any rate, she should surely be able to simply turn her head and walk away once Mr. Clarkson was done speaking.

Miss Crawford’s plan might indeed have worked had she not taken so long to consider it. Fanny turned around and the two stared at one another, silent. Indeed they might still be standing there, staring, had not Sarah turned away from Mrs. Lloyd and rejoined her friend.

“Fanny, why are you -- Oh, it’s Miss Crawford, is it not? You won’t remember me, I am sure, but I came to a few of the Ladies Society meetings when I lived in Birmingham and I always thought you spoke so well. Isn’t Mr. Clarkson wonderful? I hope I have half his spirit when I am his age. Are you in London for several days? You must come to tea. Do you remember me after all? Sarah Robinson? Though it’s Lady Bertram now; you must meet my husband. Do you know my sister-in-law, Mrs. Edmund Bertram?”

Sarah noted with some puzzlement that both Fanny and Miss Crawford were now staring at her. Miss Crawford recovered first.

“Lady Bertram, I do apologize. It has been some years since I lived in Birmingham and I was unaware you had married. Mrs. Bertram, it is good to see you as well. If you’ll excuse me …”

“Oh don’t go,” cried Sarah. “Fanny and I were just saying that we know so few ladies in London willing to talk of politics. Mrs. Lloyd is coming tomorrow, you must come as well.”

Fanny was congratulating herself on not fainting from the shock when she heard the most remarkable thing come out of her mouth. “Yes, you must come, Miss Crawford. We are quite informal.”

She spent the night tossing and turning, trying to decide if she had done the right thing. If Tom had never spoken of the Crawfords to Sarah then it was not her place to do so. But should she tell him? It was not as though he would be at the tea, but surely he would want to know who was being entertained? On the other hand, wouldn’t domestic harmony be better served by letting the whole thing go unmentioned to either party?

This debate was still roiling in Fanny’s mind the next afternoon. She had just decided to pretend – in her head, if nowhere else – that Miss Crawford was but a distant school friend of no particular mention when the lady herself sat down next to her and began speaking intently.

“Fanny. I mean, Mrs. Bertram. Please listen, as I have been thinking what to say these last twenty-four hours – and indeed these last twenty years. I know you must hate me, but I want you to know that I do bitterly regret how foolish I was when I was younger. Foolish and prideful and careless.”

Fanny could not find anything to say. Mary tilted her head and sighed.
“Perhaps I should not have said anything. But I think it must have been God’s doing that we were both at Mr. Clarkson’s lecture. For at least now I can see with my own eyes that you are as well and happy as you deserve.”

“Thank you,” Fanny said slowly. She paused to think a minute. “I do not hate you. I’m not sure that I ever did, in truth. We both played such small parts in the whole affair, after all.”

Fanny realized as she spoke that what she was saying was quite true. She remembered the shock of the event, but life as a rector’s wife had somewhat inured her to the scandal itself. As a Christian, she could not say that one sin was worse than another, but she had certainly seen many cases where the damage caused was far worse. And she knew that she blushed often to think of some of her own younger opinions. Was it so strange that Mary Crawford should do likewise?

“It was a long time ago,” Fanny said. “Perhaps it is best to not think of it.” She was still struggling to think of how to continue when Sarah spotted them and made her way over.

“Mrs. Lloyd says that you are now in Chelmsford,” Sarah said to Mary. “Have you established another anti-slavery society there?”

Mary blinked quickly a few times and then nodded her head. “Yes, my sister and I have been there the last three years. She is not political herself but has been happy to move with me. The society is doing very well. We are nothing to Birmingham or Sheffield, of course, but we have added new members every year.”

Her voice grew more animated as she described her group’s work, and Fanny found herself wondering where Mary had found such purpose and how. Not that it was any of her concern, she chided herself. Wasn’t she a much different person these 20 years gone as well? And wasn’t it satisfying, as a Christian, to see someone who had been so close to the precipice turn back? Fanny looked back up at Mary. There, that was some of her old fire, surely? That easy caustic wit? The Crawfords, she thought, had never lacked for passion.

“You make me feel so indolent,” said Sarah. “All of you do. I was speaking earlier with Miss Pease who is doing similar work in Darlington and I feel quite shamed.” She waved away Mary’s protests. “No, it is quite all right. And I am very glad to have heard from all of you because now I have a plan.”

Without meaning to, Fanny looked across at Mary and they shared a small smile as Sarah continued.

“When we get back home, Fanny, we are going to start our own ladies society against slavery. Well, I say we, but really it shall all be you, Fanny. I can get the cook to bake cakes for the meetings.”

Fanny tried to protest that there were surely better candidates. “There are not,” Sarah retorted. “Who organized the relief efforts for those poor families last summer? Who persuaded my husband’s agent that he must give the workers a full day at Christmas?”

Mary laughed. “I see some things at Mansfield remain the same. Does Mrs. Bertram still strive to avoid notice?”

“Yes,” said Sarah. “Not as much,” protested Fanny.

“Well, if I have learned anything in these past years,” said Mary, “it is that we women can accomplish far more than men think we can. I think the idea of you leading a chapter of our work
in Mansfield is a splendid idea.” She smiled softly at Fanny and then turned her head to Sarah. “Mrs. Bertram has always been one of the best things there, don’t you think, Lady Bertram?”

Sarah beamed. “I am so glad we ran into you, Miss Crawford. We shall write and tell you our progress, won’t we, Fanny? And you must send us as much advice as you can.”

Fanny sighed but couldn’t help a small smile creep onto her face. “Miss Crawford, perhaps you might address this correspondence to Lady Bertram at first?”

“Delighted,” Mary said. And she smiled back.

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