

FADE IN:

INT. LANGFORD HOUSE, LONDON - NIGHT - 1794

We are at a lavish party at the Manwarings, one of the nouveaux riches of London. The beautiful people of 1794 are all assembled in their gaudy splendor. Music is playing. Servants pass around champagne and hors d'oeuvres.

FIRST GENTLEMAN

(Sipping champagne). First class champagne! How does Manwaring do it in these revolutionary days?

SECOND GENTLEMAN

(Grabbing another glass as a servant goes by) With his wife's money, of course. (Taking a sip) Excellent! One of rewards of marrying well, I should say.

Looking over to where MANWARING, a fashionable gentleman of thirty and a crowd of other men, including SIR JAMES MARTIN, are talking with great eagerness to a woman (LADY SUSAN) whose back is towards us.

FIRST GENTLEMAN

Is that the lady in question?

SECOND GENTLEMAN

Not at all. Manwaring's wife is the sharp-nosed lady over there.

He indicates MRS. MANWARING among a group of other women, glaring at her husband.

FIRST GENTLEMAN

Marriage hasn't taught him discretion yet, has it?

He looks back at the group with Manwaring. We still can't see the lady.

FIRST GENTLEMAN

So who is the tantalizing Lady, then?

SECOND GENTLEMAN

Come now. Who else could command such a crowd? It's Lady Susan, Lady Susan Vernon.

INT. CORRIDOR, A GIRLS SCHOOL IN SOUTHERN ENGLAND - DAY

A group of elegant and well-dressed girls of ~17 can be seen walking in single file and silence down a long corridor of the school. The HEAD MISTRESS, an impeccably dressed woman of ~40 looks on, indicating to one girl that she should hold her chin up a little more.

INT. CLASSROOM, A GIRL'S SCHOOL IN SOUTHERN ENGLAND - DAY

The girls enter a classroom and take their places.

A somewhat younger, but still severe looking TEACHER scrutinizes them carefully as they enter, shaking her head as an awkward young girl, (FREDERICA VERNON) drops a book, and disrupts the line. When everyone is finally seated, the Head Mistress signals for silence, and begins to address the students. We see their reactions as she speaks.

HEAD MISTRESS

(With a French accent) You have much to learn, mes jeune filles. Remember, you are on stage at all times--even here. You are watched. You are noticed. You are judged.

INT. LANGFORD HOUSE, LONDON - NIGHT - 1794

As the teacher continues to speak, we are back at the ball where we see a YOUNG WOMAN enter the room. Gentlemen look at her appraisingly.

ANOTHER WOMAN sits demurely as a YOUNG MAN comes up to her. She pretends not to notice, but raises her eyes when he bows and speaks.

HEAD MISTRESS (V.O.)

How you appear when you enter a room; how you hold yourself when sitting; how you raise your eyes when addressed; and how you respond when called upon to speak...

INT. CLASSROOM, A GIRL'S SCHOOL IN SOUTHERN ENGLAND - DAY

Back in the classroom, the Head Mistress looks pointedly at the girls, concluding with Frederica.

HEAD MISTRESS

These will determine who will notice you, who will choose you. These will determine your destiny.

INT. HEAD MISTRESS OFFICE, SCHOOL - EVENING

The head mistress sits at a desk, looking at a letter. There is a knock at the door.

HEAD MISTRESS

Come in.

Frederica Vernon enters the room. She is pretty, but not striking, and seems somewhat shy.

FREDERICA

Madame?

HEAD MISTRESS

Ah, Frederica. Sit down. I have received some unexpected news from your mother, Lady Susan.

Frederica looks slightly frightened.

HEAD MISTRESS

No need to be frightened, ma fille. It is good news, very good news in fact. Only somewhat surprising to me in your case. She writes to tell me of your imminent engagement.

FREDERICA

Engagement?

HEAD MISTRESS

Now don't be coy. It seems you made a conquest during your recent trip to London.

FREDERICA

There must be some mistake. I don't know what you mean.

HEAD MISTRESS

You don't know Sir James Martin?

FREDERICA

I know Sir James as a friend of my mother's.

HEAD MISTRESS

Your mother tells me that he is prepared to make you an offer.

FREDERICA

I don't understand. I scarcely know him, and I certainly don't love him.

HEAD MISTRESS

You must know that he is the recent inheritor of a considerable fortune.

FREDERICA

That is nothing to me.

HEAD MISTRESS

Then you are sillier and more backward than I supposed. Don't you know that this is what every young girl dreams about, Frederica? To be settled in life so early, to have every comfort that money can buy.

FREDERICA

This must be my mother's doing. I have had no part in it. You must help me, please. Write to her. Tell her that I cannot do this. Tell her how unhappy this makes me.

HEAD MISTRESS

I will do no such thing. In fact I will write to her that you rejoice in her news. For that is the way you must feel when you have had time to reflect about what is good for you.

Frederica gets up, thoroughly frightened.

FREDERICA

No, please. Don't. I couldn't bear it. I'd sooner starve.

HEAD MISTRESS

You've been reading too many sentimental novels, my dear. Starving is vastly less pleasant in the real world.

FREDERICA

I will run away to my aunt and uncle. They will protect me.

HEAD MISTRESS

You will go nowhere but to your room. Immediately. I won't hear any more of such foolishness. Go now.

Frederica leaves.

INT. LIBRARY, LANGFORD HOUSE, LONDON - DAY

Manwaring is sitting coolly in his library surrounded by an angry wife (Henrietta) and sister, MARIA MANWARING. We get the feeling he has been in this position before.

MANWARING

Aren't you being overly dramatic about this, my dear? After all, she's your closest friend.

MARIA MANWARING

(Angrily interjecting before Mrs. Manwaring can reply) She's not my friend! As soon as she appeared, Sir James wouldn't even look at me!

MANWARING

One grievance at a time, sister, please.

MRS. MANWARING

Yes, I was stupid enough to invite her into our house, but I'm not going to sit and watch while she runs away with my husband.

MARIA MANWARING

And the man I intend to marry.

MANWARING

I don't know which of you is being more absurd. How can you believe that a woman still mourning her dead husband can be stealing away two men at the same time?

MRS. MANWARING

I saw what I saw. She was flirting outrageously with you and Sir James Martin last night. And both of you were giving her every encouragement!

MARIA MANWARING

Sir James didn't even notice my new dress!

MANWARING

(To his wife) You are exposing your country upbringing, my dear. But you, Maria, (addressing his sister) you should know better.

MRS. MANWARING

What do you mean?

MANWARING

Flirtation is as necessary to a party as champagne and hors d'oeuvres. It is part of the festivities. But it is hardly to be taken seriously.

MRS. MANWARING

I won't be talked out of what I saw. This has been going on for weeks. You know it has. She must leave.

MARIA MANWARING

And the sooner the better.

MANWARING

(Trying to appear nonchalant). Well this is all rather sudden, isn't it? Perhaps she should stay a few more days while we think of some suitable excuse—an illness in the family, a long-postponed trip?

MRS. MANWARING

(Angrily) So that you can continue your liaison? Absolutely not! I intend to confront her this minute and insist that she leave the house immediately.

MARIA MANWARING

(Angrily) And I shall. I shall...

She can't think of anything dreadful enough.

MANWARING

Hurl fire and brimstone upon her from the terrace?

Just then there is a knock at the door and Lady Susan enters. She is dressed for travel, and her bags can just be seen outside the door. Even in a travel dress, she is absolutely stunning.

ALL TOGETHER

Lady Susan!

LADY SUSAN

I know this is dreadfully sudden. I had so hoped to enjoy your company for a few weeks longer. But I find I must leave for the country. And I must depart without delay.

They are dumbfounded.

EXT. LONDON STREET OUTSIDE THE MANWARING HOUSE - DAY

A FOOTMAN hands Lady Susan into a waiting carriage.

Lady Susan looks up at the house and sees Manwaring looking down from an upstairs window, holding a note and smiling. At another window, Maria Manwaring and Mrs. Manwaring glare at her in triumph. Lady Susan smiles to herself as the carriage pulls away.

INT. A CARRIAGE DRIVING THROUGH LONDON - DAY

LADY SUSAN

(To the audience) I know it is vain of me. But it is always a pleasure to be one step ahead in the game. Did you see their expressions in the library? It really required all my self composure to keep from laughing.

Lady Susan looks out as the carriage clatters through the fashionable streets of London. We see the dandies, the shopkeepers, the musicians, the vendors.

LADY SUSAN

(Thoughtfully) Still, I regret having to leave all this. Look at

it! Johnson was quite right. The man or woman who is tired of London is tired of life!

She leans back in the carriage and sighs.

LADY SUSAN

I shall miss my dear Manwaring, of course. What a charming man! Such perfect manners. Too bad he had to throw himself away on such a wife! No style, no grace, no refinement of look or manner. And if she persists in this mad jealousy of hers, she will surely lose what little beauty she has.