

Northanger Abbey – Summary

Volume One

Chapter I

Catherine Morland hardly seems born to be a heroine. Her parents are very ordinary people, comfortably situated but not wealthy; her father is a good-tempered clergyman, her mother a healthy sensible woman whose time is devoted to bearing and rearing children. In childhood Catherine had been a plain little girl who liked playing and was sometimes mischievous. She had no special abilities or interests. She was high-spirited, kind-hearted and ordinary.

As she grew up, people began to take some notice of her. She looked forward to dances and parties; she took more care of her appearance. She continued to prefer outdoor activities to books but from “fifteen to seventeen she was training for a heroine.” Like the girls in the story-books, she too might begin to have adventures. Perhaps a hero was waiting. By happy chance, Mr Allen, the local landowner, is ordered to go to Bath for the sake of his health; his wife invites Catherine to go with them, and her parents allow her to go.

Chapter II

When Catherine Morland leaves home for “all the difficulties and dangers of a six weeks’ residence in Bath”, she parts from her parents with little fuss and no excessive show of feeling. After an uneventful journey she is soon settled in lodgings with the Allens. Mrs Allen, her chaperon, is a well-mannered, quiet, rather silly woman, whose only interest is in clothes. She likes to be admired and she knows how to dress. Catherine does her best to copy her and prepares for her first ball.

Making their way through the crowded ballroom, they try to find a seat. Knowing no one in Bath, they feel uncomfortable and awkward. When they go for tea, they have no one to speak to. If only Mrs Allen had known someone, Catherine might have found a young man to dance with. By the end of the evening they are bored and disappointed. Catherine has to be content with some compliments about her looks which she overhears; it is just enough to make her feel pleased with herself.

Chapter III

The routine of a visit to Bath is quickly established. In the Lower Rooms the master of ceremonies introduces Catherine to a pleasant young man called Henry Tilney. He makes fun of the manners and style of conversation of conventional visitors to Bath. He teases Catherine about what she might write in her diary. He even tries to share Mrs Allen’s interest in clothes. When the dance is over, Catherine knows that she has enjoyed his company and Mr Allen has taken care to find out that Mr Tilney is a respectable young man of good family.

Chapter IV

When Catherine goes on to the Pump Room next day in hope of seeing Mr Tilney, she is disappointed. Once again she is friendless. Luckily Mrs Allen meets Mrs Thorpe, an old school friend. She has three daughters with her and her son, it seems, has met Catherine’s brother, James, at Oxford. The eldest daughter, Isabella, is older and more knowledgeable than Catherine and can instruct her about clothes, flirtations, and the finer points of Bath society. Isabella and Catherine become firm friends.

Chapter V

Catherine looks in vain for Henry Tilney at the theatre. Next day after church he is nowhere to be seen in the parade in front of Crescent. Perhaps he has left Bath. Now that she had met the Thorpes Mrs Allen is happy. Catherine and Isabella become inseparable friends and share all their pleasures. They even read novels together, when it is too wet to go out.

Chapter VI

Though they have often been mentioned indirectly, it is in this chapter that 'Gothic novels' are first singled out for critical attack. They are the favourite reading of Isabella Thorpe who begins to appear a rather dangerous friend for Catherine. Trivial and vain, her talk is all of fashion, of flirtation and of physical attractions of young men she has met. All her feelings are excessive, and her expressions of them generally exaggerated. Her taste of novels was for "the horrid" and she is able to supply Catherine with a list of the latest productions. At the same time she speaks slightly of a novel devoted to displaying the virtues of the perfectly good man. Finally she tries to attract the attention of two young men by pretending to ignore them and when they fail to show the interest she expects, she offers a plausible excuse for hurrying after them.

Chapter VII

The pursuit of the two young men is interrupted by the unexpected arrival of the brothers of Isabella and Catherine in a carriage recklessly driven by John Thorpe. He boasts of his driving skill and offers to take her out in his gig. John Thorpe's hearty manner to his mother and sisters seems rather boorish to Catherine and he shows little interest in her taste in reading. But he is her brother's friend and she is prepared to be polite. John Thorpe, however, appears to admire her just as James admires Isabella. They arrange to meet at the Upper Rooms later.

Chapter VIII

The two families meet in the Upper Rooms. The young people were to dance, but John Thorpe goes to the card-room and Catherine is left with the older ladies, while James and Isabella join in the dance. A few minutes later Mr Tilney appears with a young woman Catherine guesses to be his sister and with a lady who knows Mrs Thorpe. Introductions are made. Mr Tilney asks Catherine to dance but she is promised to John Thorpe who returns at that moment to claim her for the dance. Miss Tilney is Catherine's neighbour in the set so they can talk to one another. Miss Tilney seems sensible and well-bred; Catherine would be glad to be her friend. Although Catherine hopes that Henry Tilney will ask her to dance, he has found another partner and she spends the rest of the evening on her own.

Chapter IX

Catherine returns home disappointed but not in despair. She hopes to meet Miss Tilney again in the Pump Room, where every newcomer to Bath was to be found. Next day she reads quietly waiting for a suitable time to go there. But John, James and Isabella arrive to take her driving. Catherine goes, though she doubts John's skill as a driver. John Thorpe seems self-conceited and opinionated. He seems to think that Catherine will inherit money from Mr Allen. On their return Catherine finds that Mrs Allen had met the Tilneys that morning, though she has nothing new to say about them. Catherine regrets wasting time with John Thorpe; she is convinced she does not like him.

Chapter X

In the evening the Allens, Thorpes and Morlands meet at the theatre but the Tilneys are not there. Next day Catherine and Miss Tilney meet at the Pump Room and arrange to meet at the ball. Catherine goes, scarcely daring to hope that Mr Tilney will ask her to dance. Of course he does, and, though he teases her, the naïve enthusiasm of her replies shows the warmth of her heart and the soundness of her judgement. General Tilney, Henry's father, takes notice of her and before the evening ends Miss Tilney invites Catherine to join them for a walk the next day.

Chapter XI

Next day the rain makes Catherine wonder if her friend will call; perhaps it is too muddy for a walk. Again Isabella, James and John arrive to invite her for a drive. Catherine protests that she has promised to join the Tilneys but John says that Henry Tilney has gone off with another girl. Innocently, she accepts his story and is attracted by the possibility of visiting an ancient castle (Blaize Castle). As they leave for the drive they pass the Tilneys in the street but John Thorpe refuses to stop. Eventually the castle is too far for them to reach and Catherine returns to find that Miss Tilney and her brother have indeed called for her. A dull game of cards brings the evening to an end.

Chapter XII

Next day when Catherine calls on the Tilneys to apologise and explain, the servant tells her that they are out. But Catherine notices Miss Tilney leaving the house with her father and walking off in the opposite direction. Perhaps she is being paid back for her own rudeness of the previous day. At the theatre that evening Catherine sees Mr Tilney and his father. Henry bows rather gravely but comes round to see her at the end of the play. She tries to explain why she went out riding with John Thorpe. Henry explains that she had been turned away from the door that morning on his father's order. Catherine wonders if General Tilney can dislike her. Henry reassures her and John Thorpe tells her later that the General in fact admires Catherine. John has also made clear his own admiration for Catherine.

Chapter XIII

Isabella, James and John decide to make another attempt to drive to Bristol the following morning. But they forget to consult Catherine, who has promised to meet Miss Tilney for the walk which had been postponed. They laugh at her determination to keep her promise: John Thorpe goes to tell Miss Tilney that Catherine has remembered another engagement. Angry and upset, Catherine runs to the Tilneys' house to explain that John Thorpe had acted without her knowledge. On her return home she is glad to find that Mr Allan thinks her right to keep her promise to the Tilneys even if she has to disappoint her brother and his friends. She finds indeed that he does not approve of her driving out with John Thorpe.

Chapter XIV

Catherine is able to take her walk with the Tilneys without further interference from her friends. As they walk towards one of the beauty spots of Bath, they talk about the books they have read. Henry Tilney enjoys novels as much as Catherine. He teases her about her interests, and about the way she uses words. They talk of the beauties of the countryside and the pleasures it gives. Though he is sometimes puzzling, Catherine is convinced of his kindness and good sense. Miss Tilney invites Catherine to dinner and she is happy to accept.

Chapter XV

Next day Catherine learns that Isabella has become engaged to James during their drive to Clifton. Isabella is naturally delighted. James returns home to tell his parents and writes next day to tell her they approve. John Thorpe hints that he might propose to Catherine.

Volume Two

Chapter I

Catherine's dinner engagement with the Tilneys is less successful than she has hoped. Her hosts are less friendly than she expects. Isabella says they are too proud but Catherine is unconvinced. But next day at the ball they seem as friendly as ever. Captain Frederick Tilney, the elder son, is there; he notices Isabella and she agrees to dance with him, though she has said she will not dance while James is away. Next day James writes again: his father is to give him a living, which will allow him to marry in two or three years. Although she has said that all she wants is to be happy with James, Isabella is not satisfied that Mr Morland has been generous. Soon after James returns to Bath.

Chapter II

The Allens decide to remain in Bath for another fortnight but general Tilney announces that his family will stay another week. Catherine's disappointment turns to pleasure when she is invited to Northanger Abbey, the Tilney's home. Her parents consent and Catherine is happy that her feelings of affection for Henry and Eleanor Tilney are being returned. At last she will be able to visit an ancient building which has all the associations of the Gothic fiction she enjoys.

Chapter III

When they next meet in the Pump Room, Isabella tells Catherine that John Thorpe is in love with her. He had almost proposed to Catherine and feels sure that she has encouraged him. Catherine is completely unaware of this, though Isabella cannot believe that she does not want to marry John. When they are joined by Frederick Tilney, Catherine thinks that he is far too interested in Isabella and that she wrongly encourages him. Annoyed at their flirting, she goes home with Mrs Allen. She wonders if Isabella realises the unhappiness she may be bringing to James and to Frederick Tilney.

Chapter IV

Catherine begins to feel that Isabella has changed. She shows Captain Tilney as much favour as James Morland and James is suffering. Catherine cannot believe that Frederick knows of Isabella's engagement. Catherine suggests that Henry should persuade Frederick to leave but he tells her it is a matter of those concerned. She should not be uneasy. If James and Isabella really trust one another, no harm will be done. She persuades herself that Henry knows best and, on the night before she leaves Bath, all seems well between the lovers.

Chapter V

It is time to leave Bath. Catherine still feels uncertain about General Tilney and the Tilneys seem subdued in his presence. Halfway to Northanger Abbey the General invites Catherine to share Henry's carriage and she is pleased to be beside him. He teases her about her romantic expectations of the Abbey. Will she be able to bear all the frightening experiences she might find there, if Northanger resembles the ancient abbeys of romance? Catherine listens to his stories, not quite sure whether to believe him. When she reaches the abbey, it surprises her by being modern, well-lit and comfortable. The General apologises for shortcomings of which only he is aware.

Chapter VI

Catherine finds that her room does not resemble the gloomy apartment described in the novels she has read. But there is an old chest there which arouses her curiosity. She is caught in the act of opening it by Eleanor Tilney and they find they have annoyed the General by being late for dinner.

The evening is stormy and Catherine feels frightened. Her eye is caught by an old cabinet and she explores it. Just as she is about to read the bundle of papers she finds there, her candle goes out. Thoroughly frightened, she scrambles into bed and listens to the vague and frightening noises she thinks she hears outside the door.

Chapter VII

Next day Catherine wakes up to a bright morning. She finds that the papers of the night before are laundry bills. At breakfast Henry's teasing conversation has serious overtones. He talks about the importance of habits of affection. Henry leaves to visit his parsonage, which is some distance away. The General offers to show Catherine the garden. Obediently she admires it and he is happy to find that Northanger is much grander than Mr Allen's place, but he does not join the girls when Eleanor leads the way along a path that was her dead mother's favourite walk. The sadness with which Eleanor speaks of her mother leads Catherine to suspect some family mystery. Has the General been cruel to his wife? Is there some part of the house he does not wish her to see?

Chapter VIII

Catherine decides that the General must be a guilty man. Despite his kindness towards her and his willingness to show her the beautiful rooms and complex domestic arrangement of his splendid house, so different from the castles of fiction, the General seems to feel constraint when reminded of his wife. She can only see his dead wife's bedroom when the General is absent. Catherine even wonders if Mrs Tilney is still alive, shut up in one of the few remaining rooms of the ancient Abbey. She thinks that if she keeps watch after all have gone to bed, she may surprise the General making a midnight visit to his prisoner. But by midnight, she has fallen asleep.

Chapter IX

Next morning at church a sight of the memorial to Mrs Tilney leads Catherine to speculate about her fate. On Monday morning Eleanor is just about to show Catherine her mother's room when the General calls his daughter away—some guests have arrived unexpectedly. Catherine goes there alone, to find nothing but a bright modern bedroom. There she is surprised by Henry's unexpected return from his parsonage. Confused, she gives him some ideas of her suspicions. But Mrs Tilney had died of natural causes, attended by her family. His father had loved her as much as he could love anyone. Surely Catherine cannot believe in the horrors produced by her imagination. Thoroughly ashamed of herself, Catherine runs to her room.

Chapter X

Catherine feels humiliated by her misjudgements. Henry must despise her. But in fact Henry is polite and she feels comforted. Catherine realises that her errors have been her own fault. Gothic romances cannot tell her about civilised England; people are neither angels nor monsters but a mixture of good and bad. Even her own behaviour may be forgiven, if she amends it.

She begins to long for news of Isabella. After some delay a letter from James Morland announces that Isabella has given him up for Frederick Tilney. Henry and Eleanor refuse to believe that Frederick will marry a girl with no money and position. Catherine is disappointed in Isabella but does not feel too sad at losing her.

Chapter XI

Catherine wonders if she will be thought suitable for Henry, since Isabella is not thought suitable for Frederick, but she thinks the General likes her and he has said that the possession of money does not matter. On a visit to Henry's parsonage at Woodston, the General hints that all it needs is a mistress. He enjoys the elaborate dinner that Henry has prepared and Catherine feels sure that he approves of her.

Chapter XII

The next day a letter arrives from Isabella to say that Frederick has left Bath, that she still loves James and that she hopes for Catherine's support. Catherine is ashamed of the lack of feeling that Isabella's letter shows. She decides she will not see Isabella again.

Chapter XIII

General Tilney leaves Northanger for London and the young people feel happier without him. Catherine feels her visit should come to an end, but she is persuaded to stay on. She begins to believe that Henry loves her. One week-end, when Henry is away, General Tilney returns unexpectedly and Eleanor tells Catherine she must leave the next day. It appears that the family are to make a visit elsewhere. Eleanor and Catherine are both disappointed and upset. Catherine wonders if she has upset the General. After a sleepless night, she prepares to leave, promising to write to Eleanor. She leaves the Abbey in tears with scarcely a mention of Henry.

Chapter XIV

Catherine is driven away past Woodston, where a short time ago she was so happy. Why has the General turned against her? Has he discovered that she suspected he had murdered his wife? What would Henry and her family think of the way she has been treated? Absorbed by her thoughts, the journey passes quickly and soon she is home. Her parents are surprised at what has happened but Catherine is safe and may have learned something by her experience. They know nothing of her feelings for Henry. Mrs Morland tries to comfort Catherine but her heart is with Henry Tilney at Northanger.

Chapter XV

Catherine's feelings of restlessness and depression are relieved by the arrival of Henry Tilney. He has come to assure himself of Catherine's safe return and to apologise to her family. They go to call on Mrs Allen and Henry asks Catherine to marry him. It appears that John Thorpe had told the General that Catherine was an heiress and in this belief he had encouraged Henry's interest in her. When later John Thorpe spoke slightly of the Morlands, the General had decided to send Catherine away. As a result Henry had quarrelled with his father. He has no intention of abandoning Catherine.

Chapter XVI

Catherine's parents are surprised to hear of Henry's proposal but they do not object. They cannot consent to the marriage without General Tilney's approval. The young couple agree to separate until consent can be obtained. Luckily Eleanor soon afterwards marries a rich man, and General Tilney consents to the marriage of Henry and Catherine, which takes place a year after their first meeting. Perhaps the General's displeasure has had the useful effect of helping them to get to know one another a little better in the interval.

Milligan, Ian. *Jane Austen, Northanger Abbey: York Notes*. Harlow: Longman York Press, 1997.