Mansfield Park

Adapted by Tim Luscombe from Jane Austen's novel.

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tim@timluscombe.com
+44 (0) 777 978 9198

Act One

The drawing room of Sir Thomas Bertram’s house in Mansfield Park,
Northamptonshire, an evening in 1803.

Mrs Norris: (With a letter) Oh, Sir Thomas! My poor sister writes that she’s to have another child.

Sir Thomas: (With a newspaper) Not another, Mrs Norris! Such a wealth of children –

Mrs Norris: And such a want of everything else.

Sir Thomas: Mr Price is disabled for active service, is he not?

Mrs Norris: Disabled for the marines, but not for company and good liquor. My sister Price is despondent. Perhaps their eldest boy could be useful to you in the concerns of your West Indian property? A fine spirited fellow who longs to be out in the world.

Sir Thomas: How old?

Mrs Norris: Eleven, and wishes to be a sailor.

Sir Thomas: We could help promote his education at Woolwich.

Mrs Norris: And what think you of relieving my poor sister entirely from the charge and expense of one child out of her great number? The trouble of it to us would be nothing compared with the benevolence of the action. If we were to undertake the care of the eldest daughter –?

Sir Thomas: A daughter? But a girl must be thoroughly provided for, Mrs Norris, or there’d be cruelty instead of kindness in taking her from her family.
And, in time, there'd be work to do to find a suitable attachment, or the expense will never end.

**Mrs Norris:** Give a girl an education, say I. Introduce her properly into the world, and, ten to one, she'll have the means of settling well without farther expense to anybody. I should be the last person in the world to withhold my mite upon such an occasion, and though I could never feel for her the hundredth part of the regard I bear your own dear children, I'd rather deny myself the necessaries of life than do an ungenerous thing.

**Sir Thomas:** Then the child might live with you in the Parsonage?

**Mrs Norris:** Oh no. It would be totally out of my power to take personal charge of her. Poor Reverend Norris's gouty legs could no more bear the noise of a child than he could fly.

**Sir Thomas:** My wife might find the addition of another child too much for her current frailty.

**Mrs Norris:** On the contrary. Lady Bertram would benefit mightily from having a young person to run errands for her and carry things about.

**Sir Thomas:** Then the girl had better come to us – here – to Mansfield Park. We'll endeavour to do our duty by her.

**Mrs Norris:** We'll probably see much to wish altered in her –

**Sir Thomas:** And we must prepare ourselves for gross ignorance and very distressing vulgarity of manner –

**Mrs Norris:** And I dare say she'll not be so handsome as her cousins –

**Sir Thomas:** But these are not incurable faults.

**Mrs Norris:** Exactly. Being with her cousins will be an education for the child.

**Sir Thomas:** There'll be some difficulty however. I should wish to see the girl be very good friends with my daughter, and would on no account authorise in Maria the smallest degree of arrogance towards her relation, but still they cannot be equals. It is a point of great delicacy.

**Mrs Norris:** I am at your service, Sir Thomas. (Getting into a coach) Between us it will be comprehensively managed.

*Mrs Norris and Fanny, aged 10, in a coach.*

*Fanny is weary from the long journey.*

…for your aunt Bertram, you understand, Fanny, had the good luck to captivate a baronet, Sir Thomas. Whereas your mother, it seemed to me,
married to disoblige her family. But the truth is that the world is against the female sex. There aren't so many men of large fortune as there are pretty women who deserve them. Still, I've had my luck. The reverend Norris, being a friend of Sir Thomas, secured an income in the living of Mansfield – a parsonage and salary to go with it – and a thousand a year is not contemptible.

**Fanny:** *(Awe-struck)* A thousand…?!

**Mrs Norris:** Your home in Portsmouth and Sir Thomas's world are so distant that your wonderful good fortune can hardly be overestimated. I hope you're attentive, Fanny.

*Fanny is finding it hard to keep her eyes open.*

For you will be a brute indeed if you're not always happy and sensible of it. I'm sure, when you meet your cousins, you'll speak your gratitude well. Tom and Edmund are almost men, and Maria will be a great friend to you. She's thirteen and exceedingly pretty. You're not so captivating, it's true, but there's nothing about you to positively disgust your relations…

*Fanny is asleep.*

*Back at Mansfield.*

**Maria:** She's exceedingly timid, aunt Norris –

**Tom:** She's so shy she makes me laugh –

**Maria:** And she's but two sashes. I hold her very cheap. And she's never learned French.

**Tom:** Mama says you must give her some of your toys. Maria.

**Maria:** I'll give her some old ones.

**Mrs Norris:** Where is your Mama?

**Maria:** Upstairs, lying down with a slight headache. And isn't it odd that Fanny's never heard of Asia Minor? We asked her how she'd go to Ireland and she said she'd cross to the Isle of Wight! I cannot but consider her stupid.

**Mrs Norris:** Well, it's very unlucky, but some people are stupid, Maria. However, you must make allowance and pity her deficiency. And remember that, if you're ever so forward and clever yourself, there's a great deal more for you to learn.

**Maria:** Yes, I know there is – till I'm seventeen.
**Mrs Norris:** And, though, owing to me, your papa and mama are so good as to bring Fanny up with you, it’s not at all necessary that she should be as accomplished as you. On the contrary, it’s much more desirable that there should be a difference.

*Fanny is crying on the attic stairs.*

**Edmund:** My dear little cousin, what can be the matter? Are you ill?

*Fanny can't answer.*

Is anyone angry with you?

*Fanny shakes her head and sniffs.*

Have you quarrelled with Maria?

*Fanny shakes her head.*

Perhaps you’re puzzled about something in your lesson that I can explain?

*Fanny shakes her head.*

You can talk to me, cousin. *(No response)*. Do you want anything I can possibly get you, or do for you?

*Fanny shakes her head.*

Do you like your new home?

**Fanny:** It’s…very…big.

**Edmund:** You miss you own home I suppose?

*Having done well to stifle her sobs, this question produces a fresh bout.*

You’re sorry to leave your Mama.

**Fanny:** And William, and all my brothers and sisters.

**Edmund:** But you must remember you’re with relations who all love you –

**Fanny:** William, my older brother, didn’t like I should come away, and he told me he should miss me very much indeed.

**Edmund:** But he’ll write to you, I dare say.

**Fanny:** He promised he would, but he told me to write first.

**Edmund:** And when shall you do it?
Fanny: (About to cry again) I can't, cousin Edmund. I have no paper.

Edmund: Well, if that be all your difficulty, I'll furnish you. Would it make you happy to write to him now?

Fanny smiles through her tears.

Then come with me.

Fanny: (Frightened) My uncle won't mind or think me forward?

Edmund: Fanny, this is your home now. I've got half a guinea for William. We can send it under seal to him. He's going to be a sailor, is he not?

Fanny: Yes. He's very brave.

Edmund: I'm going to be a clergyman. What books do you like?

Fanny: I only have one.

Edmund: Don't you like reading?

Fanny: I love it.

Edmund: Then I'll make a recommendation. And when you've read it, you can tell me what you think and we can discuss it. Come on.

At which point, Fanny falls in love with Edmund.

To read the entire play, please contact Tim directly on tim@timluscombe.com +44 (0) 777 978 9198

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