Sense and sensibility



Jane Austen



MRS. Dashwood and her daughters Elinor, Marianne, and Margaret, are impoverished after the death of her husband. His estate, Norland, must pass to John Dashwood, his son from his first marriage. Although John promised his father that he would take care of his stepmother and sisters, his selfish wife Fanny easily dissuades him from giving them their fair share of the inheritance. The Dashwood women are treated as unwelcome guests in their former home, and soon begin looking for another place to live.

In the meantime, Elinor becomes attached to Fanny's visiting brother Edward Ferrars. Edward is a quiet, unassuming young man with a gentle nature. He has no desire to live up to his mother and sister's desire to see him a famous politician or "fine figure in the world". Although he is not handsome or charming, Elinor soon comes to admire Edward's intelligence and good sense. However, Edward's fortune is dependent on the will of his mother. Elinor knows that Mrs. Ferrars wants her son to marry a woman of high rank, and does not allow herself to hope for marriage.

Mrs. Dashwood and her daughters soon move from Norland to Barton Cottage. Their landlord is Sir John Middleton, a distant cousin who generously offers them a low rent. He lives at Barton Park with his coldly elegant wife and their children. Also staying at Barton Park are Lady Middleton's mother, Mrs. Jennings, and Colonel Brandon, an old friend of Sir John. Mrs. Jennings, a jovial old woman who loves to joke and gossip, soon decides that Colonel Brandon must be in love with Marianne. She teases them both about the matter, much to Marianne's confusion. Marianne considers Colonel Brandon, age thirty-five, to be an infirm old bachelor incapable of falling in love or inspiring love in anyone else.

The two become increasingly intimate, and Elinor and Mrs. Dashwood begin to suspect that the couple have secretly become engaged. However, Mrs. Dashwood's sentimental nature prevents her from following Elinor's advice and simply asking Marianne about her relationship with Willoughby. Marianne is devastated when Willoughby unexpectedly announces that he must go to London on business, not to return for at least a year.

Elinor and Marianne spend the winter at Mrs. Jennings' home in London. Marianne writes to Willoughby, but her letters are unanswered. They meet Willoughby at a party, where he treats them in a coldly formal manner. He later sends Marianne a letter informing her that he is engaged to a Miss Grey, a very wealthy woman of inferior birth. Marianne admits to Elinor that she and Willoughby were never engaged, but that she loved him and that he led her to believe that he truly loved her.

Later, Mrs. Jennings tells Elinor that Mrs. Ferrars has discovered Edward and Lucy's engagement. Edward refuses to end the engagement and his mother disinherits him. Elinor and Marianne feel sorry for Edward, and think him honourable for remaining engaged to a woman he will probably not be happy with. Anne Steele tells Elinor that Lucy still intends to marry Edward.

Marianne becomes very ill after a walk in the rain during which she was overcome with misery because of Willoughby, and Colonel Brandon goes to get Mrs. Dashwood. Willoughby arrives and tells Elinor that he was left with large debts when his benefactress discovered his actions towards Miss Williams and disinherited him.

Marianne recovers and the Dashwoods return to Barton Cottage. Elinor tells Marianne about Willoughby's visit. However, Marianne states that though she loved him, she couldn't have been happy with the libertine father of an illegitimate child even if he had stood by her. Marianne also states that she realises that her illness was brought on by her wallowing in her grief, by her excesive sensibility, and that, had she died, it would have been morally equivalent to suicide. With particular reference to Elinor's bravery and sense, she now resolves to become a reformed character.

Mr Willoughby's patroness does eventually give him her money, stating that his marriage to a woman of good character redeemed him. Willoughby realizes that marrying Marianne would have produced the same effect. He must live with the knowledge that had he behaved honourably he could have had both love and money.

Over the next two years, Mrs. Dashwood, Marianne and Margaret spend most of their time at Delaford. Marianne matures and decides to marry the Colonel even though she feels more respect than passion for him. However, after the marriage she realizes that she does truly love him. She and the Colonel set up house near Elinor and Edward, so the sisters and their husbands can visit each other often.

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