SENSE AND SENSIBILITY

by Jane Austen

1811

CHAPTER 1

The family of Dashwood had long been settled in Sussex. Their estate

was large, and their residence was at Norland Park, in the centre of

their property, where, for many generations, they had lived in so

respectable a manner as to engage the general good opinion of their

surrounding acquaintance. The late owner of this estate was a single

man, who lived to a very advanced age, and who for many years of his

life, had a constant companion and housekeeper in his sister. But her

death, which happened ten years before his own, produced a great

alteration in his home; for to supply her loss, he invited and received

into his house the family of his nephew Mr. Henry Dashwood, the legal

inheritor of the Norland estate, and the person to whom he intended to

bequeath it. In the society of his nephew and niece, and their

children, the old Gentleman's days were comfortably spent. His

attachment to them all increased. The constant attention of Mr. and

Mrs. Henry Dashwood to his wishes, which proceeded not merely from

interest, but from goodness of heart, gave him every degree of solid

comfort which his age could receive; and the cheerfulness of the

children added a relish to his existence.

By a former marriage, Mr. Henry Dashwood had one son: by his present

lady, three daughters. The son, a steady respectable young man, was

amply provided for by the fortune of his mother, which had been large,

and half of which devolved on him on his coming of age. By his own

marriage, likewise, which happened soon afterwards, he added to his

wealth. To him therefore the succession to the Norland estate was not

so really important as to his sisters; for their fortune, independent

of what might arise to them from their father's inheriting that

property, could be but small. Their mother had nothing, and their

father only seven thousand pounds in his own disposal; for the

remaining moiety of his first wife's fortune was also secured to her

child, and he had only a life-interest in it.

The old gentleman died: his will was read, and like almost every other

will, gave as much disappointment as pleasure. He was neither so

unjust, nor so ungrateful, as to leave his estate from his nephew; - but

he left it to him on such terms as destroyed half the value of the

bequest. Mr. Dashwood had wished for it more for the sake of his wife

and daughters than for himself or his son; - but to his son, and his

son's son, a child of four years old, it was secured, in such a way, as

to leave to himself no power of providing for those who were most dear

to him, and who most needed a provision by any charge on the estate, or

by any sale of its valuable woods. The whole was tied up for the

benefit of this child, who, in occasional visits with his father and

mother at Norland, had so far gained on the affections of his uncle, by

such attractions as are by no means unusual in children of two or three

years old; an imperfect articulation, an earnest desire of having his

own way, many cunning tricks, and a great deal of noise, as to outweigh

all the value of all the attention which, for years, he had received

from his niece and her daughters. He meant not to be unkind, however,

and, as a mark of his affection for the three girls, he left them a

thousand pounds a-piece.

Mr. Dashwood's disappointment was, at first, severe; but his temper was

cheerful and sanguine; and he might reasonably hope to live many years,

and by living economically, lay by a considerable sum from the produce

of an estate already large, and capable of almost immediate

improvement. But the fortune, which had been so tardy in coming, was

his only one twelvemonth. He survived his uncle no longer; and ten

thousand pounds, including the late legacies, was all that remained for

his widow and daughters.

His son was sent for as soon as his danger was known, and to him Mr.

Dashwood recommended, with all the strength and urgency which illness

could command, the interest of his mother-in-law and sisters.

Mr. John Dashwood had not the strong feelings of the rest of the

family; but he was affected by a recommendation of such a nature at

such a time, and he promised to do every thing in his power to make

them comfortable. His father was rendered easy by such an assurance,

and Mr. John Dashwood had then leisure to consider how much there might

prudently be in his power to do for them.

He was not an ill-disposed young man, unless to be rather cold hearted

and rather selfish is to be ill-disposed: but he was, in general, well

respected; for he conducted himself with propriety in the discharge of

his ordinary duties. Had he married a more amiable woman, he might

have been made still more respectable than he was: - he might even have

been made amiable himself; for he was very young when he married, and

very fond of his wife. But Mrs. John Dashwood was a strong caricature

of himself; - more narrow-minded and selfish.

When he gave his promise to his father, he meditated within himself to

increase the fortunes of his sisters by the present of a thousand

pounds a-piece. He then really thought himself equal to it. The

prospect of four thousand a-year, in addition to his present income,

besides the remaining half of his own mother's fortune, warmed his

heart, and made him feel capable of generosity. - "Yes, he would give

them three thousand pounds: it would be liberal and handsome! It would

be enough to make them completely easy. Three thousand pounds! he

could spare so considerable a sum with little inconvenience." - He

thought of it all day long, and for many days successively, and he did

not repent.

No sooner was his father's funeral over, than Mrs. John Dashwood,

without sending any notice of her intention to her mother-in-law,

arrived with her child and their attendants. No one could dispute her

right to come; the house was her husband's from the moment of his

father's decease; but the indelicacy of her conduct was so much the

greater, and to a woman in Mrs. Dashwood's situation, with only common

feelings, must have been highly unpleasing; - but in HER mind there was

a sense of honor so keen, a generosity so romantic, that any offence of

the kind, by whomsoever given or received, was to her a source of

immoveable disgust. Mrs. John Dashwood had never been a favourite with

any of her husband's family; but she had had no opportunity, till the

present, of shewing them with how little attention to the comfort of

other people she could act when occasion required it.

So acutely did Mrs. Dashwood feel this ungracious behaviour, and so

earnestly did she despise her daughter-in-law for it, that, on the

arrival of the latter, she would have quitted the house for ever, had

not the entreaty of her eldest girl induced her first to reflect on the

propriety of going, and her own tender love for all her three children

determined her afterwards to stay, and for their sakes avoid a breach

with their brother.

Elinor, this eldest daughter, whose advice was so effectual, possessed

a strength of understanding, and coolness of judgment, which qualified

her, though only nineteen, to be the counsellor of her mother, and

enabled her frequently to counteract, to the advantage of them all,

that eagerness of mind in Mrs. Dashwood which must generally have led

to imprudence. She had an excellent heart; - her disposition was

affectionate, and her feelings were strong; but she knew how to govern

them: it was a knowledge which her mother had yet to learn; and which

one of her sisters had resolved never to be taught.

Marianne's abilities were, in many respects, quite equal to Elinor's.

She was sensible and clever; but eager in everything: her sorrows, her

joys, could have no moderation. She was generous, amiable,

interesting: she was everything but prudent. The resemblance between

her and her mother was strikingly great.

Elinor saw, with concern, the excess of her sister's sensibility; but

by Mrs. Dashwood it was valued and cherished. They encouraged each

other now in the violence of their affliction. The agony of grief

which overpowered them at first, was voluntarily renewed, was sought

for, was created again and again. They gave themselves up wholly to

their sorrow, seeking increase of wretchedness in every reflection that

could afford it, and resolved against ever admitting consolation in

future. Elinor, too, was deeply afflicted; but still she could

struggle, she could exert herself. She could consult with her brother,

could receive her sister-in-law on her arrival, and treat her with

proper attention; and could strive to rouse her mother to similar

exertion, and encourage her to similar forbearance.

Margaret, the other sister, was a good-humored, well-disposed girl; but

as she had already imbibed a good deal of Marianne's romance, without

having much of her sense, she did not, at thirteen, bid fair to equal

her sisters at a more advanced period of life.

CHAPTER 2

Mrs. John Dashwood now installed herself mistress of Norland; and her

mother and sisters-in-law were degraded to the condition of visitors.

As such, however, they were treated by her with quiet civility; and by

her husband with as much kindness as he could feel towards anybody

beyond himself, his wife, and their child. He really pressed them,

with some earnestness, to consider Norland as their home; and, as no

plan appeared so eligible to Mrs. Dashwood as remaining there till she

could accommodate herself with a house in the neighbourhood, his

invitation was accepted.

A continuance in a place where everything reminded her of former

delight, was exactly what suited her mind. In seasons of cheerfulness,

no temper could be more cheerful than hers, or possess, in a greater

degree, that sanguine expectation of happiness which is happiness

itself. But in sorrow she must be equally carried away by her fancy,

and as far beyond consolation as in pleasure she was beyond alloy.

Mrs. John Dashwood did not at all approve of what her husband intended

to do for his sisters. To take three thousand pounds from the fortune

of their dear little boy would be impoverishing him to the most

dreadful degree. She begged him to think again on the subject. How

could he answer it to himself to rob his child, and his only child too,

of so large a sum? And what possible claim could the Miss Dashwoods,

who were related to him only by half blood, which she considered as no

relationship at all, have on his generosity to so large an amount. It

was very well known that no affection was ever supposed to exist

between the children of any man by different marriages; and why was he

to ruin himself, and their poor little Harry, by giving away all his

money to his half sisters?

"It was my father's last request to me," replied her husband, "that I

should assist his widow and daughters."

"He did not know what he was talking of, I dare say; ten to one but he

was light-headed at the time. Had he been in his right senses, he

could not have thought of such a thing as begging you to give away half

your fortune from your own child."

"He did not stipulate for any particular sum, my dear Fanny; he only

requested me, in general terms, to assist them, and make their

situation more comfortable than it was in his power to do. Perhaps it

would have been as well if he had left it wholly to myself. He could

hardly suppose I should neglect them. But as he required the promise,

I could not do less than give it; at least I thought so at the time.

The promise, therefore, was given, and must be performed. Something

must be done for them whenever they leave Norland and settle in a new

home."

"Well, then, LET something be done for them; but THAT something need

not be three thousand pounds. Consider," she added, "that when the

money is once parted with, it never can return. Your sisters will

marry, and it will be gone for ever. If, indeed, it could be restored

to our poor little boy - "

"Why, to be sure," said her husband, very gravely, "that would make

great difference. The time may come when Harry will regret that so

large a sum was parted with. If he should have a numerous family, for

instance, it would be a very convenient addition."

"To be sure it would."

"Perhaps, then, it would be better for all parties, if the sum were

diminished one half. - Five hundred pounds would be a prodigious

increase to their fortunes!"

"Oh! beyond anything great! What brother on earth would do half so

much for his sisters, even if REALLY his sisters! And as it is - only

half blood! - But you have such a generous spirit!"

"I would not wish to do any thing mean," he replied. "One had rather,

on such occasions, do too much than too little. No one, at least, can

think I have not done enough for them: even themselves, they can hardly

expect more."

"There is no knowing what THEY may expect," said the lady, "but we are

not to think of their expectations: the question is, what you can

afford to do."

"Certainly - and I think I may afford to give them five hundred pounds

a-piece. As it is, without any addition of mine, they will each have

about three thousand pounds on their mother's death - a very comfortable

fortune for any young woman."

"To be sure it is; and, indeed, it strikes me that they can want no

addition at all. They will have ten thousand pounds divided amongst

them. If they marry, they will be sure of doing well, and if they do

not, they may all live very comfortably together on the interest of ten

thousand pounds."

"That is very true, and, therefore, I do not know whether, upon the

whole, it would not be more advisable to do something for their mother

while she lives, rather than for them - something of the annuity kind I

mean. - My sisters would feel the good effects of it as well as herself.

A hundred a year would make them all perfectly comfortable."

His wife hesitated a little, however, in giving her consent to this

plan.

"To be sure," said she, "it is better than parting with fifteen hundred

pounds at once. But, then, if Mrs. Dashwood should live fifteen years

we shall be completely taken in."

"Fifteen years! my dear Fanny; her life cannot be worth half that

purchase."

"Certainly not; but if you observe, people always live for ever when

there is an annuity to be paid them; and she is very stout and healthy,

and hardly forty. An annuity is a very serious business; it comes over

and over every year, and there is no getting rid of it. You are not

aware of what you are doing. I have known a great deal of the trouble

of annuities; for my mother was clogged with the payment of three to

old superannuated servants by my father's will, and it is amazing how

disagreeable she found it. Twice every year these annuities were to be

paid; and then there was the trouble of getting it to them; and then

one of them was said to have died, and afterwards it turned out to be

no such thing. My mother was quite sick of it. Her income was not her

own, she said, with such perpetual claims on it; and it was the more

unkind in my father, because, otherwise, the money would have been

entirely at my mother's disposal, without any restriction whatever. It

has given me such an abhorrence of annuities, that I am sure I would

not pin myself down to the payment of one for all the world."

"It is certainly an unpleasant thing," replied Mr. Dashwood, "to have

those kind of yearly drains on one's income. One's fortune, as your

mother justly says, is NOT one's own. To be tied down to the regular

payment of such a sum, on every rent day, is by no means desirable: it

takes away one's independence."

"Undoubtedly; and after all you have no thanks for it. They think

themselves secure, you do no more than what is expected, and it raises

no gratitude at all. If I were you, whatever I did should be done at

my own discretion entirely. I would not bind myself to allow them any

thing yearly. It may be very inconvenient some years to spare a

hundred, or even fifty pounds from our own expenses."

"I believe you are right, my love; it will be better that there should

by no annuity in the case; whatever I may give them occasionally will

be of far greater assistance than a yearly allowance, because they

would only enlarge their style of living if they felt sure of a larger

income, and would not be sixpence the richer for it at the end of the

year. It will certainly be much the best way. A present of fifty

pounds, now and then, will prevent their ever being distressed for

money, and will, I think, be amply discharging my promise to my father."

"To be sure it will. Indeed, to say the truth, I am convinced within

myself that your father had no idea of your giving them any money at

all. The assistance he thought of, I dare say, was only such as might

be reasonably expected of you; for instance, such as looking out for a

comfortable small house for them, helping them to move their things,

and sending them presents of fish and game, and so forth, whenever they

are in season. I'll lay my life that he meant nothing farther; indeed,

it would be very strange and unreasonable if he did. Do but consider,

my dear Mr. Dashwood, how excessively comfortable your mother-in-law

and her daughters may live on the interest of seven thousand pounds,

besides the thousand pounds belonging to each of the girls, which

brings them in fifty pounds a year a-piece, and, of course, they will

pay their mother for their board out of it. Altogether, they will have

five hundred a-year amongst them, and what on earth can four women want

for more than that? - They will live so cheap! Their housekeeping will

be nothing at all. They will have no carriage, no horses, and hardly

any servants; they will keep no company, and can have no expenses of

any kind! Only conceive how comfortable they will be! Five hundred a

year! I am sure I cannot imagine how they will spend half of it; and as

to your giving them more, it is quite absurd to think of it. They will

be much more able to give YOU something."

"Upon my word," said Mr. Dashwood, "I believe you are perfectly right.

My father certainly could mean nothing more by his request to me than

what you say. I clearly understand it now, and I will strictly fulfil

my engagement by such acts of assistance and kindness to them as you

have described. When my mother removes into another house my services

shall be readily given to accommodate her as far as I can. Some little

present of furniture too may be acceptable then."