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you could have foreseen...*



EXPECTATIONS *of* HAPPINESS

*A Companion Volume to Jane Austen's
Sense and Sensibility*

A NOVEL BY
Rebecca Ann Collins





Expectations of Happiness

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Sense and Sensibility*

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Rebecca Ann Collins



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*Dedicated to those friends of our youth,
with whom we shared the
“sanguine expectations of happiness”
that filled our dreams.*

“...That sanguine expectation of happiness,
that is happiness itself...”

—*Sense and Sensibility*, Jane Austen, 1811

An Introduction...

Originally published in 1811, *Sense and Sensibility*, more so than any of Jane Austen's other novels, leaves open the option for a sequel.

In the final chapter of the book, while she tidies up the various strands of the story, Austen allows sufficient room for certain developments, which may be credibly used to continue the narrative without distorting the original concept of her characters.

Elinor Dashwood and Edward Ferrars, the author has assured us, have a union of hearts and minds that is the accepted foundation for a happy marriage. In contrast, the marriage of Marianne Dashwood and Colonel Brandon, encouraged by Mrs Dashwood, following upon the end of a most unhappy affair between Marianne and Mr John Willoughby, does not engender in readers the same feeling of sanguinity.

On first reading the novel many years ago, soon after I had read *Pride and Prejudice*, I was struck by this difference. Re-reading it more recently, after writing The Pemberley Chronicles series, I was further intrigued by the language of the author as she described the Brandons' marriage. Marianne, we are told, "instead of falling a sacrifice to an irresistible passion" as she had expected, "found herself at nineteen submitting to new attachments, entering on new duties, placed in a new home, a wife, the mistress of a family, and the patroness of a village." Colonel Brandon, who is twice her age, "was now as happy as all those who best loved him believed he deserved to be... consoled for every past affliction" by the regard and company of his wife, Marianne. Plausible, but not, one must admit, a particularly inspiring portrait of marital bliss.

The prospect is not improved when one realises (and here we have Miss Austen's word for it) that Willoughby still roams the countryside, unhappily wed, regretting his loss of Marianne and hating Colonel Brandon. There are even hints that his dishonourable conduct has been forgiven by those who were most injured by it—including Marianne.

And then, there is Margaret, the youngest Miss Dashwood, thirteen years old in the original novel, precocious, bright, and keen to learn—she deserved to be permitted to discover her own "expectations of happiness" in a freer environment than before. I took particular pleasure in giving Margaret that opportunity, by drawing the story of this family forward into the next dynamic decade of the nineteenth century.

Unlike *Pride and Prejudice*, in *Sense and Sensibility* we are not supported and surrounded by the weight of tradition and the social structures of a place like Pemberley providing the framework for the novel.

The story of the Dashwood sisters is, by contrast, that of a family of modest means, living quietly in the country, coping with the varying circumstances and challenges that life throws up. My interest was mainly in the way these characters

mature and play out their individual roles, as they seek to substantiate those simple expectations of happiness that we all cherish.

RAC / November 2010.

For the benefit of those readers who wish to be reminded of the characters and their relationships to one another, an aide-mémoire is provided in the appendix.

Prologue

Summer 1819

The dinner party at Barton Park was exactly as Sir John Middleton had ordered it should be. The table was laid with the best porcelain, silver, and crystal, and the guests were presented with several courses of excellent fish, flesh, and fowl, accompanied by the finest wines in Sir John's well-stocked cellar. Lady Middleton had reminded him that it was her mother, Mrs Jennings's, birthday on Saturday, and Sir John had decided to please both his wife and his mother-in-law with an appropriately jolly celebration. Being a keen sportsman, no doubt Sir John may have been familiar with the notion of killing two birds with one stone, but, being also a kindly sort of man, it is unlikely he would have made mention of it on this occasion.

Mrs Jennings, an elderly, fat, cheerful woman with a tendency to talk loud and long, had been delighted to have a party given for her birthday, at which both her daughters, Lady Middleton and Mrs Palmer, sat on either side of her at table. She was able to indulge her love of gossip and jokes, while her sons-in-law sat at the other end, where Sir John ate, drank, and talked and Mr Palmer listened, thus humouring each other. It was the sort of diversion Sir John enjoyed hugely, and it was the type of occasion that allowed him to indulge his preference for food, wine, and company without feeling any sense of guilt, for he had ensured that a good time would be had by his family and guests as well.

There were not as many guests on this occasion as he would have liked, because, as he explained to each arriving visitor, it was almost the end of summer and many of the young men and ladies were already engaged for dances, picnics, and the like and had not been available at short notice.

"But that must not mean that we will be any less merry," he declared, encouraging everyone to enjoy themselves, as food and drink appeared in such variety and quantities as would satisfy even the keenest connoisseur and the heartiest appetite.

Since they could all eat well, even if they were not all particularly good at clever conversation, there would be no complaints from the guests, thought Mrs Dashwood, who had been conveyed to the manor house from her cottage in a curricle sent by Sir John. He was her cousin, whose kindness in making Barton Cottage available to them some nine years ago had rescued her and her three daughters from the embarrassment of being evicted from Norland Park, their home in Sussex, on the death of her husband, Mr Henry Dashwood.

Her stepson, Mr John Dashwood, and his wife, Fanny, had arrived, eager to take possession of Norland as soon as the funeral was over, and were it not for the generosity of Sir John's offer of the cottage, they would have been in very dire straits indeed.

Once settled at Barton Cottage in the county of Devon, Mrs Dashwood and her three daughters, Elinor, Marianne, and Margaret, had found themselves drawn into the ample circle of the Middletons' hospitality. While it had meant that they would never want for company or entertainment, it had not always been agreeable and had occasionally brought complaints from Miss Marianne that they suffered from an excess of both.

Since then, of course, two of Mrs Dashwood's daughters had been married: Elinor to Mr Edward Ferrars, now parson of the living of Delaford in Dorsetshire, and Marianne was married to Colonel Brandon and presided over the mansion house at Delaford herself.

The youngest sister, Margaret, had continued to live with her mother until the age of sixteen, when she had insisted that her thirst for knowledge could no longer be assuaged by books alone and she felt compelled to seek a fuller education. With the recommendation of her brother-in-law, the Reverend Edward Ferrars, she had enrolled at a ladies' seminary outside of Oxford, where she studied with great dedication to improve her mind and her skills, in the hope of becoming a travel writer, thus felicitously combining her desire to travel with her literary aspirations.

Mrs Dashwood, who had been very close to her two elder daughters, travelled often to Delaford to see them, but seemed not to miss, quite as much, young Margaret, who maintained an irregular sort of correspondence with her mother and sisters, sufficient to provide the kind of news of her progress that her relatives demanded.

"Margaret writes that she is almost at the end of her course of study of English poetry and is writing an essay on the work of Mr Wordsworth," Mrs Dashwood replied rather proudly to an enquiry about her daughter from Mrs Jennings, whose knowledge of both English poetry in general and the work of Mr Wordsworth in particular was inadequate to permit her to say more than, "Is she indeed? My very word—did you hear that, Sir John?"

To which her son-in-law replied, "Hear what, madam?" and when Mrs Dashwood repeated her original information about Margaret, he merely grinned broadly and added, "Is she indeed? Excellent, excellent! I always said she was a smart young thing!" before returning to refill his glass. Mrs Jennings, whose enquiry had been directed at Miss Margaret's love life rather than her academic pursuits, also lost interest and turned away to chat with her daughter Charlotte Palmer, who had plenty of gossip from London to tell regarding the latest exploits of the Prince Regent and his courtiers.

And in such a manner was the party proceeding, until one young lady—the daughter of a near neighbour—was persuaded to take her place at the pianoforte, which she did with some enthusiasm, providing two or three jolly songs in quick succession for their entertainment. Sir John, who liked nothing better than a good "sing-along," set about gathering a small circle around the instrument, urging everyone to join in, intending by this means to increase the general merriment of the party to make up for its lack of numbers.

It was at this point in the proceedings that Lady Middleton, who had been standing by the coffee table at the far end of the room, fell suddenly to the floor. Her sister, Mrs Palmer, first gasped, then screamed loudly enough to stop the performers in midsong.

No one seemed to know what to do next. Mrs Palmer continued to scream, Mrs

Jennings looked stupefied, and Mrs Dashwood bent over the collapsed form of Lady Middleton, making soothing sounds and trying to rouse her with her fan.

“I do believe the room is too hot,” she cried and proceeded to wave her fan about, while Sir John seemed to be stunned into silence. Only the consistently imperturbable and reputedly droll Mr Palmer, who had not been persuaded to join the singers and had continued to smoke his pipe by the fire, appeared to understand the need for some action. Ordering the servants to go for the doctor, he gave instructions for Lady Middleton to be laid upon a couch and asked his wife, Charlotte, to loosen her sister’s clothing and fetch the smelling salts, while he ushered the rest of the company out of the drawing room, declaring that there was need for more air.

The doctor arrived and went directly to Lady Middleton’s side, where Mrs Palmer sat weeping and wringing her hands, while Mrs Dashwood continued to wield her fan assiduously but to little effect. The doctor was attentive and thorough but, alas, it was too late; the patient had suffered a severe seizure and it seemed her heart had failed.

Lady Middleton was pronounced dead.

Sometime later the doctor went away, leaving Sir John still stunned and bewildered, Mrs Jennings and Charlotte Palmer both distraught, trying to console one another, and Mrs Dashwood in a quandary, for once, not of her own making.

She felt she had to do what she could to help, yet knew not what to do; she couldn’t go back to Barton Cottage at that hour—it was long past midnight—and she wanted desperately to contact her daughters at Delaford, but had no means to do so. As the hours passed, feeling awkward, still dressed as she was in her evening gown, Mrs Dashwood went into the kitchen and found the staff in various stages of shock and grief, apparently unable to comprehend the death of their mistress. With some difficulty, a sobbing maid was persuaded to prepare a tea tray and take it in to the morning room, where Mr Palmer stood at the window, regarding the early dawn sky. Somewhat tentatively, Mrs Dashwood approached him and asked if it would be possible to have a message sent to her daughter Mrs Edward Ferrars at the Delaford parsonage in the neighbouring county of Dorset. Familiar with Mr Palmer’s reserved and often abrupt manner, she was quite taken aback when he acknowledged her, bowing politely, thanked her for ordering the tea, and then declared that of course it could be done and if she would write a note, he would have it conveyed to Delaford immediately.

“Of course you wish to inform your daughters, Mrs Dashwood; I will have it sent directly. Furthermore, should you wish to return to Barton Cottage at any time, my carriage is available to take you home. You have been awake all night, attending on Mrs Jennings and my wife; you must be very tired. I am sure you must wish to rest.”

Mrs Dashwood, pleasantly surprised by his consideration, expressed her gratitude and, assuring him she was in no hurry to leave, moved to sit at a side table and compose her message to Elinor. Giving few details, but conveying the shock and sorrow she felt, she wrote:

*Clearly, everyone has been shocked by Lady Middleton’s untimely death.
Poor Sir John—he seems stunned; he said not a word and has not left his*

room since. As for Mrs Jennings and Mrs Palmer, I cannot imagine how they will console one another, they are both utterly bereft. Only Mr Palmer seems able to cope and it's a good thing he is able, because there is no one else to handle the arrangements for the funeral. I confess I am as disabled as the rest, for I cannot take it in and do not know what I can do to assist my cousin at this time. I long for your advice, my dear daughters, and beg you to come to me as soon as possible.

Urging Elinor to convey the news to Marianne and Colonel Brandon as well, Mrs Dashwood begged her daughters to come at once to Barton Cottage, where they were all welcome to stay until the funeral.

It was almost late afternoon when Elinor and Edward Ferrars arrived at Barton Cottage. Mrs Dashwood was first surprised and then disappointed that Marianne was not with them and would not be attending the funeral.

“Marianne sends her condolences, Mama, but unfortunately, she is unwell and cannot travel; however, Colonel Brandon has been informed and promises to be here by nightfall. He insisted that we take the carriage; he will follow on horseback,” Elinor explained.

Her mother was not happy; Sir John had been exceedingly kind and generous to them all and had taken a particular interest in Marianne when she had fallen seriously ill following her disastrous love affair with John Willoughby. No one had been happier than Sir John when she had finally married his good friend Colonel Brandon.

“I had hoped Marianne would have understood that Sir John is all the family we have—the only relative we may turn to, since it is unlikely that the selfish attitude of John and Fanny Dashwood will ever change. We have every reason to be grateful to him and to show him some kindness and sympathy in his time of grief,” she complained.

While Elinor agreed with her mother on the matter of Sir John's generosity, she was uncertain about the depth of his grief; she had not noticed any signs of deep affection between the Middletons. His wife had spent most of her time spoiling her children and gossiping with her mother and sister, while her husband pursued his favourite pastimes with his friends. However, Elinor knew her mother's sensibility well and did not wish to provoke her, so said nothing of that, trying instead to console her with the news that Edward had dispatched an express to Margaret's address in Oxfordshire breaking the news, and it was possible she would arrive in time for the funeral.

Later that afternoon, Colonel Brandon arrived at the cottage and together with Edward went up to Barton Park to support his old friend Sir John and remained there for most of the evening. When Edward returned, he reported that Sir John's spirits had improved a little. “He seemed better able to cope with the arrangements that have to be made and was exceedingly gratified to have Colonel Brandon's company,” said Edward, adding that Mr Palmer was being very useful and appeared to have everything in hand. “He seems such an odd sort of fellow, yet he is clearly a man of practical common sense and good understanding,” he said.

“He certainly is,” replied Elinor, who recalled well and recounted for her husband and mother the kindness of Mr Palmer, when Marianne had lain gravely ill at Cleveland House and only Mr Palmer had offered to stay and support Elinor until her mother arrived to help nurse the patient. “He was most kind, and I confess I was surprised, because we had grown accustomed to regarding him as withdrawn and proud, but when it mattered most, he was none of those things.”

When Mrs Dashwood added her own recent experience, Elinor felt obliged to remark that Mr Palmer’s reputation had probably suffered more as a consequence of his marriage to a silly woman like Charlotte, whose incessant prattling drove him to distraction, than any evidence of ill nature on his part.

At this the ladies laughed, but as the Reverend Edward Ferrars saw it, this was another example of why one should not leap to conclusions about people’s characters—whether for good or ill; but he did not get far with his homily, because there was a knock at the door and the maid opened it to admit none other than Mr Palmer himself.

Silenced by surprise at seeing him and the coincidence of his arrival at that very moment, in the middle of their conversation about him, they were barely able to greet Mr Palmer, until Edward invited him into the sitting room. Clearly, he had walked from the manor house.

Mrs Dashwood rushed away to order tea. Edward stood beside the fireplace and Elinor sat facing their visitor, quite unable to comprehend the reason for his visit. Not in all the years that the Dashwoods had lived at Barton Cottage had Mr Palmer visited them on his own. What had brought him there that night? As he sat rather awkwardly in a high-backed chair by the fire, the chair that used to be her father’s, Elinor wondered what had happened at Barton Park to cause him to call on them in this way.

It was after several minutes, and only when Mrs Dashwood returned and the maid bearing the tea tray had set it down and left the room, closing the door behind her, that he seemed sufficiently comfortable to explain his visit. He had come to ask a favour, he said, clearly speaking with great reluctance. His wife, Mrs Palmer, was so bereft at the sudden death of her sister, she had been unable to rise from her bed, much less come downstairs and attend to the normal matters of the household, and as for his mother-in-law, Mrs Jennings, she was in no fit state to be of any assistance to Sir John. He wondered if Mrs Dashwood could be prevailed upon, adding rather lamely, “I am very reluctant to ask you, ma’am, since it must surely appear unreasonable to expect that you—”

But before he could conclude his sentence, Mrs Dashwood had risen and offered to go with him directly to Barton Park.

“Mr Palmer, pray do not say another word; of course I am willing to help. Hasn’t Sir John been kindness itself to me and my daughters when we needed help, and have we not enjoyed the hospitality of Sir John and Lady Middleton on occasions too numerous to mention? Why would I not be ready to offer help at such a time as this? Elinor and Edward are here and they can attend to matters at the cottage. I can be ready in an hour.” Mr Palmer’s expression was instantly transformed from one of grim austerity to pleasant relief as he thanked both mother and daughter for their generosity, twice over, before declaring that he would send the carriage to transport Mrs Dashwood and her things to Barton Park—within the hour.

He finished his tea and left soon afterward, and Mrs Dashwood rushed upstairs to

pack her things, leaving Elinor and Edward shaking their heads at the strange turn of events. It had been an astonishing day.

But more was to follow. On the morrow, Elinor and Edward were preparing to walk over to Barton Park to call on Sir John, when an open pony cart arrived at the cottage bringing Margaret Dashwood. She explained that on receiving the news, she had travelled post to Exeter and taken the hack to Barton Cottage. "It was not very comfortable, but it was the only thing available," she explained, pointing to the effects of the ride upon her clothes and hair.

While there was no real surprise in her arrival, for she had been expected, she had barely been seated twenty minutes and taken a cup of tea when she rose and declared that she wished to accompany her sister and brother-in-law to call on Sir John Middleton, because she could not stay for the funeral and would presently be returning to Oxford.

Elinor was outraged. "What? Having come all this way, why can you not attend the funeral? Think what it will seem like to Sir John, Margaret; he is Mama's cousin and was more than kind to us when Papa died and we needed help."

Margaret shook her head. "I know all that, Elinor, and I am not ungrateful, but I cannot attend the funeral—it is not a question of time, it's just that I have no wish to meet all Sir John's fine friends who will no doubt travel down from London for the occasion," she said.

"And why ever not? Why should their presence at the funeral trouble you?" Elinor demanded to know, but Margaret would only say that there may be some among them whom she did not care to meet.

"I cannot say more now; perhaps when things are more settled, I may be able to explain, but please believe me, Elinor, it is in all our interests that I wish not to be seen at the funeral. I will call on Sir John and Mrs Jennings today and spend as much time with them as you think fit, but I must leave on Friday. I have arranged to travel on the overnight coach."

Elinor recalled that her young sister had always been very determined, and it would seem that she was even more so now. But the fact that Margaret would give no reasonable explanation for her actions disturbed and confused her.

When Margaret had gone upstairs to change out of her travelling clothes, Elinor confided in Edward. "What do you suppose lies behind this, Edward? Do you think Margaret has some kind of understanding with one of the gentlemen she expects to be at the funeral and does not wish it to be generally known? Unless that is the case, I can find no explanation for her conduct; Margaret is not usually unkind or insensitive."

"Indeed, she is not, and I would not say she is being so on this occasion, my dear; she has travelled a great distance to be here and intends to spend time with the bereaved family, which is a kindness in itself," Edward replied, being as usual cautious in making judgments. "As to your other proposition, I cannot be sure. I agree that it seems your sister has a very strong desire to avoid meeting a particular person or persons likely to attend Lady Middleton's funeral, but whether there is a matter of any understanding, I have seen no evidence of it."

"Then why can she not tell me who it is? If it is someone she does not wish to meet, we may be able to arrange that she doesn't meet him—or her, as the case may be. Why all this secrecy?" she complained.

Edward was hard put to find an answer that would satisfy his wife, but being very fond of Margaret himself, he did try. "Perhaps, my dear, it is not something she wishes to speak of at this moment. She may not wish to reveal the identity of the person; I recall that she did say she may be able to talk about it when it was settled."

Elinor grasped at the notion. "You may well be right, Edward, it is likely there is someone Margaret is in love with, but does not wish everyone—particularly people like Sir John Middleton and Mrs Jennings—to discover the association. You know how Mrs Jennings scents out a romantic involvement and then talks endlessly about it to anyone who will listen. I can well believe Margaret would hate that." When Edward merely nodded, she continued, "Of course, that must be it. Poor Margaret, she saw at firsthand the teasing that Marianne and I endured—no doubt she hopes to avoid it until it is quite settled and then she will reveal everything and surprise us all."

Presently, Edward and the two ladies walked over to Barton Park, where they were somewhat surprised to find Mrs Dashwood ably managing the household, a feat she had often been unable to cope with at Norland, surrendering it gladly to her eldest daughter.

Meanwhile, Sir John Middleton, with the support of Colonel Brandon and plenty of good wine, was bravely meeting and greeting the many neighbours, friends, and confreres who were arriving every hour to condole with him. In spite of being kept very busy with these duties, Sir John did find time to thank Margaret Dashwood, expressing his great pleasure at seeing her. "I appreciate very much your thoughtfulness in coming, my dear, and I am sorry that your sister Marianne is unable to join us. Brandon tells me she is unwell—she always was a delicate flower, I suppose," he said with a sigh, adding more brightly, "Miss Margaret, it was two Christmases ago that we all met in London, and since then you have grown exceedingly pretty and elegant, my dear. I am sure your mama is prodigiously proud of you." Margaret, who had been a little wary of meeting him, blushed at the compliments but was glad she had come.

Toward evening, when the house began to fill with more visitors, some from London and others from Bath, Margaret slipped away upstairs to spend some time with Mrs Jennings, who sat in her room, attended by her daughter, Charlotte. Finding the usually cheerful woman in a state of severe dejection, Margaret sat with her and tried to draw her into conversation, but to no avail. The usually loquacious and jolly Mrs Jennings appeared to have been stricken dumb with shock.

Later, Margaret went to talk to her mother and was amazed to find her bustling about with household activities, consulting the housekeeper and cook on the meals to be prepared for their visitors, organising arrangements for guests who were staying at the manor house, and ensuring that the maids and footmen were going to be correctly attired and knew their duties on the day of the funeral. To see her mother carrying out all these tasks, with hardly any sign of the muddle and confusion that had beset her at Norland, was as amusing as it was surprising to her daughter.

This did mean that, apart from an affectionate embrace and some quiet, tearful words, mother and daughter had little time together. Mrs Dashwood was saddened to learn that Margaret would not be staying to attend the funeral of Lady Middleton, but accepted her explanation that she needed to return to Oxford, assuming it had something to do with her continuing work at the seminary.

Returning later that evening to Barton Cottage, they dined and Edward retired to read by the fire, while Elinor followed her sister upstairs to the spare room, where Margaret was preparing for bed. Seated in front of the mirror, she brushed and braided her hair, which was a pretty honey-gold colour that glowed in the firelight.

Elinor, seeing her thus, was struck by the singular loveliness of her young sister. Following the marriages of her two older sisters, Margaret had grown up very quickly; she was now a very independent young lady, and as she recalled the bright, precocious little girl at Norland some years ago, Elinor struggled to contain her feelings.

She went to her and, standing behind her, looked into the mirror; their eyes met and they smiled. It felt as though they had moved back in time and were as they had been, arriving at Barton Cottage following the death of their father, having left their idyllic childhood behind at Norland. Elinor remembered the many times when she had brushed and braided her lovely hair when Margaret, finding it difficult to cope alone with the consequences of the death of their father, would seek out her elder sister and tearfully confide in her. Her childish fears had been simple but nonetheless important to her, and Elinor had always tried to understand and explain them away.

This time, Elinor was concerned that her efforts to help had been unsuccessful, because Margaret was unwilling to confide in her. Even as they looked at each other in the mirror, Elinor knew that Margaret was not going to explain why she had decided not to attend Lady Middleton's funeral.

She tried, asking gently, "Will you not tell me, dearest Margaret, what is troubling you? I can see there is something—I know it, I can read it in your eyes." Then, persisting with a nagging doubt that had assailed her mind, she asked, "Is there someone who will be at the funeral that you do not wish to meet?"

Margaret looked surprised at the question, then smiled and said, "Dear Elinor, believe me, it is nothing of any consequence, nothing you need worry about, I promise. If it were, I should tell you and ask your advice, as I have always done."

"And you do not need my advice now? Is there nothing I can do to help?" Elinor's eyes searched her young sister's face, but Margaret shook her head and said, "No, but I do love you for asking."

So saying, she stood up and embraced Elinor, and they stood together for a long moment before breaking away to say good night.

Turning at the door to look at her, Elinor knew there was something troubling her sister; she longed to know and to help her, but had to be content that it was not the right time.

End of Prologue

Part One

Chapter One

The funeral of Lady Middleton and all the attendant formalities being completed, Elinor and Edward Ferrars prepared to return to the parsonage at Delaford.

Staying one last night at Barton Cottage, they had hoped to have Mrs Dashwood with them. Elinor had decided that it would be a good opportunity to consult her mother about her plans for the future. Would she wish to continue at Barton Cottage, now that Lady Middleton was no more and Mrs Jennings was most likely to move to live with her daughter, Mrs Palmer, at Cleveland? Mrs Dashwood was not on intimate terms with any of the other neighbouring families and might find the solitude depressing, Elinor believed.

Talking it over with Edward the previous night, she had been convinced that it was unlikely her mother would choose to stay. "I should be more at ease in my mind if I knew what Mama preferred, rather than propose a solution," she had said, and her husband had suggested that it was possible her mother may be amenable to a proposition. "Perhaps your mother would consider a move to Delaford, seeing it is in the next county, where either or both of her two elder daughters could offer her a comfortable home?" he had said, adding, "Undoubtedly, Marianne would have the advantage over us, with a far more spacious establishment at the manor house; but were she to wish for a different environment or quieter society, then she would always be welcome at the parsonage."

Elinor agreed and thanked her husband, pointing out that she could see no problem of space or comfort at the parsonage, which had been recently extended and refurbished for their use; although she wondered whether her mother would find some difficulty with the presence of her two young grandsons. "I wonder how she will cope with our boys; Harry and John *are* lively, though they are not boisterous or troublesome children. Do you think she may have a problem getting accustomed to them?" she asked.

Edward was quick to reassure her. "I doubt it, my dear. Your mother is a kind, warmhearted woman; she loves both her grandchildren. I cannot believe she will find them a hindrance to a comfortable life with us. But, as I said, should she prefer it, she may decide to divide her time between the manor house and the parsonage. They are at no great distance from each other and she may, if she chooses, move quite conveniently between them."

Elinor smiled, but her husband could sense her anxiety and did his best to calm her fears. "You need have no qualms about asking her, my love; in the end, your mother will make up her mind and we will accommodate her wishes. There has never been any friction between us; you must not suppose that there will be any on this matter."

Elinor, having discussed the subject with her husband, was ready to make the offer to her mother and wanted only some few hours of her time to do so. But they were to discover that, in the meantime, Mrs Dashwood had agreed to a request from her cousin, Sir John Middleton, to stay on at Barton Park for a while longer. Colonel Brandon, arriving at the cottage to wish them a safe journey and send a message to Marianne, brought the surprising news.

“Sir John is very grateful to Mrs Dashwood for her kindness in agreeing to remain awhile at Barton Park,” he said, explaining the situation. “I understand Mr and Mrs Palmer must return to Cleveland House today and Mrs Jennings is as yet unfit to travel, nor are the Palmers able to accommodate her needs at this time—they are expecting some of Mr Palmer’s relatives to stay. This has placed Sir John in an exceedingly difficult situation. He was at a complete loss as to how to cope with matters concerning the running of his household and the care of his mother-in-law, who would be entirely alone,” Colonel Brandon reported. “Mrs Dashwood’s agreement to remain at Barton Park has considerably alleviated his problem.”

He spoke with a degree of gravitas that ensured that Elinor would not laugh, but it left both Edward and Elinor at a loss for words. Never had it been supposed among members of their family that Mrs Dashwood would emerge as a saviour in the cause of domestic management. Her rather muddled ways of running her own household at Norland, her inability to maintain accurate accounts, her total lack of understanding of the need for economy—extending even to complete ignorance of the prices of various commonplace household goods—made the thought of her running the establishment at Barton Park seem a risible proposition.

Yet, it appeared that Colonel Brandon, generally a sensible and reasonable man, was taking it quite seriously and seemed to have no difficulty with the idea. “Do you mean, Colonel Brandon, that Mama has agreed to remain at Barton Park indefinitely, taking charge of the household arrangements for Sir John?” Elinor asked, and it was clear to her husband from the tone of her voice that she found the notion unconvincing.

Colonel Brandon took a while to absorb the point of her question and when he responded said quietly, “I am not privy to Mrs Dashwood’s understanding of the situation, Elinor; I have not spoken with her on the subject. I know only what Sir John has told me. It seems they had a discussion after dinner last night, when he made his request for her help, and again this morning, before the Palmers departed, and have reached a mutually satisfactory agreement. Mrs Dashwood wishes me to assure you she is content to remain and help her cousin and Mrs Jennings through this difficult time and has asked that I convey her love to you and the children. I also have this note from her for you,” he said, handing over Mrs Dashwood’s letter.

There were many other questions to which Elinor wanted answers, but she knew the colonel was unlikely to have them. Clearly his sympathies were with his longtime friend Sir John, and he was not willing to query the basis of an arrangement that could offer some relief to him in the awkward situation in which he found himself. He assured them also that they could use his carriage to return to Delaford, while he would follow on horseback not long afterward.

Handing over a sealed envelope addressed to his wife, which he begged Elinor to convey to her sister, he left them to return to Barton Park.