The Sensible Approach

by Joylee

Summary

One cannot live on love alone. Elinor takes steps to make their home life a touch more comfortable.

Notes

AN: It is an interesting insight into Regency society that Colonel Brandon, who marries one of our heroines, is not provided with a first name at any point in the book! Rather than invent one, I have had Marianne use a nickname, Bran, for her husband based on his surname. I suspect this is anachronistic, but the alternatives were all incredibly clumsy.

“My dear, I have had a letter from Robert with a request that I greatly desire to fulfill, but as it will most certainly put you to an inconvenience, I must first put it before you.”

Since Elinor could not credit any request from his brother putting her husband in such good spirits her curiosity was aroused.

“You may recall Robert wrote last month asking that I come to London and officiate over the christening of baby Robert, that I had to refuse, having no one to act for me here whilst I was away.”
The living could not afford a curate. The only other Vicar near to them, Rev. Small, was an elderly man whose declining health made it near impossible to travel even as far as Delaford. Edward had been regularly riding over to conduct services for him when he was poorly.

“So Robert proposes that they come here to hold the christening.” Edward looked pleased. “Is it not flattering that they would go to such trouble to have me officiate?”

“It is indeed.” Elinor agreed.

Flattering, but requiring considerable household disruption. “I suppose we can manage. As long as Robert and Lucy share the guest room, the baby and his nurse can be squeezed into the nursery with Nellie and Ned. The servants will be a bit cramped, but Cook is nothing if not inventive about working out that sort of thing.”

“Ah, but there is also my mother to be included. And Fanny and John.” He had the grace to look sheepish.

“Yes. Fanny and John to act as godparents. And my mother because of course she would wish to be present at her grandson’s christening.”

Mrs. Ferrars had not so much as sent a silver spoon for either of their children’s christenings.

“I thought perhaps we could make over the upstairs sitting room...” Edward ventured.

The upstairs sitting room had been converted from an airing cupboard when Nellie had been born. It held two chairs and narrow table that served as Elinor’s work table, writing desk and tea table. A second person in the room required both to stand and push one of the chairs under the table in order to open the door. Marianne had remarked that it was well that they had never both been with child at the same time otherwise they would not both fit in the room.

“That would prove... difficult.” Elinor said “And there would still be the question of where to put John and Fanny.”

“Perhaps Marianne would be willing to have her brother and sister-in-law stay at Delaford. She always has your mother and Margaret stay with her when they come to visit.”

True, but Marianne was considerably fonder of their mother and sister. She begrudgingly had her brother and sister-in-law to dinner when both couples were in London. So far she had ignored John’s frequent hints to come to Delaford.

“Would it mean a great deal to you to officiate at your nephew’s christening?” Elinor asked. He had performed the office for both their children and little Charles Brandon.

“It is always a joy to welcome another soul into the Body of Christ.” Edward’s ministerial role had deepened his own faith. Elinor, less devout then her husband (although she took pains to conceal this from him) did regularly thank God to be blessed with a husband who had started out a good man and showed every sign of maturing into a far better one.

“But my mother has not recently had the opportunity to hear one of my sermons. I thought if she could see how much they have improved since I first took orders and how we have settled into the
life of the parish, she might become more reconciled to my calling.”

“In that case I shall this afternoon ask Marianne if she would be willing to invite them.” Elinor responded.

In the end she took Nellie and little Ned with her. Nellie could just manage the walk to Delaford and Ned was still small enough for her to carry. Though he struggled mightily to be put down to walk with his sister. Without the children to watch their maid could get her work done all the faster and Elinor would not have to assist in trimming the lamps and laying the dinner table.

Marianne was in the nursery when she arrived. The butler, knowing his mistress's habits showed Elinor up immediately.

Where Elinor looked after her children of necessity, their income only stretched to a cook and a maid of all work, Marianne choose to sped a portion of her day with her small son out delight in his company. The wholehearted love she had as a girl bestowed on Willoughby had over time transferred to her husband and expanded to include small Charles from the moment of his birth.

Despite this devotion from his mother and only slightly more restrained attention from his father, Charles showed every sign of growing into a sweet tempered child. At three he was bracketed in age by his cousins, whom he welcomed happily to his nursery. Even at this young age he pressed his toys on them and seemed to enjoy playing with the young Ferrars threadbare rag dolls as much as his own finely crafted toys.

After they settled the children playing with blocks, Marianne inquired, “Not that you need ever have a reason to call, but what brings you to me today, Elinor? Did you not plan to harvest the last of the wild berries this afternoon?”

“I did.” Elinor sighed. Another task that she would need to find time for tomorrow. Preserved, those berries would help supplement the parsonage's pantry throughout the winter. “But I have a very great favor to ask of you and it seemed best to do so before I lost my nerve.”

“If it is within my power to give it is yours.”

“You may not agree so readily once you understand the nature of my request.”

Having heard out her sister's explanation, Marianne leaned forward and inquired, “Do you truly wish to have the Ferrars here at Delaford? I completely understand your desire to please Edward, nothing gives me greater pleasure than to find a way grant my dear Bran's wishes, but even for Edward's sake why would you subject yourself to a woman who has shown you nothing but ill will, even prior to your marriage?”

“That is the very reason why I feel I must try to reconcile Edward and his mother,” Elinor responded. “Had Edward not married me, his family would no doubt have accepted him back in time. It distresses Edward that his mother does not value the good work he has done here in the parish. He hopes that if she sees for herself how well he gets on here she may become more reconciled to his choices.”

“While I should never care to dampen such hope, I cannot help but think that unlikely,” Marianne said. “For in truth Mrs. Ferrars never valued Edward for the good man that he is. She only thought of forcing him into advancement which, though you know I value dear Edward as a true brother and Vicar, he really had neither inclination nor talent for. I fear that Edward will only be disappointed by her reaction to his current position.”
“You may well be correct, but I still feel that we must make the effort.” Elinor felt unworthy at her aim. Her sister would think less of her but needs must. “Although you are right that Mrs. Ferrars has never valued Edward or even seemingly tried to know him, she is a woman whose favor can be gained with only modest endeavor.”

“Making her favor of little worth.” Marianne was still plain spoken.

“Mrs. Ferrars's favor could have a worth of many thousand pounds.” Elinor continued quickly to try and assuage the look of shock her sister was developing. “For myself I would not stoop to cultivate her for that reason, but there are the children to think of. Expenses are such that it is all I can do to keep within our income. I simply do not see how it will be possible to put aside any money for Ned's education or a marriage portion for Nellie. And in likelihood there will be more children, increasing our expenses. It would take very little from Mrs. Ferrars to ensure that my children are suitably established. I hate myself for thinking in these terms, but the world is a hard place for those who have only their inherent goodness to commend them to it.”

“Elinor, you know that Bran would not hesitate to assist our niece and nephew in any way possible.” Marianne cried.

“I do, and I cannot tell you how much comfort that gives me. Knowing that you and the Colonel would look after Nellie and Ned should the need arise. But Edward and I as their parents have the first duty to see to their well-being and if swallowing my pride and cultivating Mrs. Ferrars will assist in that purpose I must do so.”

Not meeting her sister's eyes she added. “I hope that my mercenariness has not sunk me beyond redemption in your estimation.”

“Oh, Elinor!” Marianne knelt in front of her and clasped her hands. “Quite the contrary. You set an example that shames me. I am sure that it would never even occur to me to humble myself to such a degree even for Charles's sake. As always you put your own feelings and desires after those of your family. I can only marvel at your merit.”

“Nonsense, Marianne.” Elinor hugged the younger woman. “You are too quick to ascribe virtue to me.”

“We shall have to agree to disagree on that point.” Marianne returned the hug. “But rest assured I shall do everything in my power to assist you in this matter.

“However,” Here she paused. “Before I send off invitations to the Ferrars I had best consult with Bran. While he is usually the most agreeable of husbands, it is perhaps wise to let him know I intend to fill his house with people that he would probably not choose to socialize with on his own.”

This seemed only fair. A message was sent off to the Colonel through the footman asking him to join them for tea. Elinor would have absented herself from the discussion between husband and wife, but Marianne entreated her to stay. “So that he may hear your wishes from you directly. He will be more inclined to agree if he knows you truly wish this and are not merely bowing to Edward's wishes.”

The Colonel sent back a reply that he would be delighted to take tea with his wife and her sister. Since it was to be a family affair could they not include the children as well?
“For,” He informed the ladies once he had been thoroughly hugged by all three of the small ones and was seated at the nursery tea table, small Charles perched on his knee. “I have not had the pleasure of Nellie and Ned’s company since Sunday. And business has kept me from this little man since yesterday morning.”

Charles giggled at his father and offered him a slice of bread and butter, from which the Colonel took a bite before returning to his son.

Nursery tea at Delaford was considerably more lavish than at the Parsonage. It did not take long for the children to be occupied with their treats allowing their parents to talk. Marianne explained Robert’s request and Edward’s wishes to officiate at the christening. Elinor’s motivations she placed in the kindest possible light.

The Colonel sipped his tea and inquired. “I can understand Ferrars’s desires to reconcile with his family. Given their previous treatment of you, Elinor, are you certain you wish to spend several days, for we can hardly ask them for less than a week, in their company? I cannot help but think it would be a good deal easier, for everyone including the Ferrars, to simply have some suitable candidate substitute for Edward here so that he could go to Norfolk and officiate there.

“We would,” He offered, “Be happy both to host and recompense the substitute. I certainly do not want Ferrars to think he is a prisoner here because the living has no curate.”

“But then Mrs. Ferrars would have not the opportunity to observe for herself just how respected and well liked Edward is here in the parish.” Marianne put in brightly. “Nor would she have the opportunity to spend time with Nellie and Ned. She has never seen them. Once she realizes that she has deprived herself of the company of two such delightful grandchildren she will certainly wish to mend the schism between her and Edward.”

“I fear you ascribe your own softness of heart to a woman who has never demonstrated your sweetness, my dear.” The Colonel smiled at his wife. Then glancing down at Charles, who had finished his meal and was starting to doze in his father’s embrace, he said, “Still we must give her the opportunity.

“However, after having had the pleasure of dining with your brother and the Ferrars the last time I was in London, I cannot help but think the enlargement of this party beyond the Ferrars and your brother and his wife would increase your chances of success. Perhaps the Middletons and the Palmers? They are cousins to Mrs. Robert Ferrars after all. We owe them hospitality and they can generally be counted on help to leaven a party.”

“Lady Middleton and Fanny have become great friends.” Elinor put in when Marianne looked dubious. “She would no doubt help entertain Mrs. Ferrars as well.”

“I have never hosted such a large party.” Marianne seemed hesitant. Then squaring her shoulders she decided. “But we no doubt shall do so in the future and starting with longtime friends and... family will be good practice

“We should invite Mrs. Jennings as well.” Marianne decided. “To invite both her daughters and leave her out would be a slight.”

“Quite right, my dear.” The Colonel agreed. “If she accepts she could bring Margaret back from London with her and we could send her home to your mother with the Middletons.”

“Which would save you a trip to London to escort Margaret home.” Marianne brightened at that. “So having everyone here will be convenient all around.”
Letters of invitation were immediately penned and sent off. Marianne went into hurried consultation with her housekeeper: Planning meals; rooms; and entertainments. Both Delaford and the parsonage were turned inside out in frenzied cleaning. For, as Cook informed Elinor, “They've not had a big house party up at the manor since afore the old master, him that was the Colonel's father, took sick. And they'll be servants coming from London. No one wants some snooty Londoner to find fault with their work. Or give the younger Mrs. Dashwood cause to criticize the way Mrs. Brandon manages her household. So we must measure up as well. I'll not have Mr. Ferrars's Mum thinking we're slovenly.”

By the time came for the first of the guests to arrive everything was pressed, polished and waiting. Of the two sisters Elinor was the more nervous. Marianne having found a surprising confidence in her meticulous planning.

“Though I worry what will happen when something goes amiss.” Brandon confided to Edward over one of their regular chess games when he thought Elinor was too involved with the children to overhear. “I've never seen a battle plan that survived contact with the enemy and our proposed guests tend to pursue unexpected courses of action.”

It had been decided that Margaret would stay with Elinor. Sll the other guests would stay at Delaford. “Margaret will want to spend time with the children.” Marianne said when Elinor offered to host some of the party at the parsonage. Elinor suspected this was a well-meaning attempt to shield her from her in-laws, but since she and Edward would be spending nearly every waking hour at Delaford while the guests were there it seemed pointless.

They did receive some replies that bode well for tone of the gathering. “The Palmers are otherwise engaged and have to decline. And Lucy writes her sister will also be unable to come. This, since I do not recall inviting her, will keep my room arrangements intact.” Marianne told her sister.

“The Middletons have offered to bring Mother with them. So that she and Margaret will be reunited all the sooner.” She added. “While I am always happy to have Mother to stay it will leave us rather unbalanced at the dinner table. Do you think that rather odd writer and his friend might be willing to help us fill out the party?”

Mrs. Jennings dropped Margaret off at the parsonage on her way to Delaford. Margaret though happy to see her sister seemed subdued to Elinor.

“Missing her young man no doubt.” Mrs. Jennings said. “I'll have done you all proud if that match comes about let me tell you. I do like to think I helped all three of you girls to very good husbands. And will continue to help you along in any way I can. For you know you can count on me to talk up your Edward for you.

“Not that I would need any encouragement. A fine young man he has always been. And marriage has settled him nicely. Turning him into as fine a parson as he is a man. Why I don't think I've ever sat through better sermons. I shall be sure to tell his Mother so.” Mrs. Jennings nodded.

Elinor thanked her for the compliment.

“No need to thank me, girl. I've long wanted to tell Mrs. Ferrars that she favors the wrong son. Your Edward is worth half a dozen of his brother.” Mrs. Jennings sniffed. “Lucy made herself a bad bargain there. Thousand pounds a year or no. Though you and Edward turned out so well
was for the best in the end.”

Now Elinor became concerned. Entreating her old friend to be circumspect in her expression of opinion to Mrs. Ferrars.

“Lord, girl, do you take me for a fool? I know which way the wind is blowing. It's easy enough to see why Marianne would invite such a group as this to a house party.” Mrs. Jennings asserted. “We’re to help reconcile Edward to his mother. Which is only right and proper. And hopefully lead to that woman having more common sense when it comes to distributing her brass. A few extra pounds would go a long way toward making things easier for you with those two young ones and likely more to come.”

That Mrs. Jennings so easily deduced her motives and agreed with them did nothing to cause Elinor to feel more sanguine about what she was trying to accomplish.

The Ferrars and Dashwoods did not arrive until the next day, so the first night passed off quite comfortably. Mrs. Jennings and Sir John teased Margaret mercilessly about her conquests in London. Elinor was proud of how well the younger girl bore up under their high spirits. It was only on the walk home that she realized that the girl's poise came not from composure, but from melancholy.

Elinor decided she would speak to her mother about Margaret's unusual mood. Whatever was bothering the girl would more properly be confided to Mrs. Dashwood.

The arrival of the Robert and Lucy, along with maidservant, valet, nursery maid and three months old Bobby caused an uproar. But Marianne’s housekeeper took charge and managed to get them settled before the arrival of John, Fanny, Mrs. Ferrars and ten year old Henry. Who immediately began complaining about being relegated to the nursery with his far younger cousins.

“I can only hope that Nanny does not give notice after this.” Marianne confided to her sister. “It did not occur to me to warn her she might have to deal with Henry as well as the baby.”

With Marianne trying to settle domestic issues with her staff, it fell to Elinor to act as hostess for the ladies' tea. Fortunately weather had been poor enough that the travelers were able to entertain themselves by comparing how uncomfortable their journeys had been. By the time it was generally agreed that the Dashwoods and Mrs. Ferrars had the worst of it, “For we had to wait two hours for fresh horses at Marlborough,” the party broke into smaller conversations. Her mother and Mrs. Jennings kept Mrs. Ferrars occupied with talk of grandchildren. Fanny and Lady Middleton discussed the latest scandal among their acquaintances in London. Margaret was gazing out the window at the storm.

Which left her to talk to Lucy.

Marriage had done little to improve Lucy, Elinor quickly discovered. She was still as guileful and mercenary as ever. Going out of her way to find out what Elinor had paid for her gown. (Nothing. It had been a gift from Marianne.) More she wanted to know the extent of Marianne's household and how much pin money the Colonel allowed her. A point on which Elinor demurred to comment, despite being fully in Marianne's confidences.

“I am sure the Colonel is most generous to her.” Lucy surmised. “After courting her so long. She is fortunate in having an older husband. They tend to be generous to young wives. Especially ones who give them a son so soon after the marriage.”

Elinor agreed that the Brandons were fortunate in their domestic happiness.
“We are so looking forward to the christening.” Lucy told her. “It will be such a laugh.”

“A laugh?” Elinor could not quite believe what she was hearing.

“Yes. That is why Robert suggested it. ‘Just think how amusing it will be watching old Edward up there in a surplice dabbling water about. Why it will make the whole of the service almost bearable.’ He said.”

“I see.” Elinor tried to contain her rising horror.

“Why yes. Even Mother Ferrars said that being a rural clergyman hardly seemed an appropriate occupation for her son. Spending time with farmers and tradesmen.” Lucy continued. “Though of course little Robert's christening will have a finer sort of people in attendance. Sir John and Lady Middleton and of course our Marianne's Colonel is a gentleman.”

Elinor did not know what to do about Lucy's remarks. She could not warn Edward by passing them on. They would devastate him. Under other circumstances she would have spoken with her mother or Marianne. But her mother was hovering around Margaret in a manner that suggested Margaret had already confided her troubles. Margaret had far greater claim on their mother's attention than Elinor and frankly other than allowing Elinor to unburden herself there was nothing Mrs. Dashwood could do.

Nor could she add to Marianne's concerns while her sister was hosting his disparate party on Elinor's behalf.

The next day the weather turned rainy. Luckily Colonel Brandon's late brother had been a keen billiard player. “So the gentlemen can be kept occupied, even if they can not shoot.” Marianne told her thankfully.

Edward took the opportunity to show his mother, brother and Lucy the parsonage and the church.

“Such a delightful little cottage.” Lucy said. “Robert is always saying how he adores cottages.”

“Indeed,” Robert declared. “Nothing is as snug and charming as a little cottage. Why with a few small improvements this would be a truly delightful place.”

“Rather small.” Mrs. Ferrars put in.

“Which is much of the charm of a cottage, Mother.” Robert told her. “Everything is so close.”

“Colonel Brandon had some considerable work done on the house before we moved in.” Elinor told them.

“We are rather hoping to add a few rooms at some point to better accommodate the children as they grow older.” Edward added.

The children were excited to meet another grandmother. It had taken out and out bribery to secure their good behavior. Even so Nellie's hair ribbon had disappeared during the few minutes Elinor had left them with the maid to greet her in-laws.

“I'm so sorry, Mrs.” The maid told her. “But I was so wrapped up in keeping Ned from messing himself, that she was able to pull out her ribbon. I only turned my back for a moment.”

Elinor sighed and told the maid it was only to be expected.
Lucy declared that she had never before met such delightful “... and spirited children. Are they not the sweetest things, Mother Ferrars? So much energy. Why they are almost as adorable as little Robert.”

Edward had laboriously taught Nellie a short poem which she recited to the assembled group. Afterward Mrs. Ferrars unbent so far as to say, “Very nice.” She then bestowed a penny on each child. Elinor hastily confiscated the coins as soon as she had the children back in the nursery. Ned already had his in his mouth.

After the visit to the parsonage, Edward took his family off to tour the church. Leaving Elinor with a much needed break to see to her household.

As she was straightening the sitting room Margaret joined her. “The children are finally napping. They were terribly excited by the visit, but I read to them until they settled down.”

“Thank you so much, Margaret. It is so good of you to help with them.”

“Not at all.” Margaret told her. “As I seemed destined to be the spinster aunt the sooner I get started the better.”

“You are only nineteen. I think you are a bit young to be considered on the shelf.”

“The man I have given my heart to has been forbidden me.” Margaret's voice shook. “If I cannot have him, I will not settle for another.”

“My dear, what happened?”

Margaret poured out her story. She had met a young man, “Dearest Stewart,” at the beginning of her London stay with Mrs. Jennings. His family was a business connection of Mrs. Jennings’s late husband. The two of them had instantly taken to each other. They had been in near constant company thereafter. “Although sometimes only for a few minutes a day. He is being trained by his father to take over the family business, so he has not the leisure of gentlemen with no vocation like Robert Ferrars.

“Though his family is in trade he is most genteel, Elinor. Not at all common no matter what John says. He was at Harrow.”

Not all that long ago. Stewart had just turned twenty. As part of his training in the business, last month his father had sent him off to Gibraltar to learn foreign part of the trade. He would be gone a year.

Stewart had asked his father for permission to marry or at least become engaged prior to leaving. “Since he is not of age we could not wed without his father's consent. In any event he did not want to go behind his father's back. They are very close and to marry without his blessings would greatly distress Stewart.”

But Mr. Stewart senior had refused. “He says we may marry when Stewart returns from Gibraltar. But I know how it will be. I did not witness your and Margaret's trials without learning how these things are done. Mr. Stewart will find Stewart a rich wife. And John will stand against the match because he thinks the Stewarts are of too low a station.”

Elinor counseled patience. “For if the young man truly cares for you he will return. Once he is of age his father cannot stop you.”

“We both know that is not the case.” Margaret told her sadly. “If Mr. Stewart denies him an income, then Stewart is too honorable to ask me to marry him until he can support a family. Which
could be years. He has nothing but what his father pays him for his work in the company. And I have only fifty pounds a year.”

It did not seem promising if the young man's father disapproved. Elinor's heart went out to her sister, but there was little she could do except try to soothe the girl's crushed feelings.

Margaret was more reserved in showing those feelings than Elinor would have expected. She went out of her way to assist her sisters in entertaining the guests. Taking it upon herself to play cards with the older women. She also entertained Henry, who was raising havoc in the nursery. Elinor was so proud of her and wished there was something that could be done for the girl.

Edward took his mother on a tour of the parish the next day. Borrowing the Delaford cover carriage to keep the weather at bay. Elinor was able to split her day between home and Delaford. Giving Mrs. Ferrars the opportunity to play lady bountiful and convey some broth and tonic (prepared by Elinor) to an elderly parishioner. At least this freed up time that Elinor would otherwise have had to spend visiting with the woman.

Instead she spent an interminable afternoon listening to Fanny and Lucy competing over which of them were in the direst financial straits due to the expenses of having spent the season in London.

“You cannot understand how taxing it is,” Lucy told her. “Neither you nor Marianne come to London except for brief visits, so do not suffer the costs associated with the city.”

This was too much for Marianne. “No. We find it better to remain in the beautiful countryside. Caring for our children and assisting our husbands in the management of their affairs. Thus both saving the costs of society and also improving our estates.”

Elinor cringed inwardly. She prepared to smooth things over. If Lucy took offense she could poison Mrs. Ferrars against them. Then help came from an unexpected quarter. Lady Middleton spoke, “It is vexing to travel with very young children. I can well understand your preference to remain here at Delaford. You are no doubt learning this yourself, Lucy.”

“It is indeed.” Mrs. Jennings took up the point. “Why the first time you came up to see me with your babies, Mary, it took two extra days of travel and you arrived in such a state. You're so lucky to live within such easy travel of your grandbabies, Mrs. Dashwood. Why, you get to see all of them with only a day on the road.”

Mrs. Dashwood agreed that this was most fortunate. The conversation moved on to a more innocuous discussion.

The evening was saved by Marianne's addition to the party of the rather odd writer and his friend who had taken a cottage not too far from Delaford. The author himself was taciturn, but his companion seemed to have an inexhaustible supply of amusing stories.

“I asked them again tomorrow.” Marianne told Elinor at the end of the evening. “They were free and agreed to come, for, he said, 'I like the Vicar. One does not often find an intelligent man in the pulpit. So in exchange for your excellent supper I will keep his every so unattractive relatives amused'.”

One could hardly ask more.

After another day the rain finally ceased and the party was able to to have a picnic. There was a famous Tor that the Colonel had located a guide to show them.

The carriages could only get them within half a mile of the Tor. The party slowly wended along a path the rest of the way. Stretching out as it went. Edward ended up walking with his mother.
Joined by his brother and Lucy. Marianne and Margaret conducted the others. Leaving Elinor and Colonel Brandon to bring up the rear.

“I trust you will pardon my rather dull company, Elinor.” He said.

“Quite the contrary, Brandon. It is always a pleasure to converse with a man of good sense.” Particularly after the better part of a week spent with her brother and Robert Ferrars.

The Colonel clearly understood her feelings. “The reverse is certainly true. Marianne has been so overwhelmed with her duties as hostess we have hardly exchanged two consecutive sentences this week. And I hope you will not take this amiss, but I need a respite from your brother's advise on how I could increase my income. All of which suggestions, while perhaps granting me some short term gains, would have the long term effects of reducing my rents by impoverishing my tenants.”

He assisted her up a small hill. “You will forgive my impertinence, Elinor, but is something troubling you? You have been preoccupied since the Ferrars arrived.”

And so she found herself unburdening her concerns about Robert and Lucy's real motives in asking Edward to officiate at the christening and Margaret's heartache.

After listening to her concerns the Colonel nodded. “Yes, Robert Ferrars made known his opinion of Edward's calling while playing billiards with Sir John and myself. As his host it would have been rude of me to rebuke him, but Sir John was under no such restraint. We did not reach the rank we did in the army without learning how to deal with improper ideas held by foolish young men.”

He smiled. “I do not know whether Sir John's dressing down changed Ferrars's opinion, but I assure you he will not voice it in Edward's presence.

“As for Margaret, she is under a misapprehension.” He went on. “Young Stewart's father took the liberty of calling on me when I was last in London. He had first approached your brother, briefly it seems, and decided he wished to discuss Margaret and his son's future with, as he put it, 'Someone less top lofty'.”

“Is he terribly vulgar?” Elinor asked with concern.

“He is not a gentleman by birth.” Brandon admitted. “But he appears to be a man of honor. His son is probably better mannered than many a man of superior birth and certainly better educated.

“Rather than disapproving of the match, Mr. Stewart could not be more delighted by Margaret. He thinks her 'a proper lady' and that his son would be lucky to have her. His concern lies rather in the boy's youth and inexperience. He wants to be certain both the boy and Margaret truly know their hearts. If, after the lad returns from Gibraltar and has come of age, they are still of a mind to wed, he is prepared to make the boy a full partner as a wedding gift and be glad to call Margaret daughter.”

“Will the young man then be able to support Mary?” She knew from her own struggles how difficult it was to get by on a small income.

“Oh, yes.” Brandon told her dryly. “Your brother should have given Mr. Stewart a longer audience before cutting him. The Stewart firm is one of the largest importers of cotton from North Africa. Even taking into account provisions for his sisters, young Stewart stands to inherit a personal fortune of something on the order of one hundred thousand pounds.”

Elinor tripped. “One hundred thousand pounds!”
“And that's without including the value of the shares he will be receiving from the company.” The Colonel steadied her. “I think even your brother will find him an acceptable husband for Margaret once things are made clear to him.”

“Only if they truly care for each other.” Elinor replied. “But I can see why Mrs. Jennings called it a good match.”

“Indeed.” Brandon told her.

Finally the day of the christening came. In the end the service went far better than Elinor had any right to expect. Edward's sermon was one of his best. Even the odd writer, who Elinor suspect of atheism complimented him on it. Mrs. Ferrars actually unbent to say that it was not completely uninteresting.

“Uninteresting?” Mrs. Jennings declared on overheard the comment. “Why it was riveting. I never had cause to think about the prodigal's older brother before, but the way Rev. Ferrars pointed out that he represented how those that are faithful to God always have all blessings, well it just makes you think doesn't it?”

“It does, Mother.” Lady Middleton remarked. “Rev. Ferrars should think about publishing his sermons. I would greatly enjoy having the opportunity to read them at my leisure.”

Marianne out did herself with the christening breakfast. Everyone declared it to be her best meal yet. She accepted their praise with a graciousness that caused Mrs. Dashwood to tell Elinor, “Our Marianne has quite grown into her role as mistress of this estate has she not?”

“She has, Mother. More she has found true happiness in her husband and son. She is most fortunate.”

“And you Elinor. Are you happy as well?” Mrs. Dashwood looked concerned.

“I am.” Elinor did not need to give that any thought. “I admit I sometimes wish for a greater income, but I have no fault to find in my family.”

“Now if only Margaret could find such happiness.” Mrs. Dashwood sighed.

“We can only hope for the best.”

Apparently Edward's performance as Vicar had made Mrs. Ferrars think. As she readied herself to depart with John and Fanny the next day she had a special farewell for Edward.

“You have made a start here for yourself, Edward.” Mrs. Ferrars allowed as she was putting on her gloves. “I had not thought of a career in the Church for you, but it seems you have some talent for it.”

“Thank you, mother.” Edward looked pleased. “I have come to realize I have a true calling.”

“We will need to cultivate your Bishop so when next there is an opening on his staff you will be appointed to it.” Mrs. Ferrars nodded decisively. “There is little room for advancement here in so small a parish, but once you are at the cathedral all sorts of opportunities may open for you. Why with enough push you could rise to be one of the Bishops seated in the House of Lords.”
Satisfied with her new plans, Mrs. Ferrars entered the carriage. She and Fanny could be heard discussing how best to secure Edward a Deanship as the carriage pulled away.

Colonel Brandon and Marianne relaxed as the carriage passed out of sight. “If breakfast has not been cleared away I think another cup of tea is in order.” The Colonel stated.

“It has not.” Marianne told him. “I particularly told the housekeeper that we might want some additional sustenance once the Ferrars were on their way. We may have Mrs. Jennings join us. She said something last night about waiting to come down till we had seen them off.”

She added. “I never thought to say so, but I am most grateful for Mrs. Jennings assistance this last week. I don't know what I would have done with the two Mrs. Ferrars and Fanny had she not gone out of her way to help entertain them.

“I should perhaps find some way to show my appreciation.” She looked a bit guilty. “I have never valued her good nature as I should.”

“Merely telling her of your gratitude will more than suffice, my dear.” Brandon slipped an arm around his wife's waist as they headed inside. “She likes nothing better than to be of use.”

After the other couple had passed through the door, Elinor said. “We need to show the Colonel too how much we appreciate his hosting your brother and mine. This week was certainly not how he would have wished to spend his time.”

“I had already spoken with the innkeeper at the Fox and Hound.” Edward informed her. “He will be getting us a bottle of that scotch whiskey that Brandon is so fond of as soon as his next shipment arrives.”

“Excellent.” Elinor kept him on the stoop a moment longer. “Edward, do you truly wish to join the Bishop's staff?”

“Heavens no.” His response was heartfelt. “I far prefer parish work among these good people. But if it will placate my mother, it will do no harm to cultivate the Bishop. He is actually a most scholarly man who has no desire whatsoever to advance in the church hierarchy. I could learn much from him.

“And there is every possibility that when the Rev. Small passes away, my mother might see fit to help us obtain the living there. The two parishes could easily be combined and still allow us to remain here close to Delaford. She would see it as a means to advance to a Deanship. And you must grant that the somewhat larger income would be useful.”

“I am so glad.” Elinor stepped into her husband's embrace. “Our life here may not be luxurious, but we are happy are we not?”

“I for one could not be happier.” Edward told her. “Shall we join everyone for a cup of tea?”

“Indeed. I too should express my gratitude to Mrs. Jennings. In a rather round about way, we do owe much of our happiness to her. And she did help bring your mother around.”

As they entered the house they were greeted by an excited Margaret, “Elinor, I have had a letter from Stewart. All the way from Gibraltar. He says that he thinks of me every day is counting down the time when he can return to me! Is that not wonderful?”

“It certainly is.” Elinor linked arms with her sister. “Come let us tell mother. She will be glad to
hear of it.”

The party congregated for a late breakfast was as happy as any to be found.

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