So Highly Do I Value and Esteem Him

by abluestocking

Summary

Elinor comes to a new realisation amongst the autumn leaves of Barton Cottage.

Notes

See the end of the work for notes.

It was Elinor Dashwood’s good fortune, she came to reflect in later days, that she had been born to parents who were not only well suited, but held for each other that great affinity and affection which brings security and contentment to its entire household. It left its mark on her. She grew to womanhood in a house blessed by love and care, and when she reached the age of nineteen yet unmarried, she did not despair, despite being abandoned by her father’s death to the vicissitudes of the world. On the contrary, she found that she did not care to enter into a match that would not be blessed by an equal affinity; her temperament, which was of a more sensible cast than the passionate sensibility of her younger sister, yet refused to consider wealth and prosperity alone to be a reason for quitting the company of her mother and sisters. Elinor did not need to see great passion, or a sophisticated appreciation for the finest forms of culture, to find a man worthy of her regard, as her sister Marianne did, but she demanded a certain quiet good-naturedness and amiability of spirit, sense and gentleness combined. Absent such a man, she was prepared never to settle for the sake of respectability alone.

She had known a young man in Sussex, after the untimely death of her father, whom she had begun to hope might provide such domestic felicity as would tempt her from her mother’s side; and her sister and mother had been so in advance of her feelings, as to begin to plan for her happy establishment as mistress of her own house. Yet such was not to be. It had been some months since their removal to Devonshire, and Edward Ferrars had not only refused to take up the
invitation tendered to visit Barton Cottage, but had failed to write and make his apologies. His affections must be, if not engaged elsewhere, not engaged with Elinor, and she accepted this with the sense and equanimity to which nature had endowed her. Being unsure of his own feelings, she had attempted to refrain from bestowing her own in advance of what she might prudently risk. The disappointment was nonetheless sharp at first, but bearable, and she had faith that the passage of time would smooth the memories.

In this moment, however, her own infelicity in love was thrown into the greater relief by her younger sister Marianne’s wealth of suitors – not only did Marianne have the handsome, sensitive Willoughby near by her hand, but also the distinguished local bachelor Colonel Brandon. Or so the Mrs Jennings of the world would have it; and surely Colonel Brandon did smile when the Dashwoods were present, a soft shy smile no less gentle for being a little stiff around the edges. He was not vivacious and lively, as was Willoughby, her sister’s preferred suitor, and knowing Marianne as she did, Elinor had compassion for him. She saw the gentleman in his gravity and reserve, and respected the thoughtfulness of his manners, but Marianne saw only age and dullness, and said as much.

“He is a fine man,” said Marianne one day, as they sat underneath a tree behind the cottage. “It is only that I do not understand why he must always inflict himself on us. No one thinks badly of him; but he must see that he tires us all so.”

“He does not tire me,” Elinor said, quietly. She was afraid it might rain; Willoughby and Marianne, who had met in a rainstorm, were inclined to think the rain romantic, and would run laughing for the house, but she thought of the dresses that would need drying, and prayed the rain would not come today. “I find his manners excellent, and he is well-read and widely travelled. He is entirely amiable.”

“Oh, let no one say that he is not amiable,” Willoughby said, with a cunning flick of his hair that made Marianne smile up at him, her book of sonnets lying open and forgotten in her hand. “Proclaim him the most amiable in the land, and have done! But he has no taste, no genius, no spirit, and the charms of respectability and fortune must pale when set against such insipidity.”

“I think him a sensible man, and sense will always have attractions for me,” Elinor said. “Perhaps he has his imperfections, as must we all, but I cannot think them as grave as you would have them. He is highly esteemed by us all, and every time I see him, I take pains to converse with him. He has always answered my inquiries with readiness and good nature.”

Willoughby laughed, and said something about Colonel Brandon refusing to buy his brown mare, and soon turned the conversation expertly to another lane, with Marianne’s shining eyes on his.

It was too soon to think of what might come of autumn afternoons like this one, but watching them together, Elinor thought that she would not long have both sisters at her side. A bittersweet thought, with her own disappointment not long behind her; but Marianne’s face was so open, so free and happy, that she could not find it in her to cavil.

Perhaps it was their recent conversation, but she thought of Colonel Brandon, and did wish him indifferent. Mrs Jennings was sure that he was caught by Marianne’s beauty and charm, and it might be so; but it might be that she was wrong, and Elinor did hope so. For though she might worry about the short acquaintance of Marianne and Willoughby, they seemed only too well-matched, and it could not be much longer now before he would speak.

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There are moments where the world may turn one way, or it may turn another.
In Sussex, a man hesitated before beginning a journey, thinking of the weather, or the book he had read that morning, or the woman he might love; because of the delay, his sister called him back to see a letter she had received from their mother in Town, and the course of his journey was altered. He went to Town as bidden, and because he did so, he later met again there his affianced bride, who had not forgotten him. They were wed that summer; his bride, though at first cast out by his family due to her lower origins, won her way into his mother’s affections with artfulness and care. If he thought of another woman whom he truly loved, he tried to put such thoughts away from him as quickly as he could, for it was past mending now, and he must keep his honour unstained.

His life changed that day in Sussex, though he did not know it.

In Devonshire, a man nearly stayed at home one morning, but he summoned his courage and set off on his morning’s walk, carrying a book in one hand and some flowers in the other. He passed a cottage on his way through the countryside, and, hearing voices, stepped around the corner to greet his friends; then the flowers dropped to his side as he understood their words, and found himself discussed. He watched the merry wit of the young buck, confident in his youth and vigour, displaying himself before the girl who watched him with laughter in her eyes. He had been a fool, the man thought, a fool of five-and-thirty, to think of love with a girl of seventeen, and she in love with another. His heart was not yet engaged, only his fancy, so it was no great wrench to let her go out of it, with a smile and a shake of his head at his own foolishness. He turned to go, hardly knowing that he was still hearing the quiet assurance of her older sister’s tones, hardly realising that her words fell like balm upon his lonely heart. The flowers he gave to their mother, a chivalrous token; he turned again for home.

His life changed that day in Devonshire, though he did not know it.

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The affection of Marianne and Willoughby grew apace over the autumn. Elinor still could not entirely quiet a lingering whisper of worry, at how short their acquaintance had been and at how quickly Marianne’s affection had been given. She could not help but wonder if such an immediate affection would not flare wildly, and then burn itself out, leaving only ashes behind; it did not help that the two had eyes for no one else, and spent the entirety of their time together. If they played at cards in the evenings, Willoughby cheated himself to give her a winning hand; if they danced, Willoughby cared only for Marianne, and kept his eyes on her even when he did his gentlemanly duty of partnering another; if they spent an afternoon in the grounds, his entire being was bent on making her laugh.

Perhaps, Elinor thought, she was only jealous of her sister, and the thought made her examine herself closely. No, the lingering attachment to Edward Ferrars had faded as the weeks went by and no word came from him; if he had come to Barton Cottage as he had promised, she thought the tendril might have bloomed again, but he had not, and even the softest of nascent affections must wither without tending. She had no reason to balk at her sister’s happiness; and indeed, however unwise she still thought such an open partiality, when no public promise had been given, she could not help but smile at Marianne’s joy. She loved her sister, and though Willoughby was not a man she would have loved herself, still he loved Marianne, and that was as it should be.

Marianne’s desertion did leave Elinor partnerless. She found herself more and more in the company of Colonel Brandon, and the more she spoke to him, the more she considered herself vindicated in the defence she had mounted against the others’ disdain. He was a kind man, and shy where she had thought him reserved; his dignity did not prevent him from smiling, and he was both well-read and well-travelled. She asked him of India, and examined the reading she had done in her father’s library against his own experiences. They passed many a pleasant hour speaking of the world, and the people in it. Marianne had always cared about people’s passions, their loves
and romances and tragedies, and to her Cleopatra and Juliet must always hold fascination. Elinor cared rather for people’s lives, the everyday practicality of how a person must live, whether that be in Verona or ancient Egypt or modern India – or Devonshire. She found a thoughtful companion in Colonel Brandon, though she wondered that he was so ready to spend his time in her company. Perhaps his initial fancy for Marianne had faded, in the light of so blatant a partiality between her sister and Willoughby. She was glad for him if it had, though sometimes it seemed to her that there was a great loneliness behind his deep eyes.

Elinor could not wholly understand that loneliness, living surrounded by two sisters and a mother in a small cottage, and yet somehow she did. Marianne had always been her confidante, and now that she was at Willoughby’s side, Elinor found that Margaret was too young for companionship, and that her mother was already attached to Mrs Jennings. Indeed, sometimes Elinor felt quite alone, even as the bells of Marianne’s laughter rang out next to her.

“Shall I be able to interest you in the new music I had sent up from Town?” Colonel Brandon asked, coming up.

“Yes, thank you,” Elinor said, gratefully, and accepted his arm.

She was far from being the musician that Marianne was. Marianne breathed music, the notes and emotions flowing through her fingers, though her technical excellence sometimes left something to be desired, as she could not always find the time to practice. Elinor was merely competent; the notes she played were content to remain simply notes, and did not take magical flight. Yet she loved music, and when she sat at Sir John’s instrument to run her fingers through the lines of Colonel Brandon’s new piece, she felt a smile pulling at her lips. It was a simple piece, but beautiful, and she smiled up at the man who had brought it for her, and felt well content.

Summoned by the sound of her playing, it was not long before Willoughby and Marianne joined them. Elinor felt unaccountably cross, loath to give up her seat and hear Marianne instantly better her own efforts; but Colonel Brandon, with his courtly half-smile, gave Marianne new music of her own, a complicated and fiery piece that had the two lovebirds exclaiming over it in no time. They left them to it, and walked to the window, looking out over the park.

The autumn leaves had turned their colours. Elinor, looking out at them, felt as if she too were clinging to a branch with the last tendril of her strength. She was not sure why she felt this way; Marianne had every likelihood of being married soon, but she had no such expectations for herself. She would stay at Barton Cottage, and spend her days quietly with her mother and Margaret, and her evenings at Sir John’s, smiling politely at Mrs Jennings’ japes and playing cards when asked.

And perhaps, she thought, looking up at the quiet man next to her, talking to Colonel Brandon.

“It is a beautiful prospect,” he said now, his eyes on the hills.

The rain was coming down quite strongly outside, and it made Elinor unaccountably shiver. She felt very aware of the human warmth of the man next to her, standing so looking out at the cold. “It is,” she said, and heard her own voice waver only slightly. “It will rain tomorrow, and the whole excursion to Whitwell will never come off.”

He smiled at her, and there was something in it she did not quite recognise. “We must not bring practicality into the question, Miss Dashwood. The grounds are beautiful, and your sister has expressed an explicit desire to see them.”

Why did her skin prickle at that, and her inner calm bridle? She almost frowned in consternation at
herself, but he was still looking at her. She summoned her wits back. “Surely they are most beautiful in the summer, when Sir John is accustomed to take a party to view them.”

“Yes,” Colonel Brandon said, and there was a smile in his eyes, and if she was not mistaken, in his deep voice as well. “They are most beautiful in the summer; but young ladies cannot wait for months. It must be accomplished before the week is out, and the fancy flown.”

She was a young lady herself – but looking at him, she knew he had not meant to cause offence, by keeping her out of that number. Indeed, she rather thought he had meant it in another way entirely, and that sudden thought made her catch her breath for a second. “If rain spoil our party, the renown of your brother-in-law’s grounds will suffer most terribly in the eyes of all, I assure you.”

“The grounds will not suffer in your eyes,” the Colonel said, softly. “You will see past the darkening sky and the barren trees, the rain and the storm, and see only the beauty of the landscape itself.”

“If ‘tis as bad as that, Marianne will find it wonderful,” Elinor said, scarcely sure of her words; but Marianne would love a storm, the crash and downpour and dramatics of it all, and Elinor could see her standing on top of a hill in the pouring rain, laughing for the joy of it.

His brow lowered, as he thought through what she said. “Yes,” he agreed. “But you would see not only the rain, but how it would help the gardens; not only the storm, but how it would swell the rivers. You see not only the beauty, but the sense behind the divine handiwork, and you find beauty in the sense itself.”

She found herself flushing, the rose mounting to her cheeks, where it always lived in Marianne’s. “Autumn is a time when the world is falling towards barrenness, true, but it holds within itself the seeds of renewal.” She looked down at her hands, and then back up into his face. “And when spring comes, perhaps we could take a party to Whitwell again, and see its fine prospects in the full bloom of the new year.”

But Marianne might not be there by spring; her laughter might be gone from the cottage, forever Willoughby’s, and if Elinor could not begrudge her joy, she could rue the speed with which it would make her sister a grown woman and a stranger to their house. Ever since Willoughby had arrived, and Elinor had seen their faces as they looked at each other, she had known that her days with Marianne were numbered. She had thought that she would be desperately lonely when Marianne went; this evening, for the first time, she began to hope, somewhere in the quiet reaches of her heart, that she might not be after all.

Something of this must have showed in her face – what, she did not know – for Colonel Brandon blinked down at her, and then smiled. He looked younger when he smiled, less the staid dignified householder and more a man who still had dreams. She found, quite suddenly and rather to her own surprise, that she wanted to touch the dimple in his cheek – and this was her undoing. She flushed yet more fiercely, and turned to look out at the prospect again.

“Yes,” Colonel Brandon said, standing so near and yet so far. “If it please you, Miss Dashwood, we will take a party to Whitwell again in the spring. There is a beautiful landscape garden, which the ladies will surely enjoy.”

He paused, and she listened to the pause, keeping her silence, her cheeks burning.

His voice was slightly, ever so slightly, deeper when he continued. “I admit that I myself am partial to a grove of cherry trees, which are not part of the garden proper at all. Perhaps you will not like them, however; they are not orderly. They were planted by a farmer whose farm has since
become part of the estate.”

He was teasing her, she realised after a moment, and she turned to see a shy light in his eyes. “Not everything has to be orderly,” she said, and let him see the smile in her own eyes. “Some things in life are the sweeter for being disorderly, for coming as a surprise.”

“Is that sensible?” he asked, the light still in his eyes, but his mouth still held with that careful reserve she had come to esteem.

She held his eyes for a moment longer – and then smiled. Not the way Marianne would, unprotected and fiercely free, but the way she, Elinor, would, thoughtful and chosen; and no less glad for that. “Cherry trees are quite sensible,” she informed him, still smiling. “They are beautiful, which gladdens the soul, and they give us fruit for our table. What could be more sensible than that?”

When he smiled at her, she knew that what she had taken for esteem was not quite so, and a part of her woke that had half thought it would never wake again.

“I am glad to hear you speak so,” he said, simply, and they smiled at each other until Mrs Jennings demanded they make up the number at cards.

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End Notes

1) The title comes from Sense and Sensibility itself:

Elinor, speaking to her mother during Marianne's illness: "...even my own knowledge of him [Colonel Brandon], though lately acquired, is very considerable; and so highly do I value and esteem him, that if Marianne can be happy with him, I shall be as ready as yourself to think our connection the greatest blessing to us in the world."

2) The scene between Willoughby, Elinor, and Marianne in which they discuss Colonel Brandon is inspired by one from the book, although it's altered, and Colonel Brandon was not eavesdropping in the book.

3) I don't usually write in this style, so if you notice anything out of place, please do let me know!

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