

Her love made no answer; and after slightly bowing to the ladies, began complaining of the weather.

‘How horrid all this is!’ said he. ‘Such weather makes every thing and every body disgusting. Dullness is as much produced within doors as without, by rain. It makes one detest all one’s acquaintance. What the devil does Sir John mean by not having a billiard room in his house? How few people know what comfort is! Sir John is as stupid as the weather.’

The rest of the company soon dropt in.

‘I am afraid, Miss Marianne,’ said Sir John, ‘you have not been able to take your usual walk to Allenham today.’

Marianne looked very grave and said nothing.

‘Oh, don’t be so sly before us,’ said Mrs Palmer; ‘for we know all about it, I assure you; and I admire your taste very much, for I think he is extremely handsome. We do not live a great way from him in the country, you know. Not above ten miles, I dare say.’

‘Much nearer thirty,’ said her husband.

‘Ah, well; there is not much difference. I never was at his house; but they say it is a sweet pretty place.’

‘As vile a spot as I ever saw in my life,’ said Mr Palmer.

Marianne remained perfectly silent, though her countenance betrayed her interest in what was said.

‘Is it very ugly?’ continued Mrs Palmer—‘then it must be some other place that is so pretty I suppose.’

When they were seated in the dining room, Sir John observed with regret that they were only eight all together.

‘My dear,’ said he to his lady, ‘it is very provoking that we should be so few.

Why did not you ask the Gilberts to come to us today?’

‘Did not I tell you, Sir John, when you spoke to me about it before, that it could not be done? They dined with us last.’

‘You and I, Sir John,’ said Mrs Jennings, ‘should not stand upon such ceremony.’

‘Then you would be very ill-bred,’ cried Mr Palmer.

‘My love you contradict every body,’ said his wife with her usual laugh. ‘Do you know that you are quite rude?’

‘I did not know I contradicted any body in calling your mother ill-bred.’

‘Ay, you may abuse me as you please,’ said the good-natured old lady, ‘you have taken Charlotte off my hands, and cannot give her back again. So there I have the whip hand of you.’

Charlotte laughed heartily to think that her husband could not get rid of her; and exultingly said, she did not care how cross he was to her, as they must live together. It was impossible for any one to be more thoroughly good-natured, or more determined to be happy than Mrs Palmer. The studied indifference, insolence, and discontent of her husband gave her no pain; and when he scolded or abused her, she was highly diverted.

‘Mr Palmer is so droll!’ said she, in a whisper, to Elinor. ‘He is always out of humour.’

Elinor was not inclined, after a little observation, to give him credit for being so genuinely and unaffectedly ill-natured or ill-bred as he wished to appear. His temper might perhaps be a little soured by finding, like many others of his sex, that through some unaccountable bias in favour of beauty, he was the husband of a very silly woman—but she knew that this kind of blunder was too common for any sensible man to be lastingly hurt by it. It was rather a wish of distinction, she believed, which produced his contemptuous treatment of every body, and his general abuse of every thing before him. It was the desire of appearing superior to other people. The motive was too common to be wondered at; but the means, however they might succeed by establishing his superiority in ill-breeding, were not likely to attach any one to him except his wife.

‘Oh, my dear Miss Dashwood,’ said Mrs Palmer soon afterwards, ‘I have got such a favour to ask of you and your sister. Will you come and spend some time at Cleveland this Christmas? Now, pray do,—and come while the Westons are with us. You cannot think how happy I shall be! It will be quite delightful!—My love,’ applying to her husband, ‘don’t you long to have the Miss Dashwoods come to Cleveland?’

‘Certainly,’ he replied, with a sneer—‘I came into Devonshire with no other view.’

‘There now,’—said his lady, ‘you see Mr Palmer expects you; so you cannot refuse to come.’

They both eagerly and resolutely declined her invitation.

‘But indeed you must and shall come. I am sure you will like it of all things. The Westons will be with us, and it will be quite delightful. You cannot think what a sweet place Cleveland is; and we are so gay now, for Mr Palmer is always going about the country canvassing against the election; and so many people came to dine with us that I never saw before, it is quite charming! But, poor fellow! it is very fatiguing to him! for he is forced to make every body like him.’

Elinor could hardly keep her countenance as she assented to the hardship of such an obligation.

‘How charming it will be,’ said Charlotte, ‘when he is in Parliament!—won’t it? How I shall laugh! It will be so ridiculous to see all his letters directed to him with an M.P.—But do you know, he says, he will never frank for me? He declares he won’t. Don’t you, Mr Palmer?’

Mr Palmer took no notice of her.

‘He cannot bear writing, you know,’ she continued—‘he says it is quite shocking.’

‘No,’ said he, ‘I never said any thing so irrational. Don’t palm all your abuses of language upon me.’

‘There now, you see how droll he is. This is always the way with him! Sometimes he won’t speak to me for half a day together, and then he comes out with something so droll—all about any thing in the world.’


She surprised Elinor very much as they returned into the drawing-room, by asking her whether she did not like Mr Palmer excessively.

‘Certainly,’ said Elinor; ‘he seems very agreeable.’

‘Well—I am so glad you do. I thought you would, he is so pleasant; and Mr Palmer is excessively pleased with you and your sisters I can tell you, and you can’t think how disappointed he will be if you don’t come to Cleveland.—I can’t imagine why you should object to it.’

Elinor was again obliged to decline her invitation; and by changing the subject, put a stop to her entreaties. She thought it probable that as they lived in the same county, Mrs Palmer might be able to give some more particular account of Willoughby’s general character, than could be gathered from the Middletons’ partial acquaintance with him; and she was eager to gain from any one, such a confirmation of his merits as might remove the possibility of fear from Marianne. She began by inquiring if they saw much of Mr Willoughby at Cleveland, and whether they were intimately acquainted with him.

Chapter XX

s the Miss Dashwoods entered the drawing-room of the park the next day, at one door, Mrs Palmer came running in at the other, looking as good humoured and merry as before. She took them all most affectionately by the hand, and expressed great delight in seeing them again.

‘I am so glad to see you!’ said she, seating herself between Elinor and Marianne, ‘for it is so bad a day I was afraid you might not come, which would be a shocking thing, as we go away again tomorrow. We must go, for the Westons come to us next week you know. It was quite a sudden thing our coming at all, and I knew nothing of it till the carriage was coming to the door, and then Mr Palmer asked me if I would go with him to Barton. He is so droll! He never tells me any thing! I am so sorry we cannot stay longer; however we shall meet again in town very soon, I hope.’

They were obliged to put an end to such an expectation.

‘Not go to town!’ cried Mrs Palmer, with a laugh, ‘I shall be quite disappointed if you do not. I could get the nicest house in the world for you, next door to ours, in Hanover-square. You must come, indeed. I am sure I shall be very happy to chaperon you at any time till I am confined, if Mrs Dashwood should not like to go into public.’

They thanked her; but were obliged to resist all her entreaties.

‘Oh, my love,’ cried Mrs Palmer to her husband, who just then entered the room—‘you must help me to persuade the Miss Dashwoods to go to town this winter.’

‘Oh dear, yes; I know him extremely well,’ replied Mrs Palmer;—‘Not that I ever spoke to him, indeed; but I have seen him for ever in town. Somehow or other I never happened to be staying at Barton while he was at Allenham. Mama saw him here once before;—but I was with my uncle at Weymouth. However, I dare say we should have seen a great deal of him in Somersetshire, if it had not happened very unluckily that we should never have been in the country together. He is very little at Combe, I believe; but if he were ever so much there, I do not think Mr Palmer would visit him, for he is in the opposition, you know, and besides it is such a way off. I know why you inquire about him, very well; your sister is to marry him. I am monstrous glad of it, for then I shall have her for a neighbour you know.’

‘Upon my word,’ replied Elinor, ‘you know much more of the matter than I do, if you have any reason to expect such a match.’

‘Don’t pretend to deny it, because you know it is what every body talks of. I assure you I heard of it in my way through town.’

‘My dear Mrs Palmer!’

‘Upon my honour I did.—I met Colonel Brandon Monday morning in Bond-street, just before we left town, and he told me of it directly.’

‘You surprise me very much. Colonel Brandon tell you of it! Surely you must be mistaken. To give such intelligence to a person who could not be interested in it, even if it were true, is not what I should expect Colonel Brandon to do.’

‘But I do assure you it was so, for all that, and I will tell you how it happened. When we met him, he turned back and walked with us; and so we began talking of my brother and sister, and one thing and another, and I said to him, “So, Colonel, there is a new family come to Barton cottage, I hear, and mama sends me word they are very pretty; and that one of them is going to be married to Mr Willoughby of Combe Magna. Is it true, pray? for of course you must know, as you have been in Devonshire so lately.”’

‘And what did the Colonel say?’

‘Oh—he did not say much; but he looked as if he knew it to be true, so from that moment I set it down as certain. It will be quite delightful, I declare! When is it to take place?’

‘Mr Brandon was very well I hope?’

‘Oh! yes, quite well; and so full of your praises, he did nothing but say fine things of you.’

‘I am flattered by his commendation. He seems an excellent man; and I think him uncommonly pleasing.’

‘So do I. He is such a charming man, that it is quite a pity he should be so grave and so dull. Mamma says *he* was in love with your sister too. I assure you it was a great compliment if he was, for he hardly ever falls in love with any body.’

‘Is Mr Willoughby much known in your part of Somersetshire?’ said Elinor.

‘Oh! yes, extremely well; that is, I do not believe many people are acquainted with him, because Combe Magna is so far off; but they all think him extremely agreeable I assure you. Nobody is more liked than Mr Willoughby wherever he goes, and so you may tell your sister. She is a monstrous lucky girl to get him, upon my honour; not but that he is much more lucky in getting her, because she is so very handsome and agreeable, that nothing can be good enough for her. However, I don’t think her hardly at all handsomer than you, I assure you; for I think you both excessively pretty, and so does Mr Palmer too I am sure, though we could not get him to own it last night.’

Mrs Palmer’s information respecting Willoughby was not very material; but any testimony in his favour, however small, was pleasing to her.

‘I am so glad we are got acquainted at last,’ continued Charlotte.—‘And now I hope we shall always be great friends. You can’t think how much I longed to see you! It is so delightful that you should live at the cottage! Nothing can be like it, to be sure! And I am so glad your sister is going to be well married! I hope you will be a great deal at Combe Magna. It is a sweet place, by all accounts.’

‘You have been long acquainted with Colonel Brandon, have not you?’

‘Yes, a great while; ever since my sister married. He was a particular friend of Sir John’s. I believe,’ she added in a low voice, ‘he would have been very glad to have had me, if he could. Sir John and Lady Middleton wished it very much. But mamma did not think the match good enough for me, otherwise Sir John would have mentioned it to the Colonel, and we should have been married immediately.’

‘Did not Colonel Brandon know of Sir John’s proposal to your mother before it was made? Had he never owned his affection to yourself?’

‘They mean no less to be civil and kind to us now,’ said Elinor, ‘by these frequent invitations, than by those which we received from them a few weeks ago. The alteration is not in them, if their parties are grown tedious and dull. We must look for the change elsewhere.’

'Oh, no; but if mama had not objected to it, I dare say he would have liked it of all things. He had not seen me then above twice, for it was before I left school. However, I am much happier as I am. Mr Palmer is the kind of man I like.'



'I DECLARE THEY ARE QUITE CHARMING.'

'Here comes Marianne,' cried Sir John. 'Now, Palmer, you shall see a monstrous pretty girl.'

He immediately went into the passage, opened the front door, and ushered her in himself. Mrs Jennings asked her, as soon as she appeared, if she had not been to Allenham; and Mrs Palmer laughed so heartily at the question, as to show she understood it. Mr Palmer looked up on her entering the room, stared at her some minutes, and then returned to his newspaper. Mrs Palmer's eye was now caught by the drawings which hung round the room. She got up to examine them.

'Oh! dear, how beautiful these are! Well! how delightful! Do but look, mamma, how sweet! I declare they are quite charming; I could look at them for ever.' And then sitting down again, she very soon forgot that there were any such things in the room.

When Lady Middleton rose to go away, Mr Palmer rose also, laid down the newspaper, stretched himself and looked at them all around.

'My love, have you been asleep?' said his wife, laughing.

He made her no answer; and only observed, after again examining the room, that it was very low pitched, and that the ceiling was crooked. He then made his bow, and departed with the rest.

Sir John had been very urgent with them all to spend the next day at the park. Mrs Dashwood, who did not chuse to dine with them oftener than they dined at the cottage, absolutely refused on her own account; her daughters might do as they pleased. But they had no curiosity to see how Mr and Mrs Palmer ate their dinner, and no expectation of pleasure from them in any other way. They attempted, therefore, to excuse themselves; the weather was uncertain, and not likely to be good. But Sir John would not be satisfied—the carriage should be sent for them and they must come. Lady Middleton too, though she did not press their mother, pressed them. Mrs Jennings and Mrs Palmer joined their entreaties, all seemed equally anxious to avoid a family party; and the young ladies were obliged to yield.

'Why should they ask us?' said Marianne, as soon as they were gone. 'The rent of this cottage is said to be low; but we have it on very hard terms, if we are to dine at the park whenever any one is staying either with them, or with us.'

Mrs Palmer, on the contrary, who was strongly endowed by nature with a turn for being uniformly civil and happy, was hardly seated before her admiration of the parlour and every thing in it burst forth.

‘Well! what a delightful room this is! I never saw anything so charming! Only think, Mama, how it is improved since I was here last! I always thought it such a sweet place, ma’am! (turning to Mrs Dashwood) but you have made it so charming! Only look, sister, how delightful every thing is! How I should like such a house for myself! Should not you, Mr Palmer?’

Mr Palmer made her no answer, and did not even raise his eyes from the newspaper.

‘Mr Palmer does not hear me,’ said she, laughing; ‘he never does sometimes. It is so ridiculous!’

This was quite a new idea to Mrs Dashwood; she had never been used to find wit in the inattention of any one, and could not help looking with surprise at them both.

Mrs Jennings, in the meantime, talked on as loud as she could, and continued her account of their surprise, the evening before, on seeing their friends, without ceasing till every thing was told. Mrs Palmer laughed heartily at the recollection of their astonishment, and every body agreed, two or three times over, that it had been quite an agreeable surprise.

‘You may believe how glad we all were to see them,’ added Mrs Jennings, leaning forward towards Elinor, and speaking in a low voice as if she meant to be heard by no one else, though they were seated on different sides of the room; ‘but, however, I can’t help wishing they had not travelled quite so fast, nor made such a long journey of it, for they came all round by London upon account of some business, for you know (nodding significantly and pointing to her daughter) it was wrong in her situation. I wanted her to stay at home and rest this morning, but she would come with us; she longed so much to see you all!’


Mrs Palmer laughed, and said it would not do her any harm.

‘She expects to be confined in February,’ continued Mrs Jennings.

Lady Middleton could no longer endure such a conversation, and therefore exerted herself to ask Mr Palmer if there was any news in the paper.

‘No, none at all,’ he replied, and read on.

Chapter XXI

HE Palmers returned to Cleveland the next day, and the two families at Barton were again left to entertain each other. But this did not last long; Elinor had hardly got their last visitors out of her head, had hardly done wondering at Charlotte’s being so happy without a cause, at Mr Palmer’s acting so simply, with good abilities, and at the strange unsuitableness which often existed between husband and wife, before Sir John’s and Mrs Jennings’s active zeal in the cause of society, procured her some other new acquaintance to see and observe.

In a morning’s excursion to Exeter, they had met with two young ladies, whom Mrs Jennings had the satisfaction of discovering to be her relations, and this was enough for Sir John to invite them directly to the park, as soon as their present engagements at Exeter were over. Their engagements at Exeter instantly gave way before such an invitation, and Lady Middleton was thrown into no little alarm on the return of Sir John, by hearing that she was very soon to receive a visit from two girls whom she had never seen in her life, and of whose elegance,—whose tolerable gentility even, she could have no proof; for the assurances of her husband and mother on that subject went for nothing at all. Their being her relations too made it so much the worse; and Mrs Jennings’s attempts at consolation were therefore unfortunately founded, when she advised her daughter not to care about their being so fashionable; because they were all cousins and must put up with one another. As it was impossible, however, now to prevent their coming, Lady Middleton resigned herself to the idea of it, with all the philosophy of a well-bred woman,

contenting herself with merely giving her husband a gentle reprimand on the subject five or six times every day.

The young ladies arrived: their appearance was by no means ungenteel or unfashionable. Their dress was very smart, their manners very civil, they were delighted with the house, and in raptures with the furniture, and they happened to be so doatingly fond of children that Lady Middleton's good opinion was engaged in their favour before they had been an hour at the Park. She declared them to be very agreeable girls indeed, which for her ladyship was enthusiastic admiration. Sir John's confidence in his own judgment rose with this animated praise, and he set off directly for the cottage to tell the Miss Dashwoods of the Miss Steeles' arrival, and to assure them of their being the sweetest girls in the world. From such commendation as this, however, there was not much to be learned; Elinor well knew that the sweetest girls in the world were to be met with in every part of England, under every possible variation of form, face, temper and understanding. Sir John wanted the whole family to walk to the Park directly and look at his guests. Benevolent, philanthropic man! It was painful to him even to keep a third cousin to himself.

'Do come now,' said he—'pray come—you must come—I declare you shall come—you can't think how you will like them. Lucy is monstrous pretty, and so good humoured and agreeable! The children are all hanging about her already, as if she was an old acquaintance. And they both long to see you of all things, for they have heard at Exeter that you are the most beautiful creatures in the world; and I have told them it is all very true, and a great deal more. You will be delighted with them I am sure. They have brought the whole coach full of playthings for the children. How can you be so cross as not to come? Why they are your cousins, you know, after a fashion. *You* are my cousins, and they are my wife's, so you must be related.'

But Sir John could not prevail. He could only obtain a promise of their calling at the Park within a day or two, and then left them in amazement at their indifference, to walk home and boast anew of their attractions to the Miss Steeles, as he had been already boasting of the Miss Steeles to them.

When their promised visit to the Park and consequent introduction to these young ladies took place, they found in the appearance of the eldest, who was nearly thirty, with a very plain and not a sensible face, nothing to admire; but in the other, who was not more than two or three and twenty, they acknowledged

'Never mind if they do. It is only the Palmers. Charlotte is very pretty, I can tell you. You may see her if you look this way.'

As Elinor was certain of seeing her in a couple of minutes, without taking that liberty, she begged to be excused.

'Where is Marianne? Has she run away because we are come? I see her instrument is open.'

'She is walking, I believe.'

They were now joined by Mrs Jennings, who had not patience enough to wait till the door was opened before she told *her* story. She came hallooing to the window, 'How do you do, my dear? How does Mrs Dashwood do? And where are your sisters? What! all alone! you will be glad of a little company to sit with you. I have brought my other son and daughter to see you. Only think of their coming so suddenly! I thought I heard a carriage last night, while we were drinking our tea, but it never entered my head that it could be them. I thought of nothing but whether it might not be Colonel Brandon come back again; so I said to Sir John, I do think I hear a carriage; perhaps it is Colonel Brandon come back again—'

Elinor was obliged to turn from her, in the middle of her story, to receive the rest of the party; Lady Middleton introduced the two strangers; Mrs Dashwood and Margaret came down stairs at the same time, and they all sat down to look at one another, while Mrs Jennings continued her story as she walked through the passage into the parlour, attended by Sir John.

Mrs Palmer was several years younger than Lady Middleton, and totally unlike her in every respect. She was short and plump, had a very pretty face, and the finest expression of good humour in it that could possibly be. Her manners were by no means so elegant as her sister's, but they were much more prepossessing. She came in with a smile, smiled all the time of her visit, except when she laughed, and smiled when she went away. Her husband was a grave looking young man of five or six and twenty, with an air of more fashion and sense than his wife, but of less willingness to please or be pleased. He entered the room with a look of self-consequence, slightly bowed to the ladies, without speaking a word, and, after briefly surveying them and their apartments, took up a newspaper from the table, and continued to read it as long as he staid.