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Sense & Sensibility

Written by Joanna Trollope

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Sense & Sensibility

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Volume I

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From their windows – their high, generous Georgian windows – the view was, they all agreed, spectacular. It was a remarkable view of Sussex parkland, designed and largely planted two hundred years before to give the fortunate occupants of Norland Park the very best of what nature could offer when tamed by the civilising hand of man. There were gently undulating sweeps of green; there were romantic but manageable stretches of water; there were magnificent stands of ancient trees under which sheep and deer decoratively grazed. Add to all that the occasional architectural punctuation of graceful lengths of park railing and the prospect was, to the Dashwood family, gathered sombrely in their kitchen, gazing out, perfection.

'And now,' their mother said, flinging an arm out theatrically in the direction of the open kitchen window, 'we have to leave all this. This – this *paradise*.' She paused, and then she added, in a lower voice but with distinct emphasis, 'Because of *her*.'

All three daughters watched her, in silence. Even Marianne, the middle one, who had inherited in full her mother's propensity for drama and impulsiveness, said nothing. It was

clear to all of them, from long practice, that their mother had not finished. While they waited, they switched their collective gaze to the scrubbed top of the kitchen table, to the spongeware jug of artless garden flowers, randomly arranged, to their chipped and pretty tea mugs. They were quite still, scarcely breathing, three girls waiting for the next maternal tirade.

Belle Dashwood continued to gaze longingly at the view. It had been the girls' father – their recently, appallingly, dead father – who had called their mother Belle. He said, in his emotional, gallant way, that, as a name, Belle was the perfect fit for its owner, and in any case, Isabella, though distinguished, was far too much of a mouthful for daily use.

And so Isabella, more than twenty years ago, had become Belle. And in time, quietly and unobtrusively, she had morphed into Belle Dashwood, as the wife (apparently) of Henry Dashwood, and (more certainly) the mother of Elinor and Marianne and Margaret. They were a lovely family, everyone remarked upon it: that open-hearted man; his pretty, artistic wife; those adorable girls of theirs. Their charm and looks made them universally popular, so that when Henry had had a fairy-tale stroke of luck, and was summoned, with Belle and the girls, to share the great house of a childless old bachelor uncle to whom Henry was the only heir, the world had rejoiced. To be transported from their happy but anxiously threadbare existence to live at Norland Park, with its endless bedrooms and acres, seemed to most of their friends only a delightful instance of the possibility of magic, an example of the occasional value of building castles in the air.

Old Henry Dashwood, uncle to young Henry, was himself part of that nostalgic and romantic belief in the power of dreams. He

had been much beloved, a kind of self-appointed squire to the whole district, generous to the local community and prepared to open the doors of Norland to all manner of charitable events. He had lived at Norland all his life, looked after by a spinster sister, and it was only after she died that he realised the house needed more human life in it than he could possibly provide by himself. And that realisation was swiftly followed by a second one, a recollection of the existence and circumstance of his likeable if not particularly high-achieving heir, his nephew Henry, only child of his younger and long-dead sister, who was now, by all accounts, living on the kind of breadline that old Henry was certain that no Dashwood should ever be reduced to. So young Henry was summoned for an audience, and arrived at Norland with a very appealing companion in tow, and also, to old Henry's particular joy, two little girls and a baby. The family stood in the great hall at Norland and gazed about them in awe and wonder, and old Henry was overcome by the impulse to spread his arms out and to exclaim, there and then, that they were welcome to stay, to come and live with him, to make Norland their home for ever.

'I will rejoice', he said, his voice unsteady with emotion, 'to see life and noise back at the Park.' He had glanced, damp-eyed, at the children. 'And to see your little gumboots kicked off by the front door. My dears. My very dears.'

Elinor, watching her mother now, swallowed. It didn't do to let her mother get too worked up about anything, just as it didn't do to let Marianne get over-excited, either. Belle didn't suffer from the asthma which had killed Elinor's father, young Henry, and which made Marianne so dramatically, alarmingly fragile, but it was never a good thing, all the same, to let Belle

run on down any vehement track, in case she flew out of control, as she often did, and it all ended in tears. Literal tears. Elinor sometimes wondered how much time and energy the whole Dashwood family had wasted in crying. She cleared her throat, as undramatically as she could, to remind her mother that they were still waiting.

Belle gave a little start. She withdrew her gaze from the sight of the huge shadow of the house inching its way across the expanse of turf beyond the window and sighed. Then she said, almost dreamily, 'I came here, you know, with Daddy.'

'Yes,' Elinor said, trying not to sound impatient, 'we know. We came too.'

Belle turned her head sharply and glared at her oldest daughter, almost accusingly.

'We came to Norland', she said, 'because we were *asked*. Daddy and I came here, with you all, to look after Uncle Henry.' She stopped and then she said, more gently, 'Darling Uncle Henry.'

There was another silence, broken only by Belle repeating softly, as if to herself, 'Darling Uncle Henry.'

'He wasn't actually *that* darling,' Elinor said reasonably. 'He didn't leave you the house. Did he. Or enough money to live on.'

Belle put her chin up slightly.

'He wanted to leave both to Daddy. If Daddy hadn't—' She broke off again.

'Died?' Margaret said helpfully.

Her older sisters turned on her.

'Honestly, Mags—'

'Shut up, shut up, shut the f—'

'Marianne!' Belle said warningly.

Tears immediately sprang to Marianne's eyes. Elinor clamped an arm round her shoulders and held her hard. It must be so awful, she often thought, to take everything to heart so, as Marianne did; to react to every single thing that happened as if you were obliged to respond on behalf of the whole feeling world. Holding her sister tight, to steady her, she took a breath.

'Well,' she said, in as level a voice as she could manage, 'we have to face what we have to face. Don't we. Dad is dead, and he didn't get the house either. Did he. *Darling* Uncle Henry didn't leave him Norland or any money or anything. He got completely seduced by being a great-uncle to a little boy in old age. So he left everything to them. He left it all to John.'

Marianne was quivering rather less. Elinor relaxed her hold and concentrated instead on her mother. She said again, a little louder, 'He's left Norland Park to John.'

Belle turned to look at her. She said reprovingly, 'Darling, he had to.'

'No, he didn't.'

'He did. Houses like Norland go to heirs with sons. They always have. It's called primogeniture. Daddy had Norland for his lifetime.'

Elinor dropped her arm from her sister's shoulders.

'We're not the royal family, Ma,' she said. 'There isn't a *succession* or anything.'

Margaret had been fiddling, as usual, with her iPod, disentangling the earpiece flex from the complicated knot she was constantly, absently, tying it in. Now she looked up, as if she had just realised something.

'I expect,' she said brightly, 'that Dad couldn't leave you anything much because he hadn't married you, had he?'

Marianne gave a little scream.

'Don't say that!'

'Well, it's true.'

Belle closed her eyes.

'*Please* . . .'

Elinor looked at her youngest sister.

'Just because you know something, Mags, or even think it, doesn't necessarily mean that you have to say it.'

Margaret shrugged. It was her 'whatever' shrug. She and her school friends did it perpetually, and when they were asked not to, they held up their splayed fingers in a 'w', to demonstrate the 'whatever' shape instead.

Marianne was crying again. She was the only person Elinor had ever encountered who could cry and still look ravishing. Her nose never seemed to swell or redden, and she appeared able just to let huge tears slide slowly down her face in a way that one ex-boyfriend had said wistfully simply made him want to lick them off her jawline.

'Please don't,' Elinor said despairingly.

Marianne said, almost desperately, between sobs, 'I adore this place . . .'

Elinor looked about her. The kitchen was not only almost painfully familiar to her, but also represented the essence of their life at Norland, its great size and elegant Georgian proportions rendered welcoming and warm by Belle's gift for bohemian homemaking, her eye for colour and fabric and the most beguiling degree of shabbiness. That room had seen every family meal, every storm and tantrum, every celebration and party, almost every line of homework. Uncle Henry had spent hours in the patchwork-covered armchair, a whisky tumbler in his hand,

egging the girls on to divert and outrage him. Their father had spent as many hours in the carver chair at the head of the huge scrubbed table, drawing and reading and always available for interruption or consolation or diversion. To be without this room, and all its memories and capacities, seemed violently and abruptly unendurable. She said, tensely, to her sister, 'We all do.'

Marianne gave a wild and theatrical gesture. She cried, 'I feel as if – as if I'd been born here!'

Elinor repeated, steadily, 'We all do.'

Marianne clenched both fists and beat them lightly against her collarbone.

'No, I feel it *here*. I feel I *belong* at Norland. I might not be able to play away from Norland. I might never be able to play the guitar—'

'Course you will!'

'Darling,' Belle said, looking at Marianne. Her voice was unsteady. 'Darling . . .'

Elinor said wearily, as a precaution to Margaret, 'Don't you start too.'

Margaret shrugged again, but she didn't look tearful. She looked, instead, mildly rebellious; but at thirteen, she often looked like that.

Elinor sighed. She was very tired. She'd been tired for weeks, it seemed, months, tired with the grief of old Uncle Henry dying and then the worse grief, and shock, of Daddy, rushed into hospital after what had at first appeared just a familiar kind of asthma attack, the kind that his blue inhaler usually sorted. But not this time. This time had been terrible, terrifying, seeing him fighting for breath as if someone were holding a pillow over his face, and then the ambulance dash to the hospital, with them all driving

behind him, sick with fear, and then a bit of relief in Accident and Emergency, and a bit more in a private room where he could gasp out that he needed John to come, he needed to see his son John, and then after John's visit, another attack when none of them were there, an attack by himself in that plastic, anonymous room among all the tubes and monitors and heart machines, and the hospital ringing Norland at two in the morning to say that he hadn't made it, that they couldn't help his worn-out heart any more, that he was dead.

They'd all convened in the kitchen then, too, after a last necessary, pointless visit to the hospital. In the dawn, all four of them grey with misery and shock and fatigue, had huddled round the table with mugs of tea clasped in their hands, like lifelines. And it was then that Belle had chosen to remind them, using the sort of faraway voice she used when reading fairy tales aloud, how she and Daddy had run away together, away from his first marriage – well, if facing facts, as Elinor preferred to do, his only marriage – and how, after too many struggling and penurious years, Uncle Henry had taken them in. Uncle Henry was, Belle said, an old romantic at heart, an old romantic who had never married because the girl he wanted wouldn't have him, but who loved to see someone else's adventure turn out to have a happy ending.

'He said to me,' Belle told them, turning her mug slowly in her hands, 'Norland was so huge and so empty that it reproached him every day. He said he didn't give tuppence for whether we were married or not. He said marriage was just a silly old convention to keep society tidy. And he told me that he loved seeing people do things he'd never quite had the nerve to do himself.'

Was it nerve, Elinor had thought, trying to comprehend

what her mother was saying through the fog of her own shock and sorrow, to live with someone for years and never actually get round to marrying them – or was it carelessness? Was it an adventure not to leave a responsible will that would secure the future of the person you'd had three daughters with – or was it feckless? And was it really romantic to risk being the true beneficiary of a wealthy but deeply conventional old uncle by remaining unmarried – or just plain stupid? Anyway, whatever Dad had done, or not done, would Uncle Henry always have left everything to John in the end, simply because John had had a son and not daughters?

She was still angry with Dad, even now, even though she missed him every hour of every day. No, she wasn't angry precisely, she was furious. Plain furious. But it had to be a silent fury because Ma couldn't or wouldn't hear a word against Dad, any more than she would accept responsibility for never giving a moment's thought to the possibility of her own future without him. He had been an asthmatic, after all! The blue inhalers were as much a part of the Dashwood family as the members of it were. He was never going to make old bones, and he was living in a place and a manner that was entirely dependent on the charity and whim of an old man who liked his fantasies to be daring but his facts, his realities, to be orthodox.

Of course Belle would not allow for any mistakes having been made, either on her part or on Dad's. She even insisted for weeks after Dad died, that he and John, his only child and son by that long-ago marriage, had had a death-bed reconciliation in Haywards Heath Hospital, and that they had both wept, and John had promised faithfully that he'd look after his stepmother and the girls.

'He promised,' Belle said, over and over, 'we can stay at Norland for ever. And he'll keep his word. Of course he will. He's Daddy's son, after all.'

And Daddy, Elinor thought, not without a hint of bitterness, is not only safely dead and thus unanswerable, but was perfect. Perfect.

But what had actually happened? Well, what had happened was that they had reckoned without John's wife, hadn't they? In the unbearable aftermath of Dad's death, they had almost forgotten about Fanny. Elinor glanced now across the kitchen to the huge old Welsh dresser, which bore all their everyday mugs and plates, and also holiday postcards from friends and family photographs. There was a framed photograph of Fanny up there, in a girlish white broderie anglaise dress, holding Harry, when he was a baby. Elinor noticed that the photograph had been turned to face the wall, with its back to the room. Despite the distress of the day, Elinor couldn't help an inward smile. What a brilliant little gesture! Who had done it? Margaret, probably, now sitting at the table with her earphones in and her gaze unfocused. Elinor stretched a foot under the table and gave her sister a little nudge of congratulation.

When John had first brought Fanny to meet them, Elinor had thought that nobody so tiny could represent any kind of force. How wrong she'd been! Fanny had turned out to be a pure concentration of self-interest. She was, apparently, just like her equally tiny mother: hard as nails and entirely devoted to status and money. Especially money. Fanny was mad about money. She'd come to her marriage to John with some money of her own, and she had very clear ideas about how to spend it. She had, in fact, very clear ideas about most things – and a will of iron.

Fanny had wanted a man and a big house with land and lots of money to run it and a child, preferably a boy. And she had got them. All of them. And nothing, absolutely nothing, was going to stand in the way of her keeping them and consolidating them. Nothing.

It was outrageous, really, how soon after Dad's death that Fanny came bowling up the drive in her top-of-the-range four-by-four Land Cruiser with Harry in his car seat and the Romanian nanny and the kind of household luggage you only bring if you want to make it very, very plain who's the boss round here now. She brought a bunch of garage forecourt flowers – they even had a sticker on the cellophane wrapping saying 20 per cent more for free – for Belle and then she said would they mind awfully just staying in the kitchen wing for a few hours as she had her London interior designer coming and he charged so much for every hour that she really wanted to be able to concentrate on him.

So they'd taken Harry and the nanny, who had blue varnished nails and a leopard-print miniskirt stretched over her considerable hips, into the kitchen, and tried to give them lunch, but the nanny said she was dieting, and would only have a smoke, instead, and Harry glanced at the food on the plate and then put his thumb in, and closed his eyes in disgust. It was three hours before Fanny, her eyes alight with paint-effect visions, had blown into the kitchen and announced, without any preliminary and as if it would be unquestionably welcome news, that she and John would be moving in in a fortnight.

And they had. So silly, Fanny said firmly, as if no one could possibly disagree with her, so silly to go on paying rent in London when Norland was simply standing waiting for them.

She seemed entirely oblivious to the effect that she was having, and to the utter disregard she displayed for what she was doing to the family for whom Norland had been more home than house for all their childhood years. Her ruthless determination to obliterate the past life of the house and to impose her own expensive and impersonal taste upon it instead was breathtaking. Out with the battered painted furniture, the French armoires, the cascading and faded curtains in ancient brocades, and in with polished granite and stainless steel and state-of-the-art wet rooms. Out with objects of sentimental value and worn Persian rugs and speckled mirrors in dimly gilded frames, and in with modern sculptured 'pieces' and stripped-back floors and vast flat television screens over every beautiful Georgian fireplace.

It was all happening too, it seemed to Belle and her daughters, with an indecent and brutal haste. Fanny arrived with John and Harry and the nanny, and an army of East European workmen, and took over all the best rooms, all the rooms that had once been Uncle Henry's, and the house resounded to the din of sawing and hammering and drilling. Luckily, Elinor supposed, it was summer, so all the windows and doors could be opened to let out the inevitable dust and the builders' smells of raw wood and plaster, but the open windows also meant that nothing audible could be concealed, especially not those things which Elinor grew to suspect Fanny of absolutely intending to be overheard.

They'd heard her, all the last few weeks, talking John out of any generous impulse he might have harboured towards his stepmother and half-sisters. Fanny might be tiny but her voice seemed to carry for miles, even when she was whispering. Usually, they could hear her issuing instructions ('She never

says please,' Margaret pointed out, 'does she?') but if she wanted to get something out of John, she wheedled.

They could hear her, plainly, in their kitchen from the room she had commandeered as a temporary sitting room – drawing room, she called it – working on John. She was probably on his knee a lot of the time, doing her sex-kitten thing, running her little pointed fingers through his hair and somehow indicating that he would have to forgo a lot of bedroom treats if she didn't get her way.

'They can't need *that* much, Johnnie darling. They really can't! I mean, I know Mags is still at school – frightfully expensive, her private school, and really such a waste of money when there's a perfectly adequate state secondary, in Lewes, which is free – but Elinor's nearly qualified and Marianne jolly well ought to be. And Belle could easily go back to work, teaching art, like she used to.'

'She hasn't for yonks,' John said doubtfully. 'Not for as long as I can remember. Dad liked her at home . . .'

'Well, darling, we can't always have what we like, can we? And she's had years, years, of just wafting about Norland being all daffy and artistic and irresponsible.'

There was a murmur, and then John said, without much conviction, 'I promised Dad—'

'Sweetness,' Fanny said, 'listen. Listen to me. What about your promises to me? What about Harry? I know you love this place, I know what it means to you even if you've never lived here and you *know* I'll help you restore it and keep it up. I promised you, didn't I? I promised when I married you. But it's going to cost a fortune. It really is. The thing is, Johnnie, that good interior designers don't come cheap and we agreed, didn't we, that

we were going to go for gold and not cut corners because that's what a house like this *deserves*?'

'Well,' John had said uneasily, 'I suppose . . .'

'Poppet,' said Fanny, 'just think about *us*. Think about you and me and Harry. And Norland. Norland is our *home*.'

There'd been a long pause then.

'They're snogging,' Margaret said disgustedly. 'She's sitting on his lap and they're *snogging*.'

It worked, though, the snogging; Elinor had to give Fanny credit for gaining her ends. The house, their beloved home which had acquired the inimitable patina of all houses which have quietly and organically evolved alongside the generations of the family which has inhabited them, was being wrenched into a different and modish incarnation, a sleek and showy new version of itself which Belle declared, contemptuously, to resemble nothing so much as a five-star hotel.

'And that's not a compliment. Anyone can *pay* to stay in a hotel. But you *stay* in a hotel. You don't live in one. Fanny is behaving like some ghastly sort of *developer*. She's taking all this darling old house's character away.'

'But', Elinor said quietly, 'that's what Fanny wants. She wants a sort of showcase. And she'll get it. We heard her. She's got John just where she wants him. And, because of him, she's got Norland. She can do what she likes with it. And she will.'

An uneasy forced bonhomie hung over the house for days afterwards until yesterday, when John had come into their kitchen rather defiantly and put a bottle of supermarket white wine down on the table with the kind of flourish only champagne would have merited and announced that actually, as it turned out, all things being considered, and after much thought

and discussion and many sleepless nights, especially on Fanny's part, her being so sensitive and affectionate a person, they had come to the conclusion that they – he, Fanny, Harry and the live-in nanny – were going to need Norland to themselves.

There'd been a stunned silence. Then Margaret said loudly, 'All fifteen bedrooms?'

John had nodded gravely.

'Oh yes.'

'But why – how—'

'Fanny has ideas of running Norland as a business, you see. An upmarket bed and breakfast. Or something. To help pay for the upkeep, which will be' – he rolled his eyes to the ceiling – 'unending. Paying to keep Norland going will need a bottomless pit of money.'

Belle gazed at him, her eyes enormous.

'But what about us?'

'I'll help you find somewhere.'

'Near?'

'It has to be near!' Marianne cried, almost gasping. 'It has to, it has to, I can't live away from here, I can't—'

Elinor took her sister's nearest hand and gripped it.

'A cottage,' John suggested.

'A cottage!'

'There are some adorable Sussex cottages.'

'But they'll need paying for,' Belle said despairingly, 'and I haven't a bean.'

John looked at her. He seemed a little more collected.

'Yes, you have.'

'No,' Belle said. 'No.' She felt for a chairback and held on to it. 'We were *going* to have plans. To make some money to

pay for living here. We had schemes for the house and estate, maybe using it as a wedding venue or something, after Uncle Henry died, but there wasn't time, there was only a year, before – before . . .'

Elinor moved to stand beside her mother.

'There's the legacies,' John said.

Belle flapped a hand, as though swatting away a fly.

'Oh, those . . .'

'Two hundred thousand pounds is not nothing, my dear Belle. Two hundred thousand is a considerable sum of money.'

'For four women! For four women to live on forever! Four women without even a roof over their heads?'

John looked stricken for a moment and then rallied. He indicated the bottle on the table.

'I brought you some wine.'

Margaret inspected the bottle. She said to no one in particular, 'I don't expect we'll even *cook* with that.'

'Shush,' Elinor said, automatically.

Belle surveyed her stepson.

'You promised your father.'

John looked back at her.

'I promised I'd look after you. I will. I'll help you find a house to rent.'

'Too kind,' Marianne said fiercely.

'The interest on—'

'Interest rates are hopeless, John.'

'I'm amazed you know about such things.'

'And I'm amazed at your blithe breaking of sacred promises.'

Elinor put a hand on her mother's arm. She said to her brother, 'Please.' Then she said, in a lower tone, 'We'll find a way.'

John looked relieved.

'That's more like it. Good girl.'

Marianne shouted suddenly, 'You are really wicked, do you hear me? Wicked! What's the word, what is it, the Shakespeare word? It's – it's – yes, John, yes, you are *perfidious*.'

There was a brief, horrified silence. Belle put a hand out towards Marianne and Elinor was afraid they'd put their arms round each other, as they often did, for solidarity, in extravagant reaction.

She said to John, 'I think you had better go.'

He nodded thankfully, and took a step back.

'She'll be looking for you,' Margaret said. 'Has she got a dog whistle she can blow to get you to come running?'

Marianne stopped looking tragic and gave a snort of laughter. So, a second later, did Belle. John glanced at them both and then looked past them at the Welsh dresser where all the plates were displayed, the pretty, scallop-edged plates that Henry and Belle had collected from Provençal holidays over the years, and lovingly brought back, two or three at a time.

John moved towards the door. With his hand on the handle, he turned and briefly indicated the dresser.

'Fanny adores those plates, you know.'

And now, only a day later, here they were, grouped round the table yet again, exhausted by a further calamity, by rage at Fanny's malevolence and John's feebleness, terrified at the prospect of a future in which they did not even know where they were going to lay their heads, let alone how they were going to pay for the privilege of laying them anywhere.

'I will of course be qualified in a year,' Elinor said.

Belle gave her a tired smile.

'Darling, what use will that be? You draw beautifully but how many architects are unemployed right now?'

'Thank you, Ma.'

Marianne put a hand on Elinor's.

'She's right. You do draw beautifully.'

Elinor tried to smile at her sister. She said, bravely,

'She's also right that there are no jobs for architects, especially newly qualified ones.' She looked at her mother. 'Could you get a teaching job again?'

Belle flung her hands wide.

'Darling, it's been forever!'

'This is extreme, Ma.'

Marianne said to Margaret, 'You'll have to go to state school.'

Margaret's face froze.

'I won't.'

'You will.'

'Mags, you may just have to—'

'I won't!' Margaret shouted.

She ripped her earphones out of her ears and stamped to the window, standing there with her back to the room and her shoulders hunched. Then her shoulders abruptly relaxed.

'Hey!' she said, in quite a different voice.

Elinor half rose.

'Hey what?'

Margaret didn't turn. Instead she leaned out of the window and began to wave furiously.

'Edward!' she shouted. 'Edward!' And then she turned back long enough to say, unnecessarily, over her shoulder, 'Edward's coming!'