

Chapter 2: An unaccomplished young lady

Charlotte Heywood was lying in her bed staring at the ceiling, unaware that Sidney Parker was doing the same in his hotel room further down the same street. Her emotional state was different from his though.

Charlotte's natural disposition was adventurous and merry, but now she felt deflated, sad and confused. Up until this evening she had considered herself very fortunate to be here in Sanditon and appreciated the circumstances that had brought her a long way from home, to such an exciting place. Now she was not so sure anymore.

Three weeks ago, the carriage Mr. Tom Parker and his wife Mary had broken down on the way from London to Sanditon. The carriage overturned on the bumpy country road not far from Charlotte's father's estate in Willingden and Charlotte had been the first to come to their rescue. Unfortunately, Mr. Parker had sprained his ankle and the Heywood family generously offered the two travellers to stay with them until he had recovered, and the capsized carriage had been mended.

The Parkers saw themselves forced to stay with the Heywood family for nearly a fortnight because spare parts, which were hard to get by, were needed to fix the

carriage. Even if they were very grateful for the hospitality, Mr. Parker was eager to return to Sanditon and talked about it with longing as if it were the most wondrous place in the world. Charlotte was the one who mostly attended to them and kept them company. She was thrilled over the unexpected, exciting guests and listened attentively when Mr. Parker enthusiastically spoke of the growing town and his vision to turn it into a fashionable seaside resort. Curious as she was, she asked many questions and he was more than happy to answer because Sanditon was his favourite conversation topic. He spoke with such fervent passion that Charlotte clearly could visualise new buildings taking shape, the seaside promenade filled with fashionable strolling people and the brand-new bathing machines which enabled ladies to go swimming respectably. When Mr. Parker talked of the invigorating fresh air, the beneficial sea water and the seagulls flying above, she could almost smell the sea weed, taste the saltiness and hear the cry of the birds. She had never set eyes on the sea, never been far away from home at all except for where her beloved books took her, but now a longing for the coast and the unknown town was evoked in her. She wished intensively she could experience the wonders of Sanditon first hand but never imagined she would have the chance for real.

The last evening before the Parkers were to resume their journey, Tom generously invited the entire Heywood family to come visit in Sanditon. Considering they had fourteen children, a testament to the Heywood's affectionate marriage, it was something of a relief to Mrs. Parker when Mr. Heywood turned the offer down, saying that he as a rule did not travel more than five miles away from home. However, she noticed the disappointment on the eldest daughter's face and nudged

Tom to ask if at least Charlotte could be allowed to join them as their summer guest. She had grown fond of the witty girl over the last weeks and knew she would enjoy having her as company over the summer. Tom was happy to oblige as he in Charlotte sensed someone who appreciated the grandness of his vision and he realised she could also be a companion for Mary when he was busy achieving it, thus keeping his wife content.

It took some persuasion before Mr. Heywood reluctantly agreed to let Charlotte go. He was harder to convince than his wife because he had come to depend on his eldest daughter's advice on nearly all matters concerning the estate and knew he would miss her dearly. He also knew that even if she was highly intelligent, brave and capable, she had led a protected life and had little experience of the vices of the world. He feared she may come across bad people, or even worse, a good man and fall in love. Then she would be lost to them forever. Mrs. Heywood knew his mind well and told him all that was selfish thinking. This was an excellent opportunity for Charlotte to see something else than Willingden and experience more of society than they ever would be able to offer her. Mr. Heywood was a country gentleman of some fortune, but their status and wealth was not such that their daughter would ever do a season in London. Visiting the Parkers, Charlotte could amuse herself under safe circumstances and it would be foolish to keep her from that. In addition, Charlotte would never forgive him if he did not allow her to go, Mrs. Heywood confidently informed her husband.

Unlike many other men, Mr. Heywood was a man wise enough to listen to the women surrounding him so in the end he agreed to let Charlotte go, but only after

the Parkers had promised to take care of her and bring her back to him at the end of the summer. Mrs. Heywood on the other hand, could not help hoping that even if the prospect of finding herself a husband was not what drew Charlotte to Sanditon, she might stumble upon someone to her liking. The reason for this wish was not that Mrs. Heywood wanted to get their beloved daughter of their hands, but she had long ago realised that none of the local young men was a suitable match for Charlotte even if half of them likely were in love with her. The strong-willed and opinionated Charlotte simply needed someone who was more of a challenge than any of them ever could present, if she was to admire and respect her husband. So, when the entire family tearfully waved Charlotte goodbye, Mr. Heywood hoped she would return without having found a husband, whilst Mrs. Heywood prayed for the opposite. Charlotte herself was simply thrilled over the adventure ahead.

The first week in Sanditon had been wonderful, exceeding all Charlotte's expectations. Upon arrival to the beautiful Parker residence, Trafalgar house, she had had to keep herself from gawping at the tasteful interior decor resembling nothing she had seen before, and she could scarce believe it when she for the first time got a room all to herself. She found the little town charming, with its shops with enticing displays and more elegant buildings under construction. Then there was the wondrous sea, stretching infinitely from the beach to the horizon like a connection to distant, unknown adventures and she had even surprised herself when she had dared a swim from Mr. Parker's bathing machine. When she lowered her entire body into the cold, salty water and then emerged to the surface again, gasping for air, she felt like she was reborn. Last but not least, she had met more new and exciting people than she did in a year at home. None of all the new

impressions scared Charlotte. Greedily she took it all in, amazed that the world outside Willingden had so much to offer and felt like she could not get enough of it. It was well enough to read about things, but still better to try them out for real. She was determined to make the most of this summer and experience everything Sanditon had to offer.

The first Charlotte saw of Mr. Sidney Parker was the large portrait of him hanging in Trafalgar house. She could not help but noticing the painting of very handsome young man, with dark eyes and hair, looking kind and innocent. Mary told her that Tom had two younger brothers and that portrait was of the second eldest, Sidney, who had lived in the West Indies for many years but to their joy now was based in London. He had done well for himself and was established in high-society, not by marriage but as a self-made entrepreneur. She also shared that Tom had high hopes for his younger brother to introduce some of his wealthy friends to the pleasures of Sanditon, so they would fall for its charms and rent summer houses here and then make other high-status visitors follow in their tracks. She did not say that he was desperate for it to happen, but Charlotte could read between the lines as she had already begun to realise what a high-risk venture the expansion of Sanditon was for Tom economically.

The second time Charlotte came across Sidney Parker's name was when she walked on the beach with another new acquaintance, Esther Denham. Miss Denham was a redhaired beauty, a few years older than Charlotte and Charlotte felt quite common and inexperienced next to her and listened with interest to everything she had to say, though she was surprised to learn how unimpressed Esther was by

Sanditon, the sea and even the Parkers. Miss Denham liked Mary but thought Tom a fool who would ruin himself, the youngest brother Arthur a buffoon and as for Sidney she claimed that he was very unstable and unreliable. She even advised Charlotte to be on her guard. *Of what?*, Charlotte wondered. She knew Tom relied on him to come to Sanditon for the upcoming ball and now she was very curious to meet him. She had never met anyone who was described as unstable and unreliable before and she wondered what such a man would turn out to be like. She had a hard time making that description fit with the gentle young man in the portrait, but she had understood that was painted more than ten years ago before he travelled abroad. Maybe he had changed since then, maybe during his adventure to the West Indies. That was another thing that made her curious about him; never had she met anyone who had travelled so far, and she could think of a thousand questions to ask him.

The third time Mr. Sidney Parker popped up, it was in actual person, just as he arrived in town. Apparently he was at least reliable enough to turn up for the ball like he had promised Tom, but other than that Charlotte had a hard time figuring him out at first sight. He was indeed very different from the gentle-looking manboy in the portrait. His eyes and hair were still dark, but there was nothing soft and boyish about him now. He was very much a *man*, different from any other men Charlotte had come across. Tall, imposing, undeniably handsome and with an air of fashion about him. He was charming to Mary but dismissive of herself when Mary introduced her, as if she were total insignificant. In the portrait his large brown eyes had made her think of a deer, in reality, dressed in all-black and with a restlessness and agility to his being, he reminded her more of a panther. Not that

she ever had seen one except in pictures, but he seemed just as exotic as the wild animal to her. She wondered to herself if he was dangerous too; someone to be on her guard around, like Esther had implied. Mary seemed to think nothing of the sort, smiling affectionately as he left them, and the women continued their walk.

“He has a good heart”, she said. “He can seem abrupt and absent minded like now, but he *is* a good man. I wish to see him settled but I fear it will not happen. I’m afraid he does not think highly of the female sex due to bruising experiences in the past.”

This made Charlotte even more curious about the contradictory Mr. Parker. One thing seemed for certain though; *he* was not the least curious about her.

She had met him again this evening, at the ball, and he was the sole reason for her current miserable state. She had been giddy with expectations arriving to the ball. Charlotte knew how to dance of course, she was after all brought up like a gentleman’s daughter even if her spontaneous traits sometimes made her not behave entirely ladylike, but so far she had only participated in a few country dances never a real ball like this. She had felt pretty too when she arrived in the company of the Parkers. Charlotte was not a vain girl, but she was happy about the way she looked this evening in her white dress and the new blue shoes Mary had gifted her. Not so much because she wanted to attract men, as because she wanted to fit in and be asked to dance. Oh, how she wished she would get to dace much, for she loved it.

When she entered she was overwhelmed by the beautiful ball room. It was not yet crowded, but there were still more fashionably dressed up people that she ever had seen gathered in one place before and she tried to not stare impolitely. She mingled for a while side by side with Mary and felt unusually shy, suddenly very aware of her lack of experience of events like this. When Mr. Parker pulled his wife with him in a dance, Charlotte ended up in a corner with two somewhat familiar faces, Clara Brereton and Esther Denham, and stood small-talking with them when Mr. Sidney Parker and two of his friends appeared before them. Mr. Crowe and Lord Babington originated from the London circles where Sidney moved and seemed to be set on amusement and dancing. The two invited Clara and Esther to the dance floor and for an awkward moment Charlotte and Mr. Parker were left to themselves. She had the feeling he measured her and found her inadequate somehow but felt obliged to ask her to dance even if his body language betrayed that it was the last thing he wanted. She said yes, determined to enjoy the dancing even if her partner was reluctant. It was not like he had to marry her, only spend a dance with her and if he thought that so bad he clearly took life too seriously. Charlotte noticed how stiffly he held her, as if he would have preferred not to touch her at all and how he avoided meeting her gaze. She simply turned her chin up, ignoring that he did his best to ignore her and did her part of polite conversation, decided he would not put her spirits down. Sidney Parker may be a handsome man, but he was not making a very good first, or second, impression on her.

After that dance he vanished, and Charlotte could not have cared less about losing sight of the brooding gentleman. She had warmed up now and mingled, conversated and danced until her cheeks flushed and she felt she could not smile

much more because the muscles in her face were sore. It was such a lovely ball and after the initial slow start she was asked to dance repeatedly and had more fun than she ever had had.

Then she had felt the need to take a step aside, to breathe and digest it all and that was when she had come across Mr. Parker again, up on a secluded balcony. Now she wished she had not. Encouraged by his sudden attention, his unexpected interest in her thoughts, she had shared too much. Said things about his brothers that had offended him, and rightfully so. She felt ashamed to think of her own words, and even more ashamed when she replayed in her mind what he had said to her.

That she was a girl who had been nowhere and obviously learned nothing and should not criticise those who tried to do something better with their life than embroidering and playing the piano, waiting for a suitor to turn up. Of course it had not been the time and place to answer him she did none of those things, not even if she had not been so embarrassed that she was lost for words.

The truth she did not tell him, was that she did *not* wait for a husband to find her, she was a very poor piano player and her skills in embroidery left a lot to wish for. She had always been too impatient to practice, or too eager to explore the world outside the walls of her family home to sit still on the sofa, as her father put it. She thought herself to be somewhat good-looking, but other than that she knew she lacked qualities that made a young woman considered accomplished and truly desirable as a wife. She had no large fortune even if she would have enough to get by. She was good at shooting rabbit and deer, was a mean cricket player and read

every book she came across including non-fiction about modern farming and architecture to be able to assist her father on the estate, but she was thinking and speaking her mind too much. Like now. Mr. Heywood fondly used to say she was far too curious and outspoken for her own good, but still kept bringing her new books when he went to town and always listened attentively to her opinions about how to run the estate and so in the end encouraged her to stay just as she was. He had never said so, but Charlotte knew he would never make her marry against her will, which suited her fine as she currently did not wish to marry at all and knew that the only thing that would make her inclined to ever accept a proposal was true love.

Yet, everyone here seemed to assume that finding herself a husband was her purpose for coming to Sanditon. Even Mary had implied it in all kindness when she said there might be some nice young gentlemen at the ball and now Sidney Parker had dismissed her as frivolous because she could not hold her tongue. She should not have said those things about his brothers, it was disrespectful. Mr. Parker was right to be angry, but did he really have to be *so* brusque? She had not meant any harm. She had apologised from the bottom of her heart, but he had not accepted that apology. Instead said he was the one at fault for having any expectations on her, implying that she had showed him that *nothing* was to be expected of her. She wanted to stamp her foot and tell him it was not so, she had things to say, he should not dismiss her as a nobody. She restrained herself, kept her foot still and her mouth silent. He excused himself and abruptly left her. To her relief he was not to be seen during the rest of the evening, but she could not enjoy the ball anymore.

Charlottes first impressions of Mr. Sidney was that he was cold, unkind and cared little about others, but strangely his opinion of her still mattered to her even if she did not understand why. Lying in her bed, she knew that she would have to take the bull by its horns and apologise to him, if she was to put her own mind to rest. If he accepted that, perhaps she might get the chance to show him she was not quite the silly girl she knew he now had her down for.