

Chapter 3: She does not care to be plucked

Sidney was feeling tired and grumpy this morning. It had taken him ages to fall asleep and when he finally did, vivid dreams had disturbed his rest. He could not remember for sure what those dreams were about, but he had a disturbing notion they were somehow connected to his conversation with Miss Heywood. Despite his resolve to ban her from his thoughts, she had been the last thing on his mind before he fell asleep and her devastated little face when she apologised to him was the first thing that had appeared before his eyes when he woke up. He pushed away the nagging feeling that he had been harsher to her than she deserved.

Unfortunately he would not be able to escape her altogether today, because it was Sunday and he was expected to show up in church just like everyone else in town. Despite that Sidney Parker was a man who had more faith in himself than in God, he knew it would be frowned upon if he did not go. Tom depended on him to be on his best behaviour during his stay, which included keeping Tom's largest investor Lady Denham satisfied. Sidney knew for a fact that she would be appalled if anyone did not attend church on a Sunday. He knew because he had tried it once before when he was badly hungover, and he did not want to cause the same upset ranting he had provoked that time now when he knew how critical Lady Denham's goodwill and money were to Tom.

He sighed heavily as he swung his long legs over the edge of the bed and went on to pull a white shirt over his head.

The things one had to put up with for family.

Not only going to church this morning but being in Sanditon at all when he had both business and pleasure awaiting him in London. He had to pretend like he enjoyed it though, to inspire Babington and Crowe to stay a while longer, but he knew it would be difficult as there was not much to entertain the boys here.

He arrived in church just in time for the sermon and slumped down on one of the pews in the back. The vicar, Mr. Hankins, was not the sharpest tool in the shed and usually incredibly tedious. Sidney listened first only with half an ear but as the vicar rambled on he grew increasingly amused and listen carefully. Today, the man had really lost the plot.

"Consider the lilies of the field. They toil not, neither do they spin. A young lady, I often think, is like a flower. And looking around me this morning, I see many lovely young ladies..."

Sidney held back a snort. He had always suspected that Hankins was lecherous under his polished vicar surface, secretly drooling over every young lady he came across.

"As it were, lilies of the fields of Sanditon. There are some lovely English roses. Pink and white."

Sidney followed the direction of the vicar's travelling gaze and saw it pass over the bleak Clara Brereton, then pause on none other than Miss Heywood. It disturbed

him somehow that Hankins ogled her. From where he sat he could only see her profile from half behind, but perhaps to break eye contact with the creepy vicar or maybe because she sensed that Sidney too was watching her, she suddenly turned and their eyes met. He dropped his gaze almost immediately and to his vexation felt his pulse spiking. Before he looked away, he had the time to register that she indeed did look like a rose this morning; fresh with rosy cheeks and petal like lips, though her skin was slightly golden rather than white in a quite unfashionable but not unflattering manner. In place of the neat hairdo at the ball, her curly brown hair was returned to hanging loose around her shoulders.

“And I see among us today one or two more exotic blooms...”

Now he did not need to look to know that Mr. Hankins referred to his ward, Miss Lambe. After his years in the West Indies, Sidney did not find her dark beauty that remarkable, but to most inhabitants in Sanditon the coloured young woman was truly exotic. He wished that the vicar had not singled her out like that, because he knew she was not comfortable about it. She had already complained to him how she often felt like a caged animal on display when people stared at her and it was another reason in addition to the climate to hate England. Sidney did not particularly like Miss Lambe, and he wished her father had not asked him to be her guardian when he sent her off to England to be taught to behave like the lady and heiress she was, but he still wished people would have the decency to treat her with respect. It seemed like a dark skin tone made many people forget their manners even towards someone as wealthy as Miss Lambe and he truly despised that kind of behaviour. He returned his attention to the ranting Mr. Hankins.

“And, yes, friends, there is room for them, too, in the garden of the Lord. And I say unto all you young ladies, you fulfil Jesus's will by simply blossoming and readying yourselves for the day when you shall be plucked.”

Plucked? Really? Did he just say that? Now Sidney could not keep the smirk away from his face. He noticed Miss Heywood squirming in her seat. Did she not like the idea of being plucked? Was that not what she was here for? Being plucked by a suitable husband. The vicars sermon was silly but it was a fact that marriage seemed to be the main pursuit of nearly all young ladies. *And marrying money was proven to be more important than love*, he bitterly reminded himself.

“You shall Yes. And now to God the Father, God the Son, God the Holy Ghost. Amen.”

Finally, it was over. Sidney quickly got up from his seat and went outside, where he enjoyed the fresh air after the dusty church while waiting for Babington and Crowe who had been seated in the front. As he waited, he overheard a conversation between his younger brother Arthur and Miss Heywood a few steps away.

“What did you think of Mr Hankins' address, Charlotte?”

Charlotte, so that was her name.

“I didn't care for it.”

After last evening it should perhaps not surprise him that she spoke her mind, because that seemed to be an innate flaw of hers, still it amused Sidney that she did not bother to pretend she liked the pious drawl.

“I would rather be a toiler and a spinner than a lily of the field”, she continued, thereby surprising him further. When Arthur answered that he would very much like to be a lily of the field and Miss Heywood smilingly said that then she could toil and he blossom, he laughed to himself even if he still had not forgiven her for her disturbing presence and remarks. So, she did *not* want to spend her life as a lily of the field and be plucked. What did she want then? He could not help wondering. He spent the remainder of the Sunday in Babington’s and Crowe’s company, drinking, smoking and playing cards, ignoring the Sunday rest or at least not resting in the way the Bible advocated. He sensed that his friends were already getting restless and knew it would be hard to make them stay much longer. They were talking about heading back to London the following day.

Next day, before the intended departure he went to find Tom at the construction site, to let him know they were leaving soon. As he had suspected, Tom was not willing to let him go easily.

“We counted on your staying until at least the end of the week. Lady Denham’s luncheon.”

Lady Denham had sent out invitations to a luncheon in Miss Lambe’s honour, but Sidney had no intention of attending.

“There is no need for my presence.”

“Sidney, I need you here and your friends have not yet seen enough to appreciate the town’s delights. You were to persuade them to take houses for the season. You know I’m relying on your associations with fashionable society.”

Sidney sighed. It was easier said than done to convince Babington and Crow to stay in a place they already found boring. He knew it would hurt his brother's pride if he said that about his precious town, so he tried another argument.

"I have a life, Tom, many obligations you know nothing of.

"A couple of days, man."

He was temporarily distracted when he noticed Miss Heywood standing with the foreman Young Stringer at some distance, engaged in intensive conversation and laughing like they enjoyed each other's company. Tom beckoned his attention by repeating the said words. The pleading tone in his older brother's voice finally got through to Sidney and he decided to give in. He could attend to his business from Sanditon and as for pleasures, they would still be there no matter when he returned. For Tom's sake he had to put up with a few more days.

"Very well, a couple of days. I'll talk them round."

He did not like that his brother seemed so desperately dependent on him and his friends, mostly because it implied that Tom might have serious issues with the financing of his project but also because it made Sidney feel strained. He did not want *anyone* to depend on him and that was also one of the reasons why he found it hard to accept his role as Miss Lambe's guardian. Just like now, when accepting Tom's plea, he had ended up in that role out of loyalty despite that it was the last thing he wished for.

The conversation left him in a foul mood, and he was even less pleased when he heard a now familiar female voice calling after him as he started walking away.

“Mr Parker, may I have a word?”

He was not in the mood for a conversation with Miss Heywood right now, far from it, but it was obvious that he would not get away. He reluctantly stopped and turned around. She stood in front of him, boldly meeting his stare, with back straight and chin held up high and the only thing that gave away that she might be slightly nervous was her quickened breathing and the speed with which her words came out.

“Our conversation at the party. I expressed myself badly and I fear you misunderstood me. I didn't mean to disparage your brother or to offend you. Indeed, I have the greatest admiration for what you and he are doing here in Sanditon. You were right to rebuke me and, indeed, I am sorry. I hope you won't think too badly of me.”

She seemed utterly sincere and he had to admire her for being courageous enough to search him out and apologise, when she just as well could have dodged it by avoiding him the short time he stayed in Sanditon. However, he was still frustrated over Tom and her last words provoked him so his answer came out brash. He did not want her to assume he had been thinking of her. He *had* been thinking of her, far too much and for no good reason, but that nonsense would stop, and he would not have her think she had been on his mind for a split second.

“Think too badly of you? I don't think of you at all, Miss Heywood”, he said flatly with a disinterested expression on his face. “I have no interest in your approval or disapproval. Quite simply, I don't care what you think or how you feel. I'm sorry if that disappoints you, but there it is. Have I made myself clear?”

Sidney himself thought he had been brilliantly clear.

Miss Heywood's apologetic face changed as he spoke; the eyes widened in surprise and shifted into almost black, her brows frowned in disbelief over the brusquely rejected apology, the lips transformed into a thin line, so she ended up looking hard and defiant. She did not flinch, back away, nor look tearful like she had the other night. Instead he got the impression that she contained an intense anger welling up inside of her. Her tone was polite but furiously cold when she spoke again.

"Only, if you really don't care, I wonder that you take the trouble to be quite so offensive and hurtful. Good day."

She spun around and walked away with quick steps. Sidney felt his cheeks flush as if she had slapped him and hoped it was not visible. He had not given any conscious thought to what effect his words might have before they left his mouth, but he *had* wanted to be offensive, *had* wanted to send her running so he would be rid of her company. There was something deeply unsettling about having this girl near, something in her that got under his skin and he could not stand it. Yet, the way she spoke back to him before she left made him feel ashamed and watching her leave, he knew deep inside that he was the one behaving badly now, not her. He refused to admit it though and bothered about his brother, annoyed with her and filled with unadmitted anger with himself, he stomped over to the hotel bar for drinks with Crowe and Babbers. He desperately needed one and bought rounds for his friends as part of his forced campaign to make them stay in Sanditon for a few more days.

Came Friday and Sidney was so restless that he sought out the crummy old warehouse where he knew boxing and betting usually took place in Sanditon. He

was not there to bet. He was there to fight, something he did quite regularly. It was not a gentleman's sport, but it kept him very fit and above all it had helped him to get rid of much steam over the years. He had first tried it in the West Indies, where decorum was not as strictly adhered to and he had needed the physical pain to forget the pain in his heart. He kept it secret from Tom and Mary because he knew they would be worried and appalled, but friends like Babington and Crowe just found this wild side of him entertaining. He was a skilful boxer, strong and agile, and rarely lost a fight, so even if he did not bet himself his friends liked to place bets on him. Today they were unlucky though. At a critical moment during a fight Sidney was distracted by someone calling out his name. His opponent grabbed the opportunity, took a swing on him during this attention lapse and he lost the match. The interruption vexed him and even more so when he realised he was being called upon to handle his unruly ward, Miss Georgiana Lambe, who apparently refused to attend the luncheon Lady Denham was throwing in her honour. It reminded him he was to attend the same luncheon and hurriedly he left for Miss Lamb's house determined to make sure she made it to the lunch, even if it meant carrying her there.

Whatever steam he had gotten rid of during the boxing, his frustration was quickly built up again in the presence of the stubborn Miss Lambe, but at last he convinced her to get dressed and more or less dragged her to Lady Denham's residence where all the other guests already where gathered. His friends were there, as well as Tom and Mary, his younger siblings Arthur and Diana, the Denham siblings and a few others and he did not know why it surprised him to find that Miss Heywood was among the guests too. It seemed Tom and Mary had taken such a fancy to the young

lady that they brought her everywhere, though Sidney thought it would have been a better idea to leave her in the nursery taking care of his nephews. She looked remarkably well today he had to admit when he sneaked a sideways peak. Her hair was neatly arranged to honour the occasion and she wore a light purple dress, a colour that flattered her own natural ones and her cheeks which were flushing healthily after the walk here. She was a girl who did not seem to fear a bit of exercise in contrast to his own hypocondric sister, the dreary Miss Brereton or most women he knew come to think of it.

He had no wish to attend this luncheon at all and to make bad things worse, Miss Heywood was seated beside him. They were nearly twenty guests for this particular luncheon, but naturally his lady to the table had to be her. There seemed to be no escaping Miss Heywood, but out of nowhere it struck him he was not so sure he even wanted to. Among the ladies around the table, Mary was the only one he rather would have been seated next to. Miss Heywood had repeatedly showed that even if she was annoying, she was at least more intriguing than he first had thought. She had opinions and reflected over things which was interesting even if somewhat misguided, so maybe he should try to enjoy this meal in her company.

Her expression was all but pleased when she realised they were to sit next to each other, but he initiated the conversation to try to lighten things up between them. He had no intention to apologise though.

“So, Miss Heywood, any observations on the assembled company? “

“As you have no interest in my opinion, I shan't trouble you with it, Mr Parker”, she snapped.

“I'm sure you have one. Come, share it with me.” He attempted to appease her.

“Not for the world. I've endured two tongue lashings from you, and I won't court a third. Save your unpleasantness for someone else. Or better still, why not try to be civil?”

She was quite fiery, not only her words but her eyes were also flashing with ill-concealed anger.

“Well said. Perhaps I might.” He meant it and that was the closest he intended to stretch towards an apology.

“But not with me, pray.”

She grimaced, then turned her back to him and started conversating with Crowe who was seated on her other side, totally ignoring Sidney. He was not sure if he was to be insulted or if he wanted to laugh. He looked down to his plate and bit his lip to hold back a smile, realising that he enjoyed the verbal battle with her. He was used to ladies of all ages always being eager to please him, striving to say the right thing and smiling at him. Miss Heywood on the contrary seemed determined to displease him as much as possible and after he rejected her apology so bluntly, she did not seem to care a fig what he thought of her. It was deliberating in a strange way.

He was stirred from his thought when Lady Denham bluntly addressed Miss Lambe, probably because she was offended by how apparently unwilling Georgiana has been to attend the luncheon. When Lady Denham had arranged a pineapple and all!

“Miss Lambe, what are your views on matrimony? An heiress with 100,000 must be in want of a husband, I think.”

“I don't care to be any man's property Lady Denham”, Miss Lambe answered in honest defiance.

“Hoity-toity”, the old lady scoffed. “I should have thought someone like you would be quite used to being a man's property. Was not your mother a slave?”

Sidney felt himself stiffen and all his hairs stand on end. It was dead quite around the table. How on earth could Lady Denham be so impolite?

He was impressed at how Miss Lambe held back the strong feelings that must be evoked inside her.

“She was, but being used to a thing and liking it are not the same, my lady”, she responded with a stony face.

“I'm beginning to think you're a very opinionated young lady, Miss Lambe”, the lady said disapprovingly, then turned her attention to Miss Heywood and he felt her nearly jump beside him at the unexpected attention from the stern lady.

“What do you think, Miss Heywood?”

It took a few seconds before Miss Heywood answered and for some reason he held his breath in anticipation.

“I know young ladies are not expected to have opinions, Lady Denham.” He exhaled in disappointment at the blank answer, but she had not finished.

“But I think that Miss Lambe is quite right to value her independence, just as you do yours.”

Touché. 1 point to Miss Heywood, 0 to Lady Denham.

“Don't you agree, Mr Parker?” she ambushed him by adding.

Oh no, he did not intend to be drawn into that argument and risk annoying Lady Denham when Tom wanted to keep her in a good mood.

“Miss Lambe is aware of my position on the matter”, was all he said dryly. He did not add that he was of such firm belief that a young lady should value her independence, especially if she owned a fortune, that she had prevented Miss Lambe from marrying the gold-digger she had fallen in love with in London. The reason Sidney had brought her to Sanditon was to get her out of the treacherous arms of a Mr. Molyneux who wanted to make Miss Lambe *and* her money his by marrying her. Unfortunately Miss Lambe did not see through his scam and she hated Sidney's guts for separating her from Molyneux. Sidney did not care as long as he fulfilled his role to keep her safe until she came of age. After that she was free to do as she pleased, even if it meant stupidly throwing away herself and her money on a con man.

Lady Denham turned to Miss Heywood again.

“And you, miss, are you still keeping up the pretence that you are not in Sanditon in search of a wealthy man to marry and to keep you?”

Now he felt embarrassed on Miss Heywood's account, but to his surprise she did not seem embarrassed at all. She let out a jingling happy laughter.

“Indeed I am not, ma'am. I have no thoughts of marriage at all.” She sounded completely honest and he remember her words that she had no wish to be plucked. Lady Denham looked like she had taken a big bite of a lemon when the young girl spoke her mind, but Miss Heywood seemed oblivious, or maybe she could not stop herself anyway.

“And if I were to choose a husband, wealth would not come into it. Should not a good marriage be based on mutual love and affection? Without equality of affection, marriage can become a kind of slavery.”

Sidney almost wanted to clap his hands. There the miserable old cow got the answer she deserved. Well said Miss Heywood!

Lady Denham seemed anything but pleased at this forwardness but shifted her attention back to Miss Lambe and continued insulting her in front of everyone. Just when Sidney felt he was on the verge of exploding on Miss Lambe's account, and could not stand another offensive word before he would have to interrupt Lady Denham even if it meant offending her, his younger brother pre-empted him, suddenly jumping up from his chair and grabbing the precious pineapple that was the centrepiece of this meal. Lady Denham had had the exotic fruit grown in the Chelsea Physics garden at a substantial cost and looked appalled when Arthur began slicing it with the intention to offer Miss Lambe a piece.

“Mr Parker, the pineapple is not yours to cut! Mr Parker! Mr Parker, would you please put that knife down!” Lady Denham shouted almost desperatly, very unladylike.

Arthur ignored her and continued cutting the fruit. Everyone's eyes were on him in dismayed silence, but Sidney could barely hold back laughing. He felt Miss Heywood shaking beside him, looked down and realised she too was fighting to hold back fits of laughter. Suddenly she looked up at him and saw his ill-concealed merriness. Her sparkling eyes locked with his and they shared a moment of secret amusement before she turned to watch Arthur again, leaving Sidney feeling strangely warm inside.

Just that second, Arthur had managed to cut the pineapple open but immediately threw it away with a gasp.

"It is rotten to the core", he exclaimed and those closest to him gasped too when they saw the black inside, filled with horrible little white worms squirming.

The lunch ended with that. Lady Denham was enraged at the scandalous behaviour of Miss Lambe, Miss Heywood and above all Arthur Parker. Sidney would have laughed all the way back to the hotel, had he not known how damaging this might be to poor Tom who likely was out of himself with anxiety by now.

He was growing increasingly worried for Tom's sake, something he did not like because he wanted to stay out of his affairs as much as he could. He tried to take his mind off the whole incident playing cards with Babington and Crowe that the afternoon, and they continued with more of the same the following day. Drinking, gaming, entertaining and being entertained by women were these men's forte, but neither that nor their conversation did anything to ease Sidney's mind.

He felt oddly absent, his thoughts drifting off to the conversation during lunch again and again. Miss Heywood retorting to him and Lady Denham, standing up

for Miss Lambe and herself, denying a wish to marry, defending the young women's right to freedom. The moment when they had shared a laugh. He felt confused and bothered but did not know about what. He zoned in on the conversation again as the two others talked about that Babington fancied the fiery Esther Denham and Crowe teased him for it, but admitted he liked a bit of spirit in a woman.

"Little Miss Heywood, for example. She's got a bit of spunk about her", he added, and Sidney felt his heart jolt. For some reason he did not like Crowe talking about her like that. Not one bit, but he had no reason to say anything about it.

"Or Miss Lambe", Crowe added as an afterthought. "The way she stood up to that old witch yesterday, you can tell she'd be a lively handful in bed."

Sidney banged his fist on the table, so the glasses rattled and made the other two startled jumped in their chairs.

"Don't even think about it, Crowe." He warned and his friend meekly promised him not to.

Sidney felt even more confused before, because he realised that even if his friends thought his warning referred to Miss Lambe, the ward who he had legitimate reason to be protective of like that, Sidney realised that the lady on his mind was Miss Heywood, for no valid reason at all.