

Chapter 10: It is an affliction

Charlotte was still as pensive when Sidney sought her out again later that afternoon.

Babington had called on them shortly after Molyneux's visit with the good news that he had secured invitations to a masked ball that evening. *Everyone* would be there, and it was a splendid opportunity to spread the word about Sanditon and the regatta.

"You must come as well, of course, Miss Heywood", Babington had finished off, turning to Charlotte, as did the other two men.

She felt all nervous with Sidney's eyes on her and her hands became clammy. Part of her wanted to go, would love to see what a London ball was like, would love to dance, but she knew she would not be to her advantage after a day like this and though normally curious about all things new, she was also slightly terrified at the prospect of facing a crowd of high society people.

"Thank you, Lord Babington, but I am really not in a mood to be sociable."

Mr. Parker was still watching her intently, in the same way he had this morning and she thought he must be relieved to finally be rid of her company. "Excuse me", she blurted out and left the room, unaware that Sidney's eyes followed her, silently begging her to change her mind.

Now he was here in person, doing just that under the pretence that Tom had asked him.

The Miss Heywood he found was feeling miserable and full of self-doubt. After Otis had left, Georgiana had told her that his confessions about gambling debts confirmed Mr. Parker was right doubting him all this time. Even so, Mr. Parker had paid off all of Otis's debts. Georgiana still resented her guardian, for it was easier to blame him than the man she loved despite all his flaws. Charlotte however, felt that with all these turns she no longer knew what to make of Mr. Parker. Her thoughts spun with everything she had learned about him recently, trying to mould the pieces together and it made her increasingly doubt her own judgement because he seemed a very different man than she had taken him for.

When she looked up from the book she was staring at without reading and found him standing in the doorway with dark eyes fixed on her, her cheeks turned hot.

"Tom sent me up in the hope that you might reconsider and come to the party tonight. The regatta was your idea after all."

"Why did you pay off Otis's debts?" she asked abruptly instead of answering him.

His expression became bashful, but he met her gaze with earnest in his.

“I came to the realisation that a good man shouldn't be condemned for one terrible mistake.”

Charlotte had the sensation something heavy pressed over her chest, feeling like *she* was the one who had made an enormous mistake here and had to rectify it. Upset she got to her feet and struggled to find the right words, words which would be enough.

“Mr. Parker, I owe you an apology. I accused you of the worst kind of prejudice when it came...” she started breathlessly but he took a step closer and cut her short.

“I do not accept your apology.”

Heart heat sank to her feet. It was too late. She had judged him wrongly and now he would not even let her make amends for it, or perhaps it was like the very first time she tried to apologise to him; he simply did not care what she thought or felt.

“Why not?” she still had to ask with quivering voice.

“Because I'm the one that should apologise.” His chest heaved like he found this difficult too. “I have done you a great discourtesy, Miss Heywood. I've underestimated you.”

Stunned as she was, she was unable to manage a coherent answer before he gave her a curt nod, turned and left. Trembling she sat down again and did not notice that the book had fallen to the floor. This day real life contained more excitement and unexpected turns than any book could bring her. Never had she expected Sidney Parker to apologise to her like this, and to pay her the compliment that he

had underestimated her. She was not sure why he had changed his mind, but she clearly had underestimated *him* and now had him less figured out than ever.

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Sidney was pleased to learn from Tom that Miss Heywood in the end had changed her mind and would join them to the ball, despite that he had lost his courage in the middle of the speech aimed to make her reconsider. When she flustered had tried to apologise to him, he simply had to stop her and apologise instead because he knew now that he was the one at fault. This made her look at him with searching wonder and he felt totally exposed, so many emotions evoked inside him that he was compelled to leave, not to make a fool of himself. He had cursed between gritted teeth afterwards, that he had wasted his chance to persuade her because he very much wanted her to come. When Tom casually told him she would after all, he instantly felt happy as a fiddle.

Jenkins had been sent to help Miss Heywood prepare and Sidney hoped the maid would make her presentable enough for a high society ball. He did not doubt that she would be beautiful either way, she always was, but she had looked so delicate and vulnerable this afternoon and he wanted her to feel like she fit in in the fashionable company so she could amuse herself.

As soon as he saw her slowly stepping down the stairs all such thoughts vanished, and he took in the sight of her in awe. She looked every bit a lady and the most beautiful one he had ever seen. Her dark hair and brown eyes were enhanced by an exquisite gold-shimmering dress and her natural beauty increased by the fact that

she was unaware of it. She could not help but noticing his intense stare and seemed to mistake the admiration for scrutiny, wrongly assuming he found her inadequately attired for the occasion.

“Does it not suit me? Will it not do?” she asked, when she finally stood before him and he had to hold back a laughter because the question was so ridiculous when she looked like *this*.

He could not laugh at her though when she watched him with those sincere doe eyes. He found it utterly endearing that she did not understand, that if even someone were to look at her all evening long they would be unable to find any fault. She was perfection, she was everything. He felt a wave of affection combined with protectiveness and something else shoot up inside him and if Tom had not been watching them in that moment, he was not sure what he would have done.

“It’ll do very well”, he answered solemnly, thinking it was the understatement of the year.

When they arrived at Mrs. Maudsley’s at Grosvenor Square where the party was hosted, he was incredibly proud to enter by her side. Even hidden behind a mask he found her prettier than anyone else in the room and he was grateful when his brother, Babington and Crowe disappeared in different directions, so he got her to himself for a while.

“Well, Miss Heywood. Are you not glad you came, after all?” He glanced around the magnificently room filled with elegant people.

“I cannot say that I am. I feel dreadful leaving Georgiana. At least I'm glad of the mask. I am certain I don't belong in this company.”

Her honesty and wavering confidence touched him. In one way he wished she would feel at home here, but in one way he liked that she did not because neither did he.

“I don't think I do either.”

“But this is your natural habitat, is it not?”

He heard the surprise in her voice but had been open with her in return for her honesty and shared something very few knew. He was a gentleman by birth, wealthy enough and had connections in all the right places, thus had an indisputable right to attend these gatherings to the envy of many, but that did not mean that he ever had become accustomed to it. He pretended to enjoy it, but seldom really did. It was all too superficial and made him long for something genuine. *Like her.*

“Perhaps I don't truly belong anywhere. As you said, I am an outlier.”

It was strange how every single remark Miss Heywood made about his character seemed to stick with him, made him scrutinise himself and wonder if he could change for the better.

“I cannot see how conversation is even possible when the room is so loud, and everyone is on the move.”

He smiled as she put her finger exactly on what bothered him with events like this.

“No one is here for conversation. They're here to be seen. Once their presence is acknowledged, they'll move on to the next gathering.”

Much like butterflies, beautifully dancing around among flowers but caring about little.

“I think I would like to leave now too, with your permission.” She shyly looked up on him and it stung in his heart how uncomfortable and out of place she felt here. For some reason the adventurous, happy girl was lost right now, and he wanted to help her return. He did not want her to leave but could not help smiling at the question.

“With *my* permission? Since when have you required my permission to do anything?”

He did not intend it like criticism, but she took it to heart.

“I know. I'm too headstrong, too opinionated and too...”

He loved how expressive her face was when she spoke but had to interrupt her for the second time this day, to set things right.

“No. You're not "too" anything. Don't doubt yourself. You're more than equal to any woman here”, he said softly but firm.

She looked at him with a confused expression and he understood why, given the harsh things he had said to her in the past. He wanted to tell her how come he had changed his mind, but they were interrupted by Babington appearing next to them and Tom shouting for Sidney across the room, waving him over. Reluctantly he left

her side, reluctantly she watched him go. Strange enough, she felt like he was her anchor point in this posh company.

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Charlotte turned to Babington, grateful to at least have someone who was a bit familiar by her side and Babington seemed a decent man.

“I noticed you and Miss Denham were enjoying each other's company at the cricket match”, she tried to make polite conversation.

“Hm, yes. I had thought so too, Miss Heywood, but apparently I was mistaken.” He was silent for a moment, then added as an afterthought; “You're a woman, Miss Heywood. Tell me this; is it possible for your affections towards a man to alter entirely within the space of a single day?”

Was he talking about Esther Denham or was he talking about her? Charlotte looked at Sidney Parker across the room, taller and more handsome than any of the other men around and when their eyes locked for a moment she felt like her heart stopped, to then pick up with double pace. The answer was, yes, it was possible, because *her* feelings towards Sidney Parker were very different now from what they had been last night. Or perhaps they were not, but his actions had made her re-evaluate what she felt all along but did not accept before. She realised Babington was looking expectantly at her, awaiting her response but could give none, too overwhelmed by her own emotions.

“Forgive me, Lord Babington. This room is rather too crowded, I’m finding it hard to breathe.”

She hurriedly left him and the main ball room. Only a few steps away she found a quite secluded room where the doors to a balcony were ajar. She stepped close to the opening and inhaled deeply. The cool evening air had a calming effect on her, and she felt her pulse slow down.

“My sentiments exactly.” Someone spoke behind her and startled she turned around to find a beautiful dark-haired lady seated there with a book in hand, implying a kindred spirit.

“Oh, I’m sorry. I thought I was...”

“That’s quite all right. I cannot blame you for seeking a safe harbour. It is an altogether tedious gathering. And now you are going to tell me that Mrs. Maudsley is your mother and I have just committed an unspeakable solecism.” The woman looked half amused, half guilty.

“No! No, I do not know her in the slightest. Indeed, I barely know a soul in London”, Charlotte reassured her. “But from what I have seen of the place, that is no great hardship”, she added, right then realising how much she longed to be back in Sanditon, or even Willingden. She felt like London and the people here were far more than she had bargained for when she sought for new experiences.

“If you dislike London so much, then why are you here?”, the lady kindly asked.

As she seemed genuinely interested, Charlotte sat down beside her and told her the story how her heiress friend had been abducted and nearly forced to marry but saved in time and now she was here at this party to spread the word of the regatta but singularly failing in that task. The words poured out of her because it was a relief to have someone friendly to talk to but suddenly she stopped, abashed.

“Forgive me. I am inclined to talk too much, Mrs?”

“Susan. And who might you be?” Lady Susan kept smiling as if Charlotte’s talking had not bothered her the least.

“Charlotte Heywood.”

“Forgive me for asking, Charlotte, but you seem somewhat befuddled.”

“Do I?”

Lady Susan nodded and after a brief hesitation Charlotte told her. It was a relief talking to a stranger, to be able to talk about things that she had not been able to share with anyone. Not with Georgiana because she knew she resented Mr. Parker, not with her sister Alison in her letters because the sister would not understand the complexity of everything when she had not met the mysterious Sidney Parker herself. Somehow she had a feeling Lady Susan might understand.

“There is a certain gentleman. Mr. Sidney Parker. Mr. Tom Parker’s brother.” Lady Susan nodded for her to go on, her curiosity about this pretty girl grew by the minute.

“He inspires an anger in me, I did not know I possessed. And yet I find that his good opinion means more to me than anybody else's. How can that be?”

“It sounds to me as if you are in love with him.”

“What? No! I assure you, that could not be further from the truth. If I should ever fall in love, it would not be with a man like him.”

She was not sure what kind of man it would be, but surely not with one that made her feel like an emotional wreck.

“My dear girl, you cannot determine who you fall in love with. It is an affliction. Like the measles.”

Charlotte was still taking her words in when the two women were interrupted by the man in question.

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When Sidney managed to tear away from Tom and his talk of the regatta, he did not see Miss Heywood anywhere at first. For a while he thought she had left without bidding farewell and was filled with deep disappointment, until Babington told him that she had gone to find some fresh air. He walked down a passageway in search for her and suddenly heard her voice, talking to another woman. What they said made him stop in his tracks.

“There is a certain gentleman. Mr Sidney Parker. Mr Tom Parker's brother. He inspires an anger in me, I did not know I possessed. And yet I find that his good opinion means more to me than anybody else's. How can that be?”

He smiled and bit his lip. Those were his sentiments exactly, about *her*.

“It sounds to me as if you are in love with him.”

The lady’s word sent a shock through Sidney. *Was that it?! Was she in love with him? Was he in love with her?*

“What? No! I assure you, that could not be further from the truth. If I should ever fall in love, it would not be with a man like him.”

Miss Heywood’s reaction was as strong as his and quite offensive. *Really? Why not? Because he was not good enough for her? Or because he had been a brute to her at times? Had he not redeemed himself so it would not be an utterly preposterous idea to fall in love with him?* He continued listening, not knowing he was holding his breath.

“My dear girl, you cannot determine who you fall in love with. It is an affliction. Like the measles.”

He would have loved to hear her answer, but some other guests approached and if he stayed put he would be caught eaves dropping, which hardly was honourable, so instead he joined the ladies with heart thumping hard in his chest whilst trying to seem casual.

“There you are! I was beginning to think you’d made your escape.”

Once it has seemed frustratingly impossible to escape the ubiquitous Miss Heywood. How strange that the last thing he wanted now was for her to escape

from him. She sat next to a very elegant lady and he was amused by her ability to make new friends in unexpected places.

“Might I presume you are Mr Sidney Parker? We were just discussing you.” The stranger eyed him up and down and he felt slightly embarrassed.

“Right. Well, erm I was wondering if Miss Heywood might like to dance? If I'm not interrupting that is?”

“Not in the least”, the lady reassured him, but he had a feeling Miss Heywood would have preferred to stay where she was. Nevertheless, he gave her his arm and lead her towards the dance floor. She stopped him before they reached it.

“You did not have to ask me, you know, out of politeness.”

His motives were so far from that, but he dared not tell her.

“It is what people do at dances, is it not? Dance? Unless you'd rather not?”

He held his breath again, hoping she would not turn him down.

“No. It's only, there are so many other ladies here that you could ask.”

“But I don't want to dance with them.”

He exhaled when she accepted with a graceful bend of her neck.

How very different this dance was from the first dance he danced with her. That time he had danced against his will, because etiquette demanded it, stiffly holding her at arm's length. This evening, she was the only one he had eyes for, the only

one he wanted to dance with, and he wanted it more than anything. No, not more than *anything* but it was the only thing he could allow himself to do.

Holding her gently in his arms, swirling her around only fingertips touching, he wished he could pull her closer. When she slid her gloved hand into his, it fit so perfectly, like a missing piece of a puzzle that made him complete and he could imagine too well how sublimely the length of their full bodies would fit together. When their faces were inches apart, with eyes firmly locked, it took all his willpower not to bend closer and place his lips to hers. Every time she turned away from him in the dance, he felt bereft and then relieved when she turned so their eyes met again. He was gravitating towards her and it took considerable strength to resist. He wanted to sink into her, drown in her, allow himself to want her and need her and he thought he saw it mirrored in her big brown eyes looking up at him and in her shy, warm but disbelieving smile.

Most of this, Sidney did not put words to as conscious thoughts in his mind, he simply felt it with every nerve, sensed it with every part of his being. He *did* wonder though why her expression during most of the dance implied that she found it hard to believe he really wished to be here with her, that he enjoyed her company. *How could she find that so impossible to believe?* Maybe because Sidney himself hardly could believe he finally was allowing himself to feel like this. Or ‘*allowing*’ himself, he was quite unable to prevent it. He had not asked for it nor welcomed it at first, just like being the guardian for Georgiana, but he had no choice in this matter. He had struggled against it in vain, but Miss Heywood was irresistible. Finally he had

accepted that fact and giving in made him feel jubilantly light at heart. Never had he felt such intense happiness mixed with dazing attraction as during this dance.

Yet, she first looked at him like she expected him to cast her away or give her another tongue lashing any minute. He resented how cold and distant he must have seemed to her before, because there could be no other reason for her to doubt herself as lovely as she was. As the tune played he found himself entranced with her and the rest of the room faded away. All he saw was her eyes, her smile. When her smile became wider and less guarded, he realised he was smiling wide himself, like he almost never did. He felt boyish and playful, then when he suddenly held her closer than etiquette prescribed, he turned serious again and felt very much like an adult red-blooded male, yearning to be alone with her. Her expression became serious too and when the music stopped they remained still, holding each other a few moments longer, breathing with the same pace, caught up in the intensity of their unspoken feelings. If the crowd had not surrounded them, he would have kissed her there and then.

He had to let her go for now though, took a step back, cleared his throat and tried to regain his composure. In doing so, he broke the electrifying eye contact and turned his gaze towards the other end of the room and froze. Because there, a handsome woman just removed the mask from her face and bestowed him a most welcoming smile.

This was someone he had wanted to see for so many years, who had occupied his thoughts even at thousands of miles' distance, even if she was the very cause for

him travelling so far from home. He had been desperate for a smile or a touch then, but now the unexpected sight made his blood turn cold. His long lost love, Eliza.