

## Chapter 6: How to know if to trust one's first impression, or second

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If Sidney was bewildered when he left Sanditon, so was Charlotte Heywood and she became increasingly so in his absence.

Meeting him again in Trafalgar house the morning after the chance encounter by the coves, caused a mixture of feelings to well up inside her. It made her instinctively try to escape in the most ridiculous way, by hiding under Tom's desk when she heard Sidney's deep voice in the hallway, only to cause her further embarrassment when she was discovered. For a brief moment they eyed each another, and a tingling not altogether unpleasant sensation spread throughout her body. He looked a bit rough this morning, as if he had slept badly and not taken the time to shave, but she had to admit that the dark shadow on his chin suited him and he was as handsome as ever. His vest and his trousers were as always perfectly fitted to his lean frame and the silhouette now reminded Charlotte of what he looked like underneath. Just as she had feared this forbidden knowledge was not easily buried.

When he with a smirk remarked that she always seemed to pop up when least expected, she came to her senses, excused herself and hastily left, even if she really

ached to tell him that *she* was not the one appearing out of the sea naked. It would not have been a suitable comment coming from a young lady and it would have exposed the incident to Tom, which was the last thing she wanted. He and Mary would probably put her on the first coach back to Willingden if they knew and there were so many things yet to explore here in Sanditon, including her newformed friendship with Georgiana Lambe. She was far from ready to leave. So, she sensibly held her tongue and only shot him one last defiant look then made her escape before doing anything she regretted.

Soon however, unexpected events were to turn everything around. There was an incident involving old Mr. Stringer and they were forced together, Sidney Parker and her, and surprisingly worked as a team. He astonished her in many ways over a few intense hours, showing her there was no way of predicting the actions of this man. When they had brought old Stringer to Trafalgar house, Charlotte overheard him speaking to his son, young Mr. Stringer, sympathetically comforting him and telling him to leave when they set his father's broken leg so he would not have to witness his pain. This was so different from the cold, distant personality Mr. Parker had displayed on numerous occasions, now instead showing himself compassionate and thoughtful. Even in the midst of the chaos of the accident, it left Charlotte confused to find him so caring.

She braced herself, expected him to ask her to leave too, say this was no place for a woman and prepared to object, but he tried nothing of the sort. Instead he listened to what *she* said, did as she told him and looked at her with a new expression ... she thought maybe it was approval. Oddly it caused a flutter in the pit of her stomach.

When it was all over, he even *told* her he she had given a good account of herself and admitted that she had turned out to be more capable than he had expected. Even if this implied he did not expect anything of her to begin with, he impressed her by owning up to his mistake, by willingly admitting she had made him change his mind about her. She was amazed when he asked her forgiveness for dismissing her before. For the first time, there was a smile in his eyes when he looked down on her, then even one playing on his lips. It did strange things to her insides.

Charlotte was too inexperienced and naïve to be intentionally coquette. If anyone had asked her how to flirt she would have said she did not know how, and she would never attempt it with a man like Sidney Parker. Yet there was a thrilling, fun lightness to the end of their conversation outside Trafalgar house, which made her flush from the feelings Mr. Parker evoked in her and the effect she somehow seemed to have on him.

She had liked the way his expression transformed. How his stern face softened, the jawline became less tight, and his eyes shifted from the usual near black to a warm, deep brown. His voice sounded amused rather than strained or annoyed and he took a step or two towards her instead of stiffly moving away from her as he always had done up to now. She did not understand the cause of this transformation or even register all of it consciously, but subconsciously she noticed it all and responded to it with her sweetest smile and by biting her lower lip in the most enthralling way. Charlotte Heywood was totally oblivious of her own flirtatious charm and therefore all the more delightfully charismatic. All she knew was that

when she left Sidney Parker there in the street, she suddenly liked him more than before and had a feeling it might be mutual.

That feeling was enforced down by the river later that afternoon. He actually looked pleased when she joined him and the children there. His eyes were as warm as before and his smile even wider. She in turn, liked the way he was with the children, attentively playing with them and inviting her to join, allowing her to see a new side of him. She had the fleeting thought that he likely would make a more present father than his own brother whose mind always seemed to be occupied elsewhere, probably in his grand visions for Sanditon. No matter how much Charlotte admired Tom's vision, she remained firm in the opinion he was neglecting his lovely family on the account of it and she wondered how Mary could be so patient. She knew that if *she* ever married, it would have to be with a man who had his eyes on what was right before him, rather than on a distant, promising but illusive future. Of course she knew that men had important duties that demanded their attention and could not always be with their family, but she would want a man who was present in the moment *when* he was with her. Much in the way Sidney was that afternoon. Never had she expected that Sidney in *any* aspect would turn out an ideal for how she imagined her possible future husband.

Actually, *she* was the one whose thoughts drifted away from their togetherness, joining the bark boats down the stream and suddenly she envisioned a full-fledged regatta. He perceptively noticed the shift in her, asked to know what was on her mind, listened to her and took her idea seriously. He encouraged her to tell Tom about it and unlike his brother, did not take any credit for it. For the umpteenth

time that day he amazed her. He was acting so differently from what she previously had come to expect from him and she appreciated it very much.

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*Is it conceivable that we had each other wrong?*

He had asked that question later the same evening, when they walked side by side on the beach. The words were accompanied by a genuine smile, making the corners of his eyes crinkle charmingly. It made him look years younger and the fading light from the slowly setting sun softened his features further. He had taken off his hat allowing the sea breeze to freely play with his hair and, again, he seemed to enjoy her company.

Indeed so it seemed, that she might have had him wrong like he had her. Perhaps she had been to her hasty forming a judgement then only looked for signs that cemented that impression. She had thought him to be the sensible one of the three brothers, but also cold and unkind. Now it seemed perhaps only sensible held true. Normally, Charlotte trusted her first impressions to be right, but here in Sanditon she found herself in unknown territory and she begun to realise that people in the world outside Willingden were more complex than she had realised, not wholly good or wholly bad, but a bit of both. *Was it possible that Mr. Sidney Parker was both the unstable and unreliable man Esther had claimed and deep inside hid a good heart like Mary was convinced?*

Alone in her chambers this evening, Charlotte felt exhilarated and restlessly happy. She accredited it to the regatta; for having provided the kernel to Tom's idea, made

him so enthusiastic and received praise for that, and for the prospect of experiencing such an exciting event. It would be such great fun when the idea came to life and she hoped to be part of it.

In truth, there was also something else in addition to the regatta, something at the back of her mind she could not quite put her finger on. She tried reading a book but could not focus; she sat down by the mirror to brush her hair but was lost in her own mirror image wondering how *a man*, no one specific, might find her looks; she lay down in her bed but kept twisting and turning unable to fall asleep. She wondered; *if Sidney Parker thought he had been wrong when he found her a frivolous girl with no opinions that mattered, what did he think of her now that he had changed his mind?* She knew he was leaving for London in the morning without any set date for a return and she wondered if she would see more of him this summer, or if the walk on the beach was to be the last she saw of him. Perhaps he would return for the regatta if not earlier. Then he might seek her out to hear if Georgiana had been doing well in his absence, as he had entrusted Charlotte to keep an eye on her in his absence. This idea seemed to slow down her spinning thoughts and finally she fell asleep.

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*'We are forbidden from seeing each other. By whom? My wretched guardian. Who else?'*...

*'... You should ask your friend Sidney Parker about his time in Antigua. He was glad enough to turn a blind eye to slavery when there was money to be made'*...

*'... I must ask, for the life of me, I cannot think what Sidney's objection to you could be? Is it not obvious? Look at him.'*

Walking back to Sanditon from the picknick in the amazing bluebell fields with Georgiana and her love Otis Molyneux, their previous dialogue resounded in her head and Charlotte was utterly confused. What Georgiana and Otis had told her about Sidney during the course of this afternoon, had made her doubt her impression of him again.

He had forbidden his ward from seeing Otis, despite that Charlotte had seen clear proof this day that the two were infatuated with each other. Otis seemed to be the epitome of a man in love and according to Georgiana, Sidney objected to the match because of the colour of Otis' skin. Mr. Molyneux seemed to be a true gentleman, which made Charlotte fear there might be no other valid explanation than Mr. Parker actually being that prejudiced and petty. He had even forced Georgiana away from London to achieve separating the two, so he certainly had something against Otis. Even worse than such abominable prejudice, they implied that Sidney's business in Antigua involved slavery and that his fortune was built upon it. No honourable man would ever involve himself in such shameful trade even if money was to be made. Charlotte knew that and could only hope they were mistaken. Not even when she thought the worst of him she had thought him capable of involving himself in something like that. She hoped Sidney would prove them wrong when she met him next, something she had been looking forward to since his departure.

Even with this confounding information, the three had spent the loveliest afternoon together. Otis' appearance had been a surprise to Charlotte as Georgiana had told her nothing of him before but turned out to be a pleasant one. He and Georgiana seemed to be made for each other. Never had Charlotte seen a couple so openly display their affection; speaking unmasked words of love, exchanging fiery looks, holding hands, almost kissed. She had blushed numerous times in their presence, unused to such physical contact between man and woman and obvious passionate longing for more, but despite being slightly uncomfortable she also enjoyed herself. The more time she spent with the couple, the more she realised she was on their side. If Mr. Parker had forbidden them from seeing each other, he clearly had not understood the true, beautiful feelings that sparked between them. If he could only be made to see that, he would surely come around. Would he not? Perhaps Charlotte could assist in this, she thought. Make him realise this was another case where he had been mistaken and convince him he had to allow Georgiana to marry Otis. She could talk to him upon his return and explain. She felt quite invigorated by this inspired idea and was in a splendid mood when they returned to Sanditon where Otis was to take the London coach before his presence became known to Mrs. Griffiths.

Because she was in such good spirits Charlotte jested more than usual. She made a jolly imitation of Mrs. Griffiths and when that sent her friends into fits of laughter, she went on to imitating Sidney, something she could do very well because she had observed him more carefully than she had anyone else.



“You see, Georgiana, this is exactly why I locked you away in Mrs Griffiths' dungeon.” She pretended to be smoking a cigar, squinting her eyes whilst she exhaled the imaginary smoke in the manner that Sidney used to. “Keep you out of mischief while I, Sydney Parker, am gallivanting around London with my high society dandy friends.”

Georgiana kept laughing, but Otis who looked over Charlotte's shoulder suddenly froze.

“Stop”, he said.

“No, do go on.”

Another male, familiar voice cut through and made Charlotte freeze too, though her heart began thumping hard in her chest.

“I am intrigued to hear what I might say next.”

She turned to meet the eyes of the subject of her imitation and felt like sinking through the crust of the earth. There was no hint of a smile on his face, no sign he found this remotely entertaining. All there was, was cool anger and contempt. Well, perhaps disappointment too and Charlotte resented herself for giving him reason to be disappointed in her. That feeling was quickly replaced with dismay and outrage when he turned to Otis and spoke without trying to conceal his disapproval.

“Mr Molyneux. You are the very last person I'd expect to find in Sanditon.”

“Forgive me, sir. I would have notified you of my visit, but I can't be certain of the welcome I would receive.”

“Oh, you could be entirely certain. My position has not changed, nor will it”, Sidney almost spat. “Mrs Griffiths, Miss Lambe must not see this man again.” His voice was filled with angry resolve and Charlotte flinched. The disappointment learning that Georgiana had been right about Sidney wrenched her heart.

“And if I see you within a mile of my ward, I will not be held responsible for my actions. Am I understood?” He stepped closer to Otis, threateningly looming over him.

“Perfectly”, the other man answered weakly, but his voice was filled with equal contempt.

“Mrs Griffiths kindly take Miss Lambe back to her lodgings”, Sidney now ordered brusquely.

This finally stirred Charlotte from the temporary paralysation, caused by the unexpected appearance of Mr. Parker combined with embarrassment over being caught red-handed not fulfilling her promise to look after Georgiana for him.

“Wait! You could at least allow them a proper parting”, she protested.

“Thank you, Miss Heywood, this is none of your concern”, Sidney snapped in return.

Here they were clearly in disagreement. *How could he be so heartless as to not even allow two people in love to say goodbye when it was uncertain if they ever*

*would meet again? If he had his way the surely would not. How could anyone be so cruel?* She was filled with disappointment and fury, not only for the lover's sake, but because she had begun to think well of him and now he showed his true self and proved to be just as bad as Georgiana and Otis had told her. He must have noticed her look of disapproval, because defensively he continued.

"Did we not agree that you would look out for Georgiana? Keep her out of trouble." He grunted frustratedly. "I should have known you weren't to be trusted."

This was all the more provoking because in part he was right, she had not done what he asked of her. *But how could she when he was the one in the wrong here?* Keeping Georgiana and Otis apart was nothing less than cruel.

"And I should have known, despite your professed concern, you care nothing for her happiness!" she raised her voice and her eyes flashed, now as dark as his.

"I would ask you to refrain from making judgements about a situation you don't understand."

"I understand perfectly well."

"Oh, of course you do, even though you've known Georgiana but a handful of weeks, and him a matter of hours." The disdain in his voice made her want to stamp her foot, he clearly did not credit her with any intelligence at all.

"That was time enough to learn that Mr Molyneux is as respectable a gentleman as I have ever had cause to meet."

“You seem to find it impossible to distinguish between the truth and your own opinion!” he raised his voice too, rapidly losing his temper and the little patience he had left.

Charlotte knew she ought to back away and not cause a public scene here on the street, but this was too scandalous to keep quiet and just accept it.

“The truth! You wish to speak of the truth, Mr Parker? The truth is you're so blinded by prejudice that you would judge a man by the colour of his skin alone.”

She saw him flinch as if she had slapped him and it pleased her to see that her words at least had some kind of effect.

“You speak out of turn.” His eyes seemed to drill inside her, telling her to shut her mouth, but she was too incensed to stop.

“But why should I expect any better from a man whose fortune is tainted with the stain of slavery?”

“That is enough! I do not need to justify myself to you”, Sidney shouted making the heads of by-passers turn to them.

Still trembling with fury, Charlotte knew she had gone too far. His reaction proved that she had pressed on a sensitive spot, that this indeed was the horrible truth, but she should not have challenged him so publicly. It was not the way things were to be done in fashionable society. She was his brother's guest and showed him no decorum. Whatever small grain of friendship there had been between them, that was certainly gone now and suddenly she felt like crying instead of arguing.

They stared each other out for a few heart beats, breathing in the same upset pace, then he averted his gaze as if looking for a way out and called for James Stringer, who she now noticed was observing them with a concerned expression at some distance.

“Mr. Stringer, will you please accompany Miss Heywood to Trafalgar house.”

He was sending her away as if she were a difficult child. Hateful man, how she resented him in this moment. Her blood boiled and she wanted to step into him and bang her fists on his chest, make him see he was being totally unreasonable, but he turned his back to her and left without bestowing her another look. He left her to herself with all her overwhelming emotions.

She needed a walk to cool down and when she asked, James Stringer kindly joined her along the beach, but as they walked in companionable silence she was less aware of the man by her side than the one in her mind. Even in his absence, Sidney Parker seemed to invade her senses and she could not for her life understand how it was possible to have such mixed and confounding feelings towards any one man. Contempt and anger stronger than she ever had felt, combined with sadness and a sense of deep loss over having lost his approval and good opinion of her. Probably irrevocably.