

Chapter 7: I did not know women could play cricket

Once again he was mad beyond belief and once again it was Charlotte Heywood who was the cause of it.

Officially, Sidney found himself in Sanditon so soon again for two reasons. One was to deliver Tom the unpleasant news that none of the London banks he had approached wanted to extend his brother's credit any further. The second was that both Tom and Lord Babington had begged him to attend the yearly Sanditon cricket match next Saturday; Tom because he wanted prominent players on the gentlemen's team, Babbers because Esther Denham unexpectedly had written a letter asking him to join the match and he did not want to go to Sanditon alone. Grumpily almost by habit Sidney had accepted, but he did not really mind going for reasons he shared with no one and did not even fully admit to himself. This secret reason made him actually look forward to the visit; he hoped to spend time with Charlotte Heywood, hoped for a possibility to get to know her better.

During the week he had been back in London, attending to his own business and trying to do something about Tom's, his sole source of joy had been reminiscing Miss Heywood. Their banter on the street after Mr. Stringer's accident, their playful

afternoon with the children by the river, the comfortable stillness during their late walk by the beach. Her expressive face appeared before him again and again, different versions depending what mood he pictured her in; focused, annoyed, pensive, happy, innocently flirting. God, visualising her biting her own plush bottom lip made him think things one should not think about a lady unless she was one's wife. He did not have feelings *for* her, surely not, but she made him *feel* things and that had not happened for very long.

When Sidney's fiancé Eliza left him for a wealthier man many years ago, he had been heartbroken, bereaved almost to the brink to madness because he had been in love in the uninhibited way you only can be if you have not guarded your heart at all. Sidney had not, because he was too naïve to think there was any reason to do so, thus had allowed himself to fall head over heels for the beautiful Eliza even if he did not know that much of her character. It was a mistake which in terms of emotions cost him dearly, when it turned out that she was more pragmatic about what constituted a good marriage than he was. He had survived by putting physical distance between himself and the woman he loved and with time learned to efficiently turn off his feelings, at least any feelings that risked hurting him. He was very affectionate towards his nephews and Mary, loved his siblings dearly despite all their flaws and was fiercely loyal to his friends, but did not allow himself to be emotionally engaged beyond that. He prided himself in that he neither hated nor loved, that he after the fatal Eliza became something of an outlier with a hard resilient shell. He intended to never put himself in such a weak position again.

Now, he found that Miss Heywood was picking on that shell, threatening to break through. Even if he enjoyed her company, he feared she might be a 'Pandora's box'; if one lifted the lid a little, all sorts of dangerous things might seep out. Yet he felt compelled to lift that fictitious lid by seeking her company again. He was unable to resist, and it scared him.

Returned to London, Crowe and Babbers encouraged him to partake in the more extensive pleasures the city had to offer compared to Sanditon. He joined them for drinking and cards one evening but found he was not in the mood for anything beyond that. When Crowe suggested they would visit the so called "boarding house" where they had been frequent guests in the past, both Babington and Sidney turned him down. Babington because Esther Denham currently inhabited his mind, Sidney because he was exhausted running his brother's errands, or at least so he claimed. Truth was, he was not in the mood for the company of courtesans. All he longed for were the innocent, amusing and challenging conversations with Miss Heywood, but he did not put words to that wish even in his own mind. He only knew he felt light at heart when he was on his way back to Sanditon.

Therefore the source of his fury was three-fold this afternoon when he once again found himself in a room at the Crowne hotel. He had intended to stay at Trafalgar house this time but changed his mind after the incident with his ward, Mr. Molyneux and the infuriating Miss Heywood. How provoking it was that his orders had not been obeyed, that people had gone behind his back and conspired so his ward could meet with that infernal scoundrel Molyneux. Sidney understood full well that Georgiana's feelings were deep and true, but he doubted that Mr.

Molyneux was in love with anything else than her fortune. Therefore, he had taken it upon himself as Georgiana's guardian to protect her independence and money by keeping her from marrying Molyneux. If she did, both those things would be the possessions of Mr. Molyneux and there would be no turning back. He knew she hated him for it, but that was of little importance given the situation.

He was even more furious over Miss. Heywood's accusations. First the preposterous one that he was against Molyneux because of the colour of his skin. He could not care less. In fact he had known many good black men during his years in the West Indies and counted them as friends and equals. His objections to Mr. Molyneux derived from that he did not trust a gambler and also that he thought that Georgiana deserved someone who had *something* to offer or the match would be very unequal. Secondly and worse, Miss Heywood had accused him of supporting slavery and profiting upon it. It was true that Sidney in his youth had been involved sugar trade, but when he travelled to Antigua and saw with his own eyes that it entailed the forced labour of slaves he had renounced it with immediate effect even though it had meant an economical loss. He despised slavery and firmly believed that no man or woman should be the property of another. It all came down to the idea that he thought of humans as equals no matter the colour of their skin or gender and therefore Miss Heywood's accusations felt totally unfair.

He had been so taken aback and enraged by those accusations that he had not found the words to contradict her. All he had done was to raise his voice and told her he did not have to justify himself to her. Indeed he did not, but perhaps he wanted to anyway. When he cooled off he realised that yes, he did. He could not

stand the thought of her believing those things of him, of her assuming he was so despicable.

This lead back to the third reason of his anger; deep disappointment. Disappointment that Miss Heywood had not lived up to the trust he had placed in her, even if it was understandable given that she thought his only objection to Otis Molyneux was his skin colour, and even deeper disappointment as being on bad terms with her meant he could not see her. He should not *want* to see her after she had spoken to him like that unless she apologised, and he knew *that* was highly unlikely to happen. Tormented he realised he wanted to see her nevertheless. Right now, *he* was probably the last person she wanted to see anyway.

Only a few hours ago seated in Mary's parlour, things had looked so promising. When he arrived in Sanditon, he had called on Trafalgar house and Mary told him Tom was out somewhere and Miss Heywood was visiting Miss Lambe. His heart had jolted at this immediate opportunity and completely valid reason to see Miss Heywood, perhaps he could even walk her back from Miss Lambe and get her alone for some time. Sidney's thoughts had spun away with him and a little smile played on his lips.

How disappointed and even betrayed he had felt when he realised Miss Heywood had helped Georgiana lying to get away from Mrs Griffiths, even more so when he found them in the company of Molyneux, and what *really* hurt was that he apparently was a joke to her. That imitation of him as some fancy, cruel dandy locking Georgiana away without justification was so unfair and spiteful that just

thinking about it, made him clench his fists. *She had him wrong. She had him completely wrong.* Even in his furious state he knew he had to show her that and as he cooled down it seemed increasingly important. He did not understand why it mattered, it just did. He needed some distance to the whole thing first and decided it was better to return to London for a few days, before it was time for the cricket match.

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Came Friday and he was back in Sanditon now accompanied by his friends. The idea that he needed to see Miss Heywood and explain to her had grown on him and he was more convinced than ever that it was the necessary thing to do. She had been in his thoughts countless times during the days away. Reluctantly Sidney had concluded that even if it angered him that she had done the exact contrary to what he asked of her, he appreciated that she did what she was convinced was right. He admitted to himself that even if it drove him mad when she accused him of being a prejudiced opportunist using slavery, he admired how passionately and unflinchingly she challenged him. If he had been guilty of those things he would indeed have deserved that, he only had to make her see he was free of charge – he was against those things as much as she was.

It was enigma, but the very same things about her that angered him, made him want to be with her even more. He would not mind provoking fire in her eyes again, but for totally different reasons.

He had played the conversation with her many times in his head, always with the excellent outcome that she finally saw him for who he was, and they reconciled. Yet he found himself totally unprepared for it when he ran into her, as he stopped by Tom for another depressing financial chat. He knew his brother did not fully confide in him and he feared that his economic situation was grave, but he had truly done everything in his power to help him. The banks were simply not interested in investing more in Tom's building project at risk.

Running into Miss Heywood in Trafalgar house should perhaps not come as a surprise by now, yet he was caught off guard and even when they had a moment to themselves none of the eloquent explanations he had thought of came over his lips. He tried to avoid looking at her, suddenly afraid what she might see in his eyes, but his gaze was immediately drawn back to her quite lovely appearance. The loose dark curls, the thin white muslin dress flowing around her delicate figure making him think of a flower, her pretty face which became flushed and troubled as soon as she saw him. He sighed to fill the strained silence.

"I assume you're here for the cricket, Mr. Parker."

He was there mainly because he needed to see her, explain to her. Tom's and Babington's needs for him to participate in the cricket came second.

"Never short of assumptions, Miss Heywood." He heard how harsh it came out and tried to compensate with a smile but felt it did not sit right on his face and she responded with a snort. He was too anxious about what she must think of him, too nervous and eager to explain to actually be capable of doing it.

“Well, I was not expecting to see you back so soon.” She uncomfortably shifted weight between her feet, her whole body language demonstrating she wished to be somewhere else and he averted his eyes again.

“Believe me, neither was I.”

He had battled with himself, come to the conclusion it was best not to come here, then changed his mind again and here he was.

He was not sure if he was relieved or annoyed when Mary interrupted them. Mostly relieved probably, because he knew he would not manage a coherent explanation in this moment. The effect she had on him was too distracting. He had to see her again when he was better prepared, more balanced. Perhaps after the cricket match tomorrow. Yes, it had to be then, because after that he did not plan return to Sanditon for some time. *Unless something changed dramatically.*

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Things did not look bright to begin with. When he first saw Miss Heywood on the beach before the cricket began she was standing in the refreshments tent and when she spotted him approaching, she practically ran away. She really could not make it any clearer that she did not wish to be in his presence. *If she kept running, how would he then be able to explain to her?*

Then it got even worse. Gritting his teeth, Sidney could only observe with, he hoped, a blank expression, when Miss Heywood friendly chatted with James Stringer. They looked so at ease together, all smiles. He heard her wish him luck

and joke that he already seemed to have gathered several admirers. Sidney found he wished intensively that she only eluded to the Beaufort sisters who were eyeing Stringer quite shamelessly and not to herself but given the smiles she flashed at Stringer he could not be sure. *Why had he not spoken to her yesterday when he had the chance?* He cursed his own hesitance.

When Stringer left to join his team she turned and became aware of Sidney standing close and with his dark eyes fixed on her. It seemed like she felt compelled to say something to him, out of common courtesy.

“Good luck to you too Mr. Parker, although I imagine you don’t think you’ll need it.”

She said it in a defiant tone and with more of a grimace than a smile, letting him know that they were not on friendly terms in any way. How far this was from how he wanted things to be, but this was not the time and place for a long explanation to change that, as the match was about to begin, and they were surrounded by people.

“Yet more assumptions”, was all he managed to say, and something felt heavy inside his chest.

Things got worse than so, before there finally was some light to this dreadful day. He tried to focus on the match, but in addition to the situation with Miss Heywood there was a disturbing tension in the air between Tom and the worker’s team. During a heated verbal exchange between Tom and some of the other players, it dawned on Sidney just how serious Tom’s financial situation was. Unfortunately

he was not the only one who heard when Stringer said that the workers were right to be snide when they had not been paid for weeks. It was shocking news to Sidney and embarrassing for Tom to be so publicly exposed. It was not surprising that he did not want to stay and play after that, even if he in fact embarrassed himself further walking out on the match, leaving the gentlemen's team one player short.

Sidney watched his brother's back as he practically fled with long strides, instead of facing his problems. Sidney wished *he* could bury himself in the sand or dive into the sea, because he did not know what to do; not how to help Tom out of his serious predicament, not how to resolve the enmity with Miss Heywood, not how to find a replacement player for his team when the previous team captain had escaped.

He normally liked James Stringer, but not today. Not when Miss Heywood seemed to hold him in such high esteem, not when he spoke the uncomfortable truth about his brother and certainly not now when he stated the obvious.

"You haven't got another player to replace him. We win."

Sidney wanted to continue the match, to save the day somehow, he really did. Not to let his brother spoil this event which was an amusement for the whole town and draw further shame upon himself. He wished he could at least prevent that from happening but saw no way out. The defeated words 'Yes, you win' were on his lips when there was a surprising turn.

"I'll play."

Miss Heywood had left her seat by the other ladies and purposefully came towards the men.

“Ah, but isn't this a gentleman's pursuit?” The designated umpire Mr. Hankins said insecurely at this unexpected offer.

“Women play cricket in Willingden, Reverend”, she stated confidently, and Sidney felt like laughing with relief. She was willing to play, he could think of no other woman he ever had met who would have the idea to join a cricket match but of course Miss Heywood would. No one objected, in fact it seemed like they all appreciated being accompanied by her.

When it was her time to strike, he attempted coaching her. She had said women played in Willingden but even so he doubted she had much experience of cricket and wanted her to succeed, as much for her sake as for the team's.

“Keep your eye on the ball, all right?”

“Thank you. I know what I'm doing.” She rocked back and forth, grasping the bat, tensely awaiting the ball to come flying.

“If you can't make the run, just stay put.”

“Yes, thank you.” An annoyed wrinkle appeared between her brows and she sounded impatient. “I know exactly what I'm doing. Now please. I'm concentrating, and you're putting me off.”

He gave in. If she was adamant she could do without advice, who was he to give it?

“All right.” He backed away with a smile.

“Let’s play!”

And so they did. With Tom gone and with him the hostility boiling under the surface, the match was entertaining for real. With Miss Heywood in his place it was a pure delight to play, and for some more than others. Sidney did not know when he last enjoyed himself this much. He had the notion young Stringer shared that sentiment but would not let that spoil it for him. Of course she proved him wrong from her first strike, she was an excellent player.

She had taken off her blue jacket and bonnet to be able to move freely. Her cheeks were flushed from the exercise and she was laughing happily and intoxicating, like she was embracing everything about this moment. Her hair was damp from droplets of sea water travelling with the wind and curlier than usual, looking adorably unruly. Same sea breeze made her thin white dress move, so it shifted between being filled with air almost like a sail and being glued to her body so he could see every curve of her silhouette. His breath hitched at the sight of forms normally hidden by the loose dresses that were in fashion. He knew he should look away, but he could not make himself. The curves of her slender waist, softly rounded hips and well-shaped legs were too tempting.

When he first saw her on the road together with Mary but a month ago, he had thought her insignificant and bland. It was long since he had changed his mind about this vivacious, brave and headstrong girl, but today was the first time a wave of want flashed up inside him. Not only because her female curves seemed like

perfection to him, but for being infinitely more *alive* than any lady he had ever known.

It was like the match brought them closer again, like she could not be mad at him and he not at her when they were on the same team, the two of them. No one else really mattered as they ran between the wickets grinning at each other, not to him at least. How he loved that she stroked better than many of the men, ran to win until she gasped for air without any thought of what was respectable for a lady, but mostly he loved how their eyes met repeatedly and how hers were twinkling then.

When Stringer bowled, she hit the ball one last time and made a run that rendered their team the victory, he felt ridiculously proud of her even if it was not his doing at all. Everyone cheered and applauded, and he would have liked to give her a big hug, envelop her in his arms and say she was amazing, but that was unthinkable. She met his eyes again, still looking friendly instead of challenging even if her words were slightly so.

“Was that a smile I detected?”

He had not even been aware of it but realised now he was smiling wide. His heart was no longer heavy, it was light much like the fabric of her dress flowing in the wind.

“Oh, I doubt it.”

She smiled in return and turned to thank the other team for a good match. Sidney tried to collect himself, somehow overwhelmed with joyous feelings.

“Well done, Miss Heywood”, he told her when she turned to him again.

“Thank you.” Her smile reached all the way to her hazel eyes and he knew that at least momentarily he was forgiven even if he still had explaining to do. Her hand went to her unruly hair, to push it away from her face and he had to hold back not to do it for her. During a few seconds their eyes were locked and the air between them somehow seemed to fizzle and bind them together rather separate them. He existed only there and then and was happy through and through for the first time in forever.

“Mr Parker!”

He always found Mrs. Griffiths slightly annoying but in this instant more than ever. Maybe she would go away if he ignored her.

“It's Miss Lambe. I've lost her. I can't find her anywhere.”

Her words made him abruptly snap back to reality.

“What?!”

In despair she told him Miss Lambe had gone missing during the match and was nowhere to be found. When he turned to ask if Miss Heywood knew where she might be, she was gone too, and he saw her back disappearing between the dunes in direction of the town. The speed of her implied both that she was worried about Georgiana and that she might know something, and he immediately set off after her, cursing under his breath as he ran.

Was it impossible for him to be allowed to feel happiness for longer than a few minutes? Damn Miss Lambe, damn Miss Griffiths and damn Miss Heywood too if she had anything to do with Georgiana disappearing.

He ran to Mrs. Griffiths' house with the vain hope of finding Georgiana and Miss Heywood there, but neither of them was to be seen. He paced the parlour back and forth deliberating where to go next when Miss Heywood barged into the room, breathless and flushed, looking very anxious. She looked like she wanted to tell him something, but they were interrupted by Mrs. Griffiths and James Stringer.

"Mr Parker, there is some news of Miss Lambe." Mrs. Griffiths sounded like she was about to cry.

"One of the men saw her waiting, outside the hotel", Stringer said, calmer but also seeming bothered.

"What do you mean, waiting? When? What, what time?" Sidney demanded.

"About four o'clock. The next thing was, a carriage drove up. A man got out."

"A man? She was meeting a man?" His pulse spiked again.

"Was this man black?" It was Miss Heywood asking and alarmed he turned to her and for the first time realised she had a guilty look on her face.

"Why would you ask that?" he inquired but she ignored him.

"Was he?"

“All he said was, there were two of them. The other was in the carriage. She was bundled in and, and they took off.”

“Bundled?!” His eyes did not leave Miss Heywood’s face and now she looked very confused and distressed. He realised that he had to get to the bottom of what she knew.

“Thank you, Mr Stringer. I’m grateful.” He asked Mrs. Griffiths to accompany Stringer out so he would get rid of them both. He feared the worst and needed to talk to Miss Heywood alone.

“You know something, don't you?” he enquired as soon as they were gone.

“I have been acting as go-between for Georgiana and Otis Molyneux since you forbade them from seeing each other”, she confessed, nervously fiddling with the bonnet she was holding and went on explaining. “Her heart was broken, Mr Parker, I could not bear to see it. They arranged to meet today. During the cricket match.”

“You did what?” He hoped he had heard her wrong but felt like he was about to explode. Could the girls had been so foolish? Could Miss Heywood had done something so irresponsible as being an accomplice in setting this up? He could hardly believe it.

“I was to accompany her. I never would have let them meet alone.”

At least that meant she had some sense...

“I was caught up in the excitement of the match and I forgot.”

..or maybe not. For fucks sake!

“You... you forgot?” His blood boiled and he could no longer contain the anger and desperation he felt. “You forgot!” he shouted out loud and saw her flinch but thought she deserved it.

“ Yes! Yes. And I'm sorry.”

He was sure she was but that hardly helped.

“She must have sneaked off. She was desperate to see him. She would not be stopped.”

He stepped closer to her and had to hold back not to grab her and shake her.

“If anything happens to her, *anything*, it will be on your head. Do you understand me?”

He stared hard into her scared tearful eyes, then spun around and left before he did anything he regretted. He was more furious with her than ever before. Furious because she had taken part in causing a situation which potentially was both compromising and dangerous for his ward and even more outraged because by doing so, she forced him to be mad at *her* again when it was the last thing he wanted. The fragile friendship between them was shattered yet again at her doing. Instead of having the conversation with her that he had longed to have, he was now forced to set off to London to look for the missing Miss Lambe with the vain hope of finding her before irrevocable damage was done to her reputation. If anything

grave happened to Georgiana he was not sure how he would ever be able to forgive Miss Heywood and that prospect made him wistful more than furious.