

**Author's note: So far, every second chapter has been Sidney's perspective, every second Charlotte's. From now I will mix a bit but this one focuses mostly on Sidney, because I love to imagine what he was thinking and feeling.**

### **Chapter 8: London by night**

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He was back in London with the purpose to track down Otis Molyneux and hopefully a still virtuous and unmarried Georgiana Lambe along with him. It had not been too difficult finding Molyneux's address, unsurprisingly in a rough part of the city. Sidney was on his way there through narrow, dark alleys when he came across a woman in distress. He heard some muffled sounds and noticed a man cornering a woman with the clear intention to take advantage of her. He was covering her mouth and held her arms locked behind her back, and even if she put up a fight to get free, the man was stronger, and her struggle was in vain. The man curse when the woman apparently bit his hand and suddenly the bleak street lights reflected on a long knife blade.

Another man might have walked by, thinking it was none of his business, but Sidney had never been one to accept other men forcing themselves on women and it had provoked his involvement in several fist fights in the past. This occasion was

no different and he brusquely grabbed the man, punched him hard in the face and threw him towards a brick wall, causing him to drop the knife and wail with pain. When the woman whimpered beside Sidney, he turned her direction and to his utter surprise found her to be none other than Miss Heywood. She looked equally shocked and not especially grateful when she saw his face.

“Mr Parker?”

“Miss Heywood?”

He reached out a hand to help her up, but she ignored it and got up without his assistance, dismissing his protective instincts.

*What on earth was she doing here?*

His heart thumped erratically and not only from the adrenaline rush provoked by the fight.

“As if this situation were not insufferable enough, I now have the added burden of protecting you”, he scoffed yet gentlemanly reached for the bag she held on to, and she handed it to him with some reluctance. Even in a situation like this she stubbornly maintained her independence.

“I have no need of your protection. I have the situation in hand”, she claimed defensively and barely seemed to register that he blocked a drunkard from bouncing into her.

That was the most preposterous thing he had ever heard. She would likely not have made it through this night unharmed if he had not come across her.

“What do you suppose would have happened had I not arrived at that moment?”

She shrugged her shoulders and then it hit him that she was too innocent to understand that the man’s intentions had been to rob her of something far worse than her purse. He clenched his fists and felt a hard knot in his stomach at the mere thought, now wishing he had hit the man harder.

“What possessed Mary to let you come in the first place, I have no idea.”

It was actually unthinkable that his sensible sister-in-law would have allowed Miss Heywood to travel to London alone. Such a thing was unheard of for a young lady, far too dangerous and potentially harmful for her reputation.

“She doesn't know I am here. In fact, she expressly forbade it”, she explained without a trace of regret in her voice.

“But you stole away on the London coach regardless?”

He was flabbergasted yet unsurprised. Apparently, Miss Heywood had a habit of doing the exact opposite of what she was told to do. Such recklessness was exactly what one could expect from her. *Or such bravery, depending on how one chose to see it.* He was not sure why that thought hit him, surely her behaviour was unacceptable no matter from which angle it was viewed.

“I left a note, explaining that I'd come here to help.”

“Help? How exactly do you think your presence here would help?” he asked, incredulous.

“For one thing, I did not think that you had Mr Molyneux's address.”

“It's hardly taken me long to find it, as you can see.” Now his voice was dripping with sarcasm.

“It is of no use anyway, he has not been seen in over a week. Apparently, he has all but vanished.”

“Yes, of course he has; with Georgiana. What more proof do you need? Mercifully, Tom is in our London house. He'll see that you're kept out of harm's way.”

She stopped in her tracks and turned to him, her pretty little face looking very troubled.

“No!” she protested vehemently. “I am in large part to blame for what has happened. You must allow me the chance to help put it right. Please.”

The last she added with pleading eyes and voice. He suddenly needed to look away, overwhelmed with emotions. In this very moment the coin dropped for Sidney and he realised she was here because of *him*, because *he* had told her that if anything happened to Georgiana it would be on her head. Because of him and for Georgiana's sake, she had defied Mary and selflessly endangered herself by travelling alone to an unknown and dangerous city to try to put things right. This realisation made him feel like a remorseful brute and endlessly grateful he had stumbled upon her before anything happened to her. He would never have forgiven himself. Still, he wished he did not have to deal with this unwelcome companion when he was on a mission.

He returned his gaze to meet hers.

“You've done enough.”

He did not tell her in more words than so, that his discontent with her was fading, but the sudden softness in his voice and the shift in his eyes gave him away even in the dim light. Without fully understanding why, this made her obey instead of objecting further when he nodded his head in direction of the awaiting carriage as a sign for her to get in.

Sidney gave the driver the address to the Parker's London residence and slumped down in the seat, too late realising he had sat down beside Miss Heywood instead of on the opposite side as may have been the wiser choice. When the carriage started with a jerk she was tossed towards him, her side temporarily pressed to his. Briefly he felt the pleasant pressure from her body, then the two quickly moved apart to sit as far away from each other as they could.

He wished they would travel in silence, but she had different ideas. As usual there were things she needed to get off her chest.

“If you'd been honest with me, if you'd only told me that you feared for her safety, I would have thought twice.”

He nearly gasped at the unfairness of this accusation. If there was one thing he was certain of, it was that he had made his view on the matter very clear indeed.

“I could not have been any clearer about my feelings for Mr Molyneux.”

“You spoke only in the vaguest of terms. You gave no reason for your antipathy. No explanation.”

He felt his annoyance return, the upset feelings from their argument in the street in Sanditon. Damn it, he had no obligation to disclose his reasons to her.

“Oh, so you supplied your own. You baselessly accused me of prejudice.”

He kept staring out of the window, struggling not to let his temper get the better of him like it had when he had shouted at her in the street. He had a hot temper, he knew that, but no one made him lose it quite as often as Miss Heywood despite that he increasingly disliked losing it with her.

“Hardly baseless, given how you made your fortune”, she said with evident contempt.

He snapped around, now compelled to look straight at her. *That accusation again.* At least now he was more mentally prepared for it and managed to blurt out an upset explanation.

“For God's sake, I despise slavery! I've long since renounced the sugar trade for that very reason.” It gave him some satisfaction to notice a confused expression pass over her face. She thought he had him all figured out and he longed to prove her assumptions wrong. “The man's race played no part in it.”

“I can think of no other reason for your enmity.”

Sidney felt like an artery might burst inside him very soon. *How come she must constantly assume the worst of him instead of looking for other possible explanations?*

“Are you really that naive? Why do you think he was so desperate to marry her? Because the moment they are wed, everything she owns belongs to him.”

He saw her process the information as his words sank in and it silenced her - for about three beats, then she shifted topic.

“Are we not wasting time? Instead of taking me back to Tom, we could be searching for Georgiana.”

*Would she ever accept being a by-stander?* Highly unlikely, but he was firmly determined to drop her off at Tom’s.

“And where do you suggest we look, Miss Heywood? This is a city of a million people.”

“The Sons Of Africa.”

“What?” Sidney had never heard of it.

“It is the movement he belongs to.”

This was actually a brilliant idea and instead of taking Miss Heywood home to Tom, Sidney gave the driver new instructions and they continued the search for Otis Molyneux in the London night together.

He brought Miss Heywood to places he knew he should not, but time was of the essence now when they had an important clue, so he could not waste it by going to the Parker residence. They located Molyneux as he by a stroke of luck was giving a speech at the premises of ‘The Sons Of Africa’ this very evening. Molyneux in his

turn pointed them to a Mr. Beacroft, the infamous owner of several establishments of disputable reputation, among them a gambling house which Molyneux was indebted to. The situation turned out to be very grave indeed, exceeding Sidney's worst fears. Georgiana was not with Molyneux but had been abducted by Beacroft's thugs and basically been sold to a man who intended to force her to the altar to get his hands on her fortune. When they learned this information Sidney had felt for a moment like everything was lost, but Miss Heywood was not willing to throw in the gauntlet yet and had suggested that Beacroft maybe was hiding Georgiana somewhere in London. He had implied he was awaiting payment for her and he was a man who was unlikely to let anything go without some kind of security. That had led Sidney to think of a 'boarding house' which he knew Beacroft also owned, so he had ordered the carriage to bring them there in a last attempt to locate Georgiana.

They had another painful conversation on the way and Sidney wondered if this night would ever come to an end and how he was to survive it. They had left Molyneux behind and Miss Haywood had found it in her right to scold at him because she thought he had been too hard on the man.

"As I see it, he is a good man who made one terrible mistake", she said, looking sternly at Sidney from the opposite seat as he now had had the presence to at least avoid sitting beside her.

"He is an inveterate gambler. He has several debtors beside Beacroft", he tried to explain patiently.



“Otis never meant to place Georgiana in harm's way, any more than I did.”

“And yet you both did.” She flinch and knew he was being hard on her, but he felt she needed to hear the truth.

“All I ever cared about was Georgiana's happiness”, she defended herself.

“What do you think I care about?” Again he felt he was on the verge to losing his temper, but more out of desperation than anger this time.

“That is anyone's guess!” she spoke back with equal indignation.

“I have done the best I can by Georgiana.”

Why did she make him feel like he did not measure up? What was it about her that so often made him feel he was not doing enough? He intended for that to be the end of the conversation, but she could not let him have the last word.

“No. At every turn you've abdicated responsibility. If you truly cared for her welfare, you would have watched over her yourself.”

Her words hit a soft spot inside him and now he felt a strong need to defend himself.

“It's a role I neither sought nor asked for.”

“Of course not! Because you are determined to remain an outlier. God forbid you give something of yourself.”

She was right. He did *not* want to give of himself because once he had given *all* and been burned. He had fought hard to bury and forget the reason for his behaviour

deep inside over the years, but his visible actions strived to achieve one thing; to protect himself from the pain that came with emotional involvement. He had no intention of sharing this with her.

“Please, do not presume to know my mind, Miss Heywood.”

“How can anyone know your mind? You take pains to be unknowable. All I know is that you cannot bear the idea of two people being in love.”

For some reason her words made Sidney feel like he hardly could breathe.

“And what do you know of love, apart from what you have read?” he asked with choked voice and could barely stand looking at her. It must be pleasant to be so naïve and unruined as Miss Heywood, to not know the pain of betrayal and unrequited love. How he envied that.

“I would sooner be naive than insensible of feeling.”

At these words another feeling came over him, like a mighty wave. He did not understand why he so strongly disliked her thinking him insensible of feeling, when that was exactly what he long had strived to be.

“Is that really what you think of me? I am sorry that you think that. How much easier my life would have been if I were.”

Briefly their eyes locked and he saw that his words confounded her. Perhaps she also noticed the sudden tired sadness in his voice because she said nothing more and soon they stopped outside the boarding house. Miss Heywood made a move towards the carriage door, but Sidney held her back. This was an establishment

where he refused to bring her inside. He had to draw the line somewhere and such a place was an unacceptable environment for a young lady.

“Under no circumstances are you to set foot outside this carriage.”

She looked like she had tasted something sour, but stayed behind without putting up a fight when he went inside.

As soon as he entered the lavishly decorated room, the Madame approached him. She had not seen Sidney Parker for quite some time and was pleased he was here now. He had always been a very popular, even if not very frequent, customer among the girls. Not only was he handsome, but he also belonged to the few men who cared that the woman took some pleasure in the act and the rumour was that an evening with Sidney Parker was very enjoyable indeed. So enjoyable that most girls would spend it for free, had the Madame allowed it.

“Good evening, Mr Parker. I've not seen you in a while. I have some new ladies who'll be delighted to make your acquaintance.”

“Thank you, Mrs Harries, but I am not here for that.”

Indeed the tone of his voice suggested he was here for business rather than pleasure. Madame barely had time to feel disappointed, before that feeling was replaced with surprise when a tiny brunette appeared by Mr. Parker's side. Her astonished gaze wandered around the exclusive room, filled with beautiful girls and their guests.

“Mr Parker, what is this place?” she creased her little nose suggesting that she understood full well what kind of place this was.

Madame noticed that Mr. Parker looked far from pleased to see her here.

“I thought I told you to wait”, he hissed through gritted teeth.

“I decided against it.”

Ha, such a feisty girl. Was it his wife? No they did not seem like such an established couple. His fiancé perhaps, or otherwise soon to be because Madame noticed almost visible sparks flying between them. Madame had seen enough different sorts of people in her days to know when there was a special connection between two, and there definitely was between Parker and this girl.

“And who is this? You haven't made an honest man of our Mr Parker, have you?”

“Gracious, no.”

The brunette shook her head as if the suggestion was ridiculous. So she was still in denial. Judging by the furious look on Mr. Parker's face, he was too. Well, give them time and Madame was certain they would understand their own feelings because *she* was never wrong.

“I am a friend of Miss Georgiana Lambe's. Is she here?” the girl continued.

“I don't believe I am acquainted with anyone of that name”, Madame lied fluently and tried to turn away, but Mr. Parker took her by the arm.

“Wait, wait, wait. You know something. Miss Lambe is my ward, you must tell me what you know.”

Ah, this was awkward. She really liked Parker and wanted to help him, so after a brief hesitation she told him the truth.

“You missed them by half an hour. If you're quick you might catch them on the road to Scotland.”

Sidney almost pushed Miss Heywood in front of him, trying to get her away from there as quickly as possible now when they had the information they needed, but as soon as they came outside she turned to him.

“A ‘boarding house’, you said. Is this your idea of love? Something to be paid for?” Her big innocent eyes seemed to drill deep inside him, and he tried to hide the fact that he was deeply embarrassed by lashing out at her.

“That will do! If we are to stand any chance of catching them up, we should make haste.”

She rolled her eyes at him and stepped towards the carriage.

“I don't suppose there's any point in telling you to stay behind, is there?”

She entered and her unusual, cool silence was as clear as if she had told him verbally to sod off.

Seated inside, Charlotte stared at Mr Parker with a disgusted and confounded look on her face reflecting her exact sentiments.

Every time he showed something of himself which improved her opinion of him, something happened which made her think the contrary. This evening he has come to her rescue, even if she had not needed it, not at all. He had also disclosed motives for his recent actions which had surprised her. Her thoughts went on to what Mr Parker had said about Otis Molyneux and his objections to him. He had wanted to safeguard Georgiana's independence and fortune and he denied that objecting to Otis had anything to do with race. He also claimed to be against slavery. She glanced at him, as if trying to penetrate his hard outer shell but he seemed preoccupied with his own thoughts. *Did she believe him?* Yes, she found that she did, and these revelations were all in his favour, but then again, another was not.

It had been clear that the hostess in that so called 'boarding house' knew him well. Charlotte found it despicable and utterly disappointing that he had been a guest there in the past. Of course, she knew that many men paid for female company but somehow she had expected more from Mr. Parker. She was not sure why, but surely he did not need to *pay* women to be with him? He was often moody enough to deter any woman from voluntarily spend time with him, that was true, but he had also shown her another side of himself; charming, attentive, supportive and caring. If he chose to show more of that, women would gladly throw themselves at his feet because his brooding looks were indisputably attractive. She shook her head to herself. *Did she really just think that?*

So, why would he then do it? She pondered over this for a while as the carriage moved through the streets towards the outskirts of the city and concluded that perhaps it was because he did not want any feelings to be involved, no strings

attached. Not for his part, not for anyone else's. He wanted to remain distant, unengaged and what better way than to pay for company. Still, it disturbed her to imagine him with those women and a strange, nagging feeling emerged inside her, one which Charlotte was too unfamiliar with to identify as jealousy. She did not admit to herself that she would welcome Sidney Parker's company in any shape or form, so how could she then be jealous of someone else having it. It did not even occur to her because it was such a ridiculous notion.

At the other end of the seat, Sidney's thoughts much mirrored Charlotte's.

He prepared himself for a long ride. Even if they had been told that they only had missed Miss Lambe by half an hour, it would take time to catch up on the bumpy country road towards Gretna Green and the company of Miss Heywood would likely make the journey feel twice as long.

She kept quiet now though and did not look at him. He felt his cheeks still burn after her comment outside the boarding house and was grateful for the dim light. He had the feeling she would not find him redeemed even if he told her it had been months since he was there last because he strangely had not fancied to go. Had not fancied the company of any woman... except on occasions hers. Not tonight though.

Eager as he was both to get Miss Heywood as far away from the boarding house as he could and to chase after Georgiana, he had made the same mistake again; sat down on the same seat as her and then it somehow seemed rude to move, so he did not but kept his distance.

He knew it probably was better if he did not try to explain to her, but after a while driving in strained silence he could not resist.

“It is not my idea of love.”

“What?” she turned to him looking confused.

“You asked before... outside the boarding house. Paying for it is not my idea of love. Not like that and not in a marriage.”

He looked out the window and the small muscle by his jaw tensed.

“I suppose that is why I am not married, because I have not found the right woman and I refuse to see marriage as a transaction of money. Then I would rather not marry at all.”

He swallowed hard before he continued.

“Perhaps we are not so different after all Miss Heywood. Was it not you who said marriage would become a kind of slavery without love and affection? That you would not marry without it?”

Their brown eyes met, his near black with her hazel ones, and she just nodded in response, stunned over his confession. For once Miss Heywood did not seem to find any witty words in return.

They drove on in silence, but now it felt more companionable than before. He noticed how tired she looked and no wonder in the middle of the night, after a long journey from Sanditon to London and a far too adventurous evening.

“Try to get some rest. It may take long before we catch up with them.”



“I’m not sure I can sleep when I am so worried for Georgiana.”

“I am sure it will all turn out for the best now when we know where she is headed”, he said with more confidence than he felt, but it seemed to comfort her and within a few minutes she was asleep.

He was filled with a strange tenderness when he watched her sleeping form, saw her eyelashes flutter and heard her calm breaths. She soon became relaxed and limp and he noticed how her body shifted back and forth uncomfortably as the carriage moved and jerked. With a loud sigh only for himself, as if to make it clear he was making a sacrifice, he moved closer on the seat and pulled her to him, so she rested against his shoulder. When he put his arm around her to support her, she slid further down so she was half lying on his chest. In her sleep she nestled into him and put her arm over his stomach. Sidney momentarily froze at this much unexpected body contact, but he did not have it in his heart to push her away and could not help but secretly enjoying it. Instead he held her steadily, indulged in her form fitting so well to his and the warmth coming from her. He registered her every breath and faint sound, the same jasmine perfume he had smelled at the ball and allowed himself to gently stroke her soft hair.

So it happened, that for many hours Sidney Parker held a sleeping Miss Heywood in his arms. He had never slept beside a woman a full night and he wondered if this was what it would feel like having one in his arms *every* night, knowing she was *his*, waiting to wake up to meet another day together. He told himself he stayed awake for when they would catch up with Georgiana’s abductors, but the

truth was he did not want to miss a second of the loveliness. This was something he never had expected to experience, least of all with Miss Heywood.

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*Author's note: I felt we missed a lot when we did not get to see anything from a carriage ride that lasted all night and then Sidney obviously had softened towards Charlotte when they came to Tom's house, so I imagined what might have happened in between.*