

Author's note: Sometimes I curse myself because I always take a story so seriously once I have started it. I want it to contain a complete plot, not skip over parts too lightly but it also makes it a bigger project requiring quite some effort. Really should try to keep to one-shots but it is impossible. Right now I'm a bit torn between wanting to give more substance to the amazing story we have already seen and moving on to what happens beyond episode 8. Well, we will get to it at some point if you have not given up by then. Perhaps you are bored by this reliving of the series, but I really enjoy getting inside their heads.

Another chapter shifting POV between the two, I hope you can follow and that you enjoy the read. Next is almost ready because it was part of this at first but got too long for my taste.

Chapter 9: Change of hearts

Charlotte was rattled awake by the lurching carriage. Dazed and confused she looked up and for a moment was even more bewildered at the sight of Sidney Parker on the opposite seat, watching her intently.

“Where are we?” she asked sleepily.

“On the road to Scotland, tracking down Georgiana, remember?”

Then it all came back to her, last night and why they were here. His melodious voice was surprisingly soft and somehow made her feel like she was exactly where she wanted to be.

Mr. Parker looked a bit haggard, but just like the previous time she had seen him like that, it suited him. He was the kind of man that looked slightly dangerous in a handsome, thrilling way when he was not all polished up and perfect. Fleetingly she wondered what that stubbled jaw would feel like if her fingertips touched it, and if his tousled dark hair would feel soft or rough if she smoothed it over. Not that she ever would dare or even really wanted to. His looks made her self-consciously aware that she must look very disorderly, with crumpled dress, messy hair and a sleepy face and she was quite certain it was not to her advantage as it was to his. She sat up and tried to smooth out wrinkles on her clothes, tidy her curls a bit and put on the bonnet that had fallen off during the night.

He did not cease watching her and now she noticed there was something different about him. The rest of his appearance might be stern as usual, but the expression in his eyes had shifted since last night. He did not look at her as if she was flawed, like she did not know enough of the world, was too outspoken and did not dress the part of a lady. The unexpected warmth in his eyes made her feel like she was wrapped up in blanket; safe, protected and also a bit hot. She looked away, out the

window and only now she registered it was daylight, which meant she must have slept for long.

“I never expected to sleep so well during a bumpy carriage ride, but I feel as if I have rested in the most comfortable bed, tucked in under a duvet and with my head on a fluffy pillow”, she said astonished and returned her gaze to his face.

For some reason this made his cheeks flush slightly, but there was also a little smile playing on his lips. It struck her how soft and full those lips were. They could have been feminine if the rest of his features had not been so supremely masculine. Now they were just an enticing contrast to his chiselled jaw and stubble.

“I suppose the movements of the carriage rocked you to sleep.”

“Did you sleep at all?”

“For a while yes, but mostly I have been awake.”

“It must have been a dreadfully long and boring night for you. I hope at least I did not snore”, she giggled insecurely. The thought of him watching her as she slept was disconcerting. Now he smiled fully.

“I can assure you, you did not. You slept very peacefully.”

The way he said it gave her goosebumps. Their eyes stayed locked for a few, long seconds. She chewed her bottom lip and heard her own heart beats resound in her ears so loud that he surely must hear them too. He steadily kept holding her gaze and something flashed inside her. He was so calm and comforting and when he looked at her like that she had the strangest sensation inside. He had been so

brusque at times last night, not for the first time and probably not for the last, but right now his eyes were tender like they had been that afternoon by the river and when they walked together along the beach. He opened his mouth as if to say something more but remained silent. Charlotte felt like something important was going on here, but even if she was part of it she was unsure of what it was.

The intense moment was interrupted by the driver shouting to them from above, alerting them to that he now saw another carriage on the road ahead of them. Mr. Parker immediately tensed, preparing himself for the upcoming confrontation.

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Hours later, three exhausted travellers arrived at the door of Tom Parker's house at Bedford Place. Tom was first happily surprised to see them, then dismayed when he saw the state of the ladies.

"Let's get the ladies upstairs, then I'll explain", Sidney told him.

His eyes followed Miss Heywood when she disappeared upstairs and suddenly he wished she would not go, felt like he wanted her within reach so he could be sure she was safe from harm. This night and morning had been far more adventurous than was suitable for a young woman. He shook it off and told himself he was being ridiculous. She had handled it surprisingly well and of course she was safe here, as now at last was Georgiana.

At some point during the night Sidney had fallen asleep despite his intention not to, too content with Miss Heywood in his arms not to let his body relax and be lulled

to sleep. When he woke up, daylight had already come and when he became aware of Miss Heywood still sleeping, with her head at the crook of his neck, he felt guilty, like he had indulged in a forbidden pleasure. She was not his to hold. Yet, he held her a minute longer, unable to let go of her warm body, pliant in sleep. She was so lovely. With long, dark eyelashes resting on rosy cheeks and her soft lips slightly parted, she looked innocently beautiful. She had proven to be so many other things; annoying, opinionated and headstrong but also intelligent, genuine and at each point following her own heart. She was impulsive and reckless, but also adventurous and brave, putting her friend's safety before her own. The very same things that one could criticize because she did not follow the norms for how a young lady should behave, also made him reluctantly admire her the more he got to know her, but he had not understood until now exactly how *lovely* she was. Not *despite* all those things but *because* of them, for no one else was like her. No one stood up to him, challenged him and made him re-evaluate his own opinions and actions like she did. No one was as unimpressed by him or as undeterred when he lashed out at her. It was infuriating but when his temper cooled, he always had to admit that she was right at least in part. She was right when she said that he took pains to be unknowable, but she seemed to understand him better than anyone, even if he did not want her to.

Her eyelids fluttered and he hurried to carefully lay her down on the seat and move away from her, to instead sit on the opposite seat. From a safe distance he continued watching her until she woke up, perplexed about the feelings she evoked

in him. Last night she had been such unwelcome company when he stumbled upon her in that alley. How come his feelings were quite the opposite now?

He had continued thinking about it during the journey back to London. In retrospect he felt like he had behaved like a sulking child when he met her last night and he knew well that Georgiana would not have been with them now if it was not for Miss Heywood. She was the one who cleverly had suggested they went to The Sons of Africa, she was the one who had insisted Georgiana might still be hidden in London and thus lead him to think of the boarding house. He would never had succeeded rescuing his ward from ruination had it not been for Miss Heywood.

Thankfully, Georgiana was safe and the girls had talked meanwhile Sidney for the most part had stayed silent, listening to them with half an ear. Georgiana had told them about her abduction and that she had been well treated and not abused in any way, which was a great relief. Miss Haywood had shared their nightly adventures, with some hesitance when it came to disclosing Molyneux's part in the whole sordid business. She had paused and looked at Sidney. He understood she hesitated because she wanted to spare Georgiana's feelings, but he nodded for her to go on. Georgiana needed to know it was Molyneux's gambling depts that had put her in this situation, nearly sold off not much better than when he mother was a slave.

He had felt pity for her when her eyes filled to the brim with tears. Loving the wrong person hurts, he knew more about that than he cared to. For this reason he checked

on the girls after the arrival to Bedford Place, with a sudden urge to try to comfort his unruly ward.

“What will happen to Otis now? The debtor's prison? Worse?” she asked him.

“He is no longer your concern.”

“Whatever he has done, I cannot just cauterise my heart. I am not you.”

Through her father, Georgiana knew Sidney's history, but how mistaken she was about how he felt about it. He had no intention to share those sentiments with her though, especially not in front of Miss Heywood.

“At this moment, your world feels undone, I know that, but you must put him from your mind, or you'll go mad.”

He was not sure that was any comfort at all even it was his intention, and as he excused himself and left the girls he met Miss Heywood's searching eyes. When he walked down the stairs her words echoed in his head; *‘At every turn you've abdicated responsibility. If you truly cared for her welfare, you would have watched over her yourself.’* He could not help feeling that perhaps she was right, and he had not done what he could for Georgiana. He asked himself if there was anything more he could do at this point.

“Good heavens, Sidney. You have had quite the drama”, Tom said when he summarised the night's events for him.

Sidney had joined him in the parlour and poured himself a glass of wine. He longed for a bath but felt he needed to update his brother on the situation first.

“But all is well now!” Tom continued chirpily but Sidney disagreed.

“Is it? I fear Georgiana's spirit is broken. You have no idea how close to ruination she came, Tom.”

“That's hardly your fault.”

“Her father entrusted her to my care. The man saved my life, and in return I failed to honour the one thing that he asked of me.”

“Still, there's no use dwelling on it. What's done is done.”

How delightful it must be to be Tom. Never accepting blame or responsibility for anything was his approach to life.

“How can a man begin to make amends until he's willing to face his own faults?” Sidney asked eluding to Tom as much as to himself, but he could see that the remark as usual flew over Tom's head.

“That's why you came to London, is it not, Tom? To make amends?” he clarified.

“Well, er, no. I mean, I came mainly to raise interest in the regatta.”

“Tom, I was present at the cricket. Be honest with me. Be honest with yourself,” he asked sincerely. It was like Miss Heywood's provoking yet refreshing way to speak up instead of sweeping things under the carpet, made him want to do the same.

Finally his brother shared with him the gravity of his situation, how he had knocked on half the doors of London and no-one seemed to care a damn about Sanditon or

the regatta and now he had no means whatsoever of paying his labourers. Worst of all was that he had lost the trust of his dear wife, perhaps forever.

Sidney sighed, wondering how Tom could have allowed it to come to this. Once he had admired his brother, seen him as his role model, but when he returned an older and wiser man from the West Indies himself he had begun to see the flaws. The way he handled his investments and private economy was a disaster and the only thing left to admire and envy was his marriage, which he now seemed well on his way to ruin too. However, Sidney cared too much for his brother, Mary and the children to let that happen if he could prevent it.

“Well we will raise interest in the regatta yet. Babington will know where best to knock and as for the labourers, I shall lend you the money.”

He had sworn not to be financially involved in Tom’s craziness, but he felt he had to revise that now. Not because he believed in the investment but because he wanted to help those dearest to him, because he was indebted to Tom for helping *him* in the past... and perhaps because he wanted prove himself a better man than Miss Heywood considered him to be.

“But when it comes to Mary I’m of no use, I cannot pretend to understand the workings of a marriage. What I do know, is I would do anything to be blessed with a wife such as yours. So, you must do whatever it takes.”

When the words left his lips he knew they were true. He had long given up the thought of marriage because he thought he was not suited for it with anyone after Eliza. He realised now that even if he had repressed it, part of him had never

stopped hoping and longing to find a woman who would make him feel complete. The sight and sensation of Miss Heywood in his arms came back to him, making him feel strangely warm inside.

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The housemaid Jenkins had poured Charlotte a bath and provided her with a change of clothes. Charlotte had only brought a very small luggage when she sneaked off to London, but thankfully Mary kept a wardrobe here and Jenkins had found her a dress to borrow. Now she was clean and tidy, unexpectedly well-rested and Georgiana was safe and sound under the same roof, so she did not understand why she felt so out of sorts. Tom found her like that, seated in the library, troubled and unable to focus on the book in her lap.

“How are you Charlotte?” he enquired. Even he, who usually was cheerfully oblivious to other’s mood swings, could see that something was ailing her.

“It’s all been so overwhelming. I hardly know what to think any more.”

“About what, my dear?”

“About anything! I have always felt so certain of my judgment but now I see that I have been blinded by sentiment and naivety. I’ve got it all so wrong. No wonder your brother has such a poor opinion of me.”

She did not know it but right there, she was approaching the core of the matter; Sidney Parker’s opinion of her. She knew it had swayed between half bad and worse

over time, but she was unsure as to what it was now and for some reason eager to know. She could not decipher the way he had looked at her this morning.

“I am certain that is not the case.” Tom chuckled. “Sidney can be hard to read, that is all.”

“He is a conundrum”, Charlotte sighed heavily.

“But a conundrum can be solved”, Tom tried to appease her.

“He seems so determined to keep the world at arm's length.” She complained, without knowing why that bothered her as it did.

“That wasn't always the case. In his younger days, he was a very different man.”

“Mary has spoken of a broken engagement?” Charlotte did not want to seem overly curious, but truth was that she was dying to learn more.

“ Yes, Eliza. They were very much in love, but at the last moment, she passed him over in favour of an older and wealthier man. Sidney set out on a rather self-destructive path and we were all greatly concerned. In the end, I paid his debts and he sailed to Antigua in a bid to forget her. I fear the man he was never quite returned.”

Charlotte thought that so sad. No wonder he was disillusioned about love when he had been let down so terribly himself. It was difficult to picture him a young man very much in love, then cruelly deserted. She wished she had known him as he was then, before he started distrusting others. On the other hand it seemed quite unfair of him to judge Otis for his gambling when he had been in the same situation.

Talking about the devil, they were interrupted by the unexpected appearance of Otis Molyneux, with Sidney close behind him.

“Mr Molyneux?” Charlotte asked but steered her gaze to Mr. Parker for an explanation. Him bringing Otis here was the last thing she had expected.

“I thought they at least deserved a proper parting”, he told her and led Molyneux up the stairs to Georgiana, leaving Charlotte even more confused than before.

‘At least they deserve a proper parting.’ The words she had said to him back in Sanditon. He had disregarded them then, brusquely said it was none of her business, but now was making amends for it. Sidney Parker’s actions and whole being was making her increasingly confounded by the minute.