

Author's note: Thank you for all reviews to the last chapter, I really appreciate them, and you are just the loveliest readers one can have. This chapter has been haunting me, because I never manage to finish it! It just grows longer, and I can't stop editing but here it is at last.

I hope you all feel energized by all the positivity after the US premiere of Sanditon, I'm still nurturing a hope there will be a second season. Don't miss Fabiola SPN's beautiful video 'Sanditon needs a second season' on YouTube and please tweet bomb @masterpiecepbs with requests for another season! Sorry for campaigning, now I will let you read in peace.

Chapter 16: A cliff-top walk is much more to my taste

In which a thousand night-time questions are asked and finally receive an answer

'That is all', Sidney had concluded, turned on his heels and left. She had remained frozen next to Tom's model of future Sanditon, stunned and bewildered by his unexpected words.

It was *not* all.

It was a turmoil of emotions, heart beating erratic and a sleepless night tossing and turning on crumpled sheets with those words resounding in her head, trying to figure out what he really meant.

'I decided against it.'

He had decided against joining Mrs. Campion to London. A wave of joy rolled through her, followed by confusion. Why? Did it mean he would *not* engage himself to her again?

'On reflection, I realised I would rather be here.'

Here? What exactly did he allude to by '*here*'? In Sanditon? In Tom's studio? Or was it possible... *with Charlotte?*

All she had managed in her befuddled state was to stare at him, mutely willing him to explain. She was almost afraid to blink in case he would disappear, but he did not. He stayed exactly where he was, rooted to the wooden floor, in this moment no longer inclined to escape her. When he spoke again, his words were not rushed, but slow and deliberate, like he cared a great deal about what he was about to say and how she would receive it. He seemed to be treading carefully, not to repeat his previous mistake this day when words had come out so hurtful. This time he wanted to make sure to repair his wrongdoings, not cause further harm.

Silently she had observed him, trying to read him. She was so sad and angry with him still and if he had come here to mock her again she would not stand it. The

candle light cast flitting shadows on his handsome features, but she saw him well enough to realise there was not the slightest hint of tease or condescension there.

He diverted his gaze before he continued, as if to summon his courage, then met her eyes anew with an earnest expression that almost seemed to leave his soul bare to her.

'I am a great deal less than perfect.'

Those words were truly unexpected, shocking even. With absolute candour he admitted to her that he thought himself flawed. She had indeed thought him imperfect before but now... He had treated her badly today, when he did not stand up for her and she abhorred that, but now he was here and trying to make amends and in this very moment he seemed quite perfect.

'You have made me all too aware of that.'

Now she shivered with embarrassment thinking of all the times she had spoken harshly to him, criticised or mocked him. No man in his right mind would want anything to do with a woman who talked to him like that. A man wanted to feel adored and admired, not diminished or ridiculed, but she seemed to have this constant urge to speak her mind even if it meant pointing out the faults in a man she had come to feel affection for. Why did she have to be so opinionated? Why could she not be more pleasing, when most other girls managed to hold their tongue? For a man to accept constantly being challenged by a woman, he must either be a fool who did not understand it, and such a man she could never love or

admire, or a strong, open-minded man who was not put down by it. Such men seemed to be a rare kind.

'But for whatever it is worth I believe I am my best self, my truest self, when I'm with you.'

She gasped silently. Was Sidney Parker *that* kind of man after all?

He gave no further answer. After that, it appeared he could not bear to stay another minute and he had excused himself saying 'that was all', when it so obviously was not. In this crucial moment, she had remained speechless, incapable of saying anything to prevent him from leaving. Overwhelmed and occupied trying to take in what he had said, she had allowed him to go and now had to live through the night with a thousand questions as her sole companion.

What did it mean when a man said he thought he was his best and truest self with you? Surely it must be a compliment, or?

She already knew she had feelings for him but had thought them unrequited. Was this a confession from Sidney Parker that he felt something for her too? Was it possible that he had turned down Mrs. Champion and decided to remain in Sanditon to be near *her*? The mere possibility made her feel flushed and terribly upset but not in an unpleasant way. It made the feelings she had tried to hold back gush through her with renewed strength, impossible to restrain anymore. She was undeniably in love with him.

Once again, Charlotte's world had been turned upside down, and simultaneously it expanded its boundaries far beyond what she ever had experienced or been capable of imagining before. It happened so fast she barely knew how to handle it.

'*What do you know of love apart from what you have read?*' Sidney had asked her in London, with ill-concealed contempt, or at least so she had thought at the time. In light of his words tonight, it seemed that she had to re-evaluate everything the man had said and done once again.

How mistaken she had been when she thought she had him figured out the night of the first Sanditon ball and told him he must be the sensible brother. She still thought him to be that, especially compared to Tom and Arthur, but she had only seen but a fragment of who he was then, and he was so much more than simply *sensible*.

She had thought she had him figured out anew when he sent Otis away from Sanditon, thought she had revealed the rotten core of a bad fruit, like Lady Denham's exquisite but worm-filled pineapple. He only seemed to confirm her assumptions when he lashed out at her instead of explaining or defending himself, but she had been wrong, so devastatingly wrong. His objections to Otis had nothing to do with racial prejudice and he had not built his fortune on slavery. On the contrary, he willingly had taken a financial loss rather than exploiting fellow humans and had only aimed to protect Georgiana from letting a gambler get his hands on her fortune. In retrospect, it seemed Sidney's reason for not telling Georgiana the truth about Otis was that he did not want to cause her more grief

than the separation necessitated. He would bear her hating him instead of Otis to let her faith in men stay intact. In the end he had paid off Otis' debts, giving him a second chance in life and allowed them a proper parting. Indeed, Sidney Parker was not insensible of feeling like Charlotte had accused him of.

It was then she had realised that she had misjudged his character grossly. At the London ball she had come to realise that she also had misjudged her feelings for him. Susan's words made her understand she was in love with him but thought it unreciprocated. The latest event made her wonder if she read him wrong once again.

'What do you know of love apart from what you have read?'

Even if she had retorted like she did not give a fig what he thought of her when he asked this, his words had stung afterwards when she began to realise how much she cared for him and he only seemed to have eyes for Eliza Champion. It had made her scrutinize herself. Made her feel too young, too naïve and inexperienced to ever attract a man like him. It had made her wish she was more like Lady Susan who seemed to understand the world, men and matters of the heart so well.

She turned in her bed for the umpteenth time and let out a frustrated groan, very unladylike and she was grateful she had a room of her own and no one was present to hear her.

After his confession she no longer knew what she was supposed to believe. He apparently did not think as little of her as she had thought, but what exactly did that mean? He had told her she was the one he truly could be himself with and that

this was the version of him he liked most. He had not in fact asked for her forgiveness, but she had the feeling that between the lines of the words spoken he had tried to do that and more. But did it mean he wanted to be with her instead of Eliza, that he even would consider proposing to her? Ask her to be his wife?

It was a farfetched assumption, but the thought made her more feverish than before and suddenly he appeared before her eyes like she had seen him by the cove. Like only a wife was supposed to see her husband and perhaps not even then. Did husbands show themselves to their wives entirely without clothes? She was not sure because such matters were never the topic of conversation in Willingden. And would *he* want to see *her* like that? Would he who had complained he never could escape her, want to be as close to her as a man and woman could possibly be? The idea made her feel embarrassed even if she had been the one fully clothed that time. To think he might imagine her like that, imagine to kiss her. Now she grazed her own lips with her fingertips. The touch felt so inadequate, it could not dampen the need growing inside of her once she had allowed herself to think of how it would be to be kissed by him. She closed her eyes and tried to feel it, but with no previous experience her imagination was not enough, and she felt desperate emptiness where she would have wanted to feel him. He no longer inspired anger in her, he inspired a need deep inside her like no one else.

What *did* she know about love? If he asked her again her answer would indeed be different.

She knew now that love had the power to hurt her, to render her defenceless and tear her apart like nothing else. She never expected it could be so cruel, reading about it was not the same as understanding even half of how painful it could be. Yet she would not want to be without the experience because it was also the most wonderful feeling, one which transformed her, turned her into someone she had not known she could be. She loved him and not because he was flawless. She loved him because he was perfect to her even with his flaws. She loved him even if he was not hers to love. That was what she now knew about love.

She would never dare to tell him all that of course, and she wondered; could he be in love with her despite all *her* flaws?

This was how Charlotte's trail of thoughts went in circles throughout the night. How she wished she had her dear sister here to confide in, to advise her. Even if Alison was even more inexperienced with men than herself they had always been able to talk about everything and she knew Charlotte inside out. Lady Susan would also have been an excellent confidante. She would for sure have known what to make of this utterly confusing situation, but she had returned to London and was out of reach for now.

The third best option was Georgiana and next morning Charlotte went to call on her. Besides seeking advice, she needed to distract herself from the constant thoughts of Sidney, but it was made impossible by the appearance of him in the flesh just as she called on Mrs. Griffiths' door. She spotted him standing further away on the street, engaged in conversation with Tom and when she noticed him

he was already staring at her, with a faint smile, telling her that last night was no dream and that he did not regret or wish to take back the words said. When Mrs. Griffiths' housemaid opened the door, Charlotte almost stumbled inside, dazed and flushed under his intense gaze. Just like the day before, she wondered what he wanted from her but now with the feeling it might be something she was willing to give him.

She found it hard to fully focus on what Georgiana said until unkind words spoken about Sidney broke through her absentminded state and she felt the need to defend him. Today she could not bear anyone thinking ill of Sidney.

By now, she considered Georgiana a dear friend, but the topic of Sidney Parker was unfortunately a sensitive one due to Georgiana's animosity towards him. Before, she could not forgive him from separating her from Otis. Now it was like she could not forgive him for showing her Otis' true nature, thus breaking her heart. She did not care to admit that was exactly what Sidney had tried to prevent when he forbade her from seeing Otis and that it was her own disobedient actions that had exposed the ugly truth. Charlotte tried to appease her, eager to ventilate what had transpired last night with someone and Georgiana was the only one in Sanditon which it was even remotely possible to do so with.

"You judge Sidney too harshly. Consider the kindness he showed Otis. I believe he has a tenderness that few people get to see."

"What has he done to make you think so?" Georgiana asked sceptically.

“Not what he has done, it's what he has said. We spoke after the regatta, and then...”

Suddenly she felt hesitant to share the precious but confusing encounter.

“And?”

“He said, he felt his truest self when he was with me.”

Even to her own ears it sounded silly when she repeated the words, not at all like when Sidney had said them to her.

“Why would he say that?” Georgiana frowned her brow.

“I've been asking myself the same question. I couldn't sleep last night, thinking on it.”

Thinking of his words, thinking of him. She felt her cheeks heat again.

“Oh, no.” Suddenly Georgiana's voice was filled with alarm. “You aren't in love with him? Please say you are not.”

“I...”

She would have loved to confide in her friend, but the look on Georgiana's face stopped her and her next words confirmed she would never support any warm feeling towards Mr. Parker.

“You cannot trust a word he says.”

But Charlotte knew she had to trust her own instincts when it came to this, and they told her that Georgiana was wrong. She realised however, that she would not be able to convince Georgiana of this. Sidney would have to show her himself in

due course and she hoped that he would. Diplomatically she changed topic instead, to talk of the Midsummer's ball.

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When morning finally came after a long sleepless night, Sidney knew he had to talk to her again. In private. He had to hear the words he cowardly had ran away from last night or he would not find peace. Had to know what she thought of what he had said, of him, if she had feelings for him. Romantic feelings, not anger, vexation or resentment. Could she ever see him as anything beyond Tom's brother and a friend?

He had agreed to meet Tom early by one of the nearly finished buildings for a tour inside. He was determined to seek out Charlotte after that.

As it turned out he saw her sooner than expected, standing on the doorstep to Mrs. Griffiths' house. Everything around him seemed to fade away at the sight of this young woman. To others there was perhaps nothing remarkable about her. She looked like most young women except that she unconventionally wore her hair down like she so often did, something he had come to love that about her, but even from afar her figure was enough to make his heart flutter. He felt like every minute away from her was a wasted one.

"Splendid! It's all coming true."

He heard Tom, enthusiastic as ever in the background and for once shared the same opinion. Not that he exactly knew what he meant with '*all*' but when he saw

Charlotte Heywood standing there he had the feeling that things were starting to fall into place in his life in a way they never had before. He sensed that she had the ability to make him feel complete. There had already been moments like that between them and he wanted that feeling to be perpetual.

When she threw a glance over her shoulder and noticed him staring at her, her eyes seemed friendly, like he had at least not offended her with his words last night. He missed her as soon as she disappeared into the house and could barely wait until he would get the chance to talk to her alone again. He prayed it would be before tonight's ball, because there in the crowd it would be difficult even if she miraculously wanted to be alone with him too.

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Not long after she had returned to Trafalgar House from Georgiana, she heard some commotion and cheerful voices mentioning Sidney's name. With heart pounding hard in her chest, she joined the others in the hallway.

He registered her at once and bestowed her one of his rare, lovely smiles. The flicker in his brown eyes was warm and she had the notion that once again he was here for *her*, not to see Tom, Mary or the children.

"Good morning, Miss Heywood."

His voice was so different from the harsh one back in the days when all their encounters seemed to annoy him, when he sighing rolled his eyes and mocked her for being ubiquitous. His next words confirmed that impression.

“I’m going for a walk and was wondering if there was anything you needed in town?”

She could hardly keep from giggling. What must Mary and Tom think of this sudden change in Sidney. She glanced at them and saw that Tom had noticed nothing, but Mary on the other hand smiled knowingly.

“Oh, I, er, I have a dress fitting for the ball. Perhaps I could walk with you?”

She could scarce believe she had been so bold, but an opportunity had arisen to be alone with him and impulse made her act on it because there was nothing she wanted more.

“Of course, be my pleasure.” He seemed very pleased and smiled even wider than before, telling her she had done the right thing.

“Go on, then, off you go, you two.” Mary’s smile grew wider by the minute too. She did not seem to disapprove of the turn of events.

It was not common etiquette in polite society, that a young unmarried woman who valued her reputation went for a walk alone with a gentleman, but just as Charlotte’s father had warned, rules were a bit floated here in the seaside town and Sidney was the brother of her host. No one could really see any harm in him accompanying her to her dress fitting. To Charlotte though, it felt momentous when she and Sidney left Trafalgar House together, but she was in no doubt about wanting to go.

He had no ulterior motives, no plan to lure her away. In fact, no plan at all beyond an intense need to be in her company and resume last night's conversation. It was simply so that he was so focused on her walking next to him that he paid no attention to where they went. All his senses were tuned in on her, on her appearance, her mood.

As if seeing her for the first time, he noticed how small she was compared to him, her head reached just above his shoulder when they walked side by side. She was so delicate, with slender shoulders and narrow waist under her billowing dress and he imagined she would be light as a feather to lift in his arms. Still, and this made him smile, he knew she was far more robust than she looked, like those thin limbs were made of iron underneath the soft skin and he found that combination of being feminine but far from fragile fascinating. Just like the fact that she, who always spoke her mind, now was silent, only breathing a little more strained than usual as they walked uphill. Crowe once observed correctly that she had spunk, but today she seemed slightly apprehensive, like himself.

Their sides occasionally brushed against one another, they moved apart but then connected again as if they could not help it. He struggled to start the conversation but did not know how, without being too abrupt. Last night, his resolve to put things right had made him eloquent. Now he felt disturbingly shy.

They had been alone before, but that was before Charlotte's heated question what he wanted from her, before he declared that he wanted to remain here in Sanditon, in the proximity of her because with her he was himself like with no one else. Those

words filled the silence between them and made him feel nervous and exposed. He had put his heart on his sleeve and was in emotional limbo awaiting her reaction. She seemed to have forgiven him, but that did by no means imply that she could love someone as flawed as him.

The urge to break the tension building up inside him made him start rambling about insignificant things.

“A fine fresh day.” The most trivial remark of all trivial remarks, but he could not come up with anything better.

“Yes, indeed.”

“Bodes well for the ball tonight.”

“Yes.”

“Though it were, being an indoor occasion, good weather is not so much of a consideration.”

“No quite.” There was a hint of amused curiosity in her voice. Surely she must think this the most awkward conversation ever.

“But, er, welcome, nonetheless.”

He could not remember a time when he had felt less confident in a woman’s company. It was a bewildering contradiction. She was the one he could be himself with, yet in this moment his courage failed him because he was so anxious to know if she had feelings for him and it made him resort to polite nonsense. He cleared

his throat, hoping to come up with something wittier or more substantial, but no such luck.

“Are you looking forward to the ball?”

Another cliché was all he managed..

“Very much. I love to dance. Are you looking forward to the ball?”

“Yes, yes, very much, very much.”

It was at least true. The thought of dancing with her again almost made him dizzy.

They walked a few steps in silence and he was painfully aware of how silly the conversation was and how far it was from what he actually wanted to talk to her about. Her company was lovely, still he was in agony.

“Er... And your family have you heard from them recently?”

This got worse by the minute, asking about relations he never had met and knew near to nothing about. She might as well tell him her family was none of his concern.

“Yes, a letter from my sister came just this morning.”

“Ah, well, we both know nothing ever happens in Willingden.”

He immediately regretted the words, hoping she did not think he was looking down his nose at her home. Insulting her was the last thing he wanted, but it seemed she had not noticed his *faux pas*.

Then she suddenly stopped.

“We seem not to be walking into town.”

He looked around, only now aware of their surroundings as if she had woken him from a spell. They had indeed walked away from Sanditon and found themselves on the vast green up on the clifftops. The view of the sea and sky was stunning, though not as breath-taking as her.

Clenching his jaw he silently cursed himself.

“Yes, your, erm, your dress fitting! Forgive me. What a fool I am. Should we head back perhaps?”

Embarrassed he turned to walk back but she stopped him.

“No. There is absolutely no urgency about my dress fitting.” She smiled almost shyly, then added reassuringly; “A walk along the clifftops is much more to my taste.”

He exhaled and dared step closer to her again, to stand face to face instead of continuing walking by her side.

“Good. My thoughts exactly.”

He smiled too, now less nervous than before. She had implied that she would rather be alone with him than do anything else. Relief flooded through him and he finally found the words that had eluded him.

“I, er I was hoping that we might find a moment when we could be alone together.”

He kept his eyes trained on her face and noticed her eyes widening slightly.

“Were you?”

“Yes. I woke up this morning, my head full of the conversation we had last night.”

“So did I.”

The way she said it told him she had been thinking of him in the same way he had been thinking of her and it was the most wonderful realisation. The way she now looked at him made him tremble inside. He moved closer as if invisible strings were pulling him to her. She remained still, did not step into him, but neither moved away.

“Charlotte.” Saying her name, he was asking for permission.

“Yes.” Whispering the one word and turning her face up towards him, shifting her gaze to his lips, gave him that permission.

He had not planned to kiss her even if he had wanted to for some time and he did not dwell on the consequences in this moment. Naturally, he knew that a kiss was so much more than a kiss when it occurred between a lady and an honourable gentleman. It contained a promise of all things to come, of a future together, because a lady should not kiss anyone but her husband.

Only yesterday had he understood the true nature of his feelings for Charlotte and jilted another woman. Until this very minute he had not been sure of *her* feelings for him. In truth he had not had the chance to consider engagement, marriage, a lifetime with her, all those things that ought to follow if one kissed a lady, or even

ought to happen before. All he knew was that he *had* to kiss her now, he could not help himself because the pull was too strong. She said yes and he closed the remaining small gap between them and placed his lips to hers.

It was astonishing really, how this kiss was like nothing before it. In the past he had kissed many times, many women, yet this kiss was like a first. He had never craved to touch anyone's mouth this much, never been so curious or desired it like this. Her soft lips were cold from the sea breeze at first, but warmer as the kiss continued and she tasted so sweet. He was mindful not to be too forceful even if he would have wanted to kiss her senseless. He knew this was more than likely her very first kiss and did not want to frighten her, did not want to take more than she was prepared to give, but Charlotte surprised him with her response. Initially she was motionless, simply receiving his touch but then curled her arms around his neck and held him to her to make sure he knew she did not want to end this. Her body was so warm and pliable when she pressed herself to him and this unexpected fire set his every nerve ending alight. He never wanted to stop and knew that no matter what was to come after this kiss, he would never regret it. He felt his own breathing get heavier and knew his body was reacting more than he could allow and finally, reluctantly and with all the strength he could muster he broke away.

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She did not know how they came to stand so close, in each other's space, or how his arm found its way around her waist, but now it was there, warm, strong, and pulled her even closer to him. Her body followed without resistance. She, who was

used to choose her own path, allowed him to guide her in this moment because this was ground she never had tread before. She was terrified and exhilarated in equal measures, but nothing could have made her stop him. Of all the things she had set out to experience coming to Sanditon she never had expected this; kissing a man she was in love with. She had neither sought love, nor thought she would be kissed, but now she wanted it with all that she was.

There was a moment of hesitation when their faces mere inches apart. She had been nervously giddy before, but that was nothing compared to now and she hoped he could not feel her tremble. When he placed his lips to hers, the seemingly small achievement caused joyful triumph to rush through her body, because this was so much more than merely a pair of lips meeting. It was the eruption of the tension that had been there since their very first meeting; it was the rocky road of friendship and trust growing slowly and with backlashes and hurt on both sides; it was mutual respect, physical attraction, budding love and desire, all channelled into one kiss and the outcome was explosive.

The first touch was cautious, just a graze of lips with noses accidentally bumping together, but they immediately needed to taste each other again and this time she instinctively deepened the kiss. Allowed herself to bury her fingers in the curls at the nape of his neck and hold him to her. His chin may be raspy from stubble, but his lips were so soft. His taste was difficult to define, but fresh almost like when she had tasted the sea water whilst swimming and she immediately knew she would never tire of it. She had been unable to imagine anything close to this sensation,

being in his arms held as if she were precious to him, kissing, kissing, kissing until the ground seemed to disappear under her feet and she ran out of breath.

In the end he broke away, with heaving chest, looking discombobulated like she never had seen him before. She felt a flash of dismay, fearing she had done something wrong. Perhaps she was too impudent in her response and now he had come to his senses and regretted the whole thing. Then he broke out in the happiest boyish grin, stepped closer again and took her hands.

“Nothing is wrong”, he assured her before she even had the chance to ask, sensing her anxiety. “Quite the contrary.” He cleared his throat and then chuckled embarrassed. “It is just the effect you have on me... I have to stop this now... and someone could come, it would ruin your reputation if we were caught kissing.”

She nodded and chewed her bottom lip, still in doubt as to how he regarded her after the fiery kiss.

“I would very much like to kiss you again Charlotte. To tell the truth there is nothing I want more, but at a time when it is appropriate, when we do not risk anyone walking in on us and... er... I know it was not right of me to kiss you now, but forgive me, I couldn't help myself.”

“I wanted it too”, she told him in clear voice. “You didn't make me do something I didn't want to.”

Perhaps a lady ought not to give that information away, but she *wanted* him to know she had desired that kiss as much as he.

Now he chuckled fondly, cupped her cheek with his palm and traced her lips with the pad of his thumb.

“I could tell, but I’m very pleased if you don’t regret it, because I don’t regret it the slightest.”

“Neither do I.” She smiled, relieved.

“Good.” He took a deep breath to regain his composure. “We should head back so you get your dress ready for this evening and so I’m not too tempted to kiss you again.”

She wished he would kiss her again but also realised the risk it would entail out here in the open and did not try to convince him.

They walked back towards town, even closer side by side than on the way up. They did not dare hold hands but let their fingers touch every now and then and even hook briefly. Both were too overwhelmed with emotions to talk of the future or say much at all, but the silence between them was vibrating.

At the first sight of the houses Sidney was reminded there was limited time to get something important off his chest.

“Before we part, I need you to know how much I regret my behaviour towards you during the last days. Ever since London actually.”

She looked at him, waiting for him to tell her exactly what he regretted before she said anything.

“I knew... I knew already at the ball that this was what I wanted and now I think perhaps you knew too? When we danced?”

She nodded, jubilant to know she had not imagined, that the feelings had been mutual during that wonderful dance.

“But I allowed myself to foolishly be distracted by someone who is part of my past, not the present or the future. You know Mrs. Campion and I were engaged once, and it was confusing meeting her after so long. I didn’t know what to make of it and I behaved so badly to you. I shouldn’t have left you alone at the ball, should never had allowed Tom to invite her here. I shouldn’t have prioritised entertaining her over being with you out of some misguided duty, when being with you was the only thing I wanted. I shouldn’t have let her belittle you when you are the most wonderful person I know. I cannot even begin to explain how happy I am that you have come into my life. Can you forgive me?”

She blushed and smiled, overjoyed by the turn of events.

“I thought I had already showed you I forgive you.”

“Well, er, perhaps you have”, he smiled in return. “I wanted to make sure... you know this means everything to me and I am so truly sorry for what I did. You deserve so much better.”

She had been tormented indeed, but it did not matter anymore.

”Of course I forgive you... Sidney.”

Coyly she tried his Christian name for the first time. How he loved hearing her say it, confirming the intimate bond between them.

He wished to continue the conversation, but they were interrupted by jolly shouts. It was Arthur and Diana approaching on the road. If he had not been so ridiculously happy he would have been annoyed with them for the intrusion, but now he simply shrugged his shoulders smilingly. There was no rush now when he and Charlotte knew how they felt for each other.

“Sidney! Miss Heywood! How lovely to see you! We are giving the revigorating exercise Dr. Fuchs prescribed another try, but I must say I think we have had enough for one day. Can we accompany you back into town?”

Both him and Charlotte held back their laughter, it seemed Diana feared physical activity almost more than being ill. He could not deny his siblings joining them and accepted he would have to resume the conversation another time, hopefully tonight.

When he left her outside the dress-maker, it took all his strength not to kiss her or even stroke her cheek goodbye, but he hoped his eyes told her all she needed to know. As he walked away, his head spun even more than it had this morning, but now only with joyous thoughts. Miss Charlotte Heywood was in love with him too.