

A/N: Dear Readers, sorry it has taken so long since the previous update. Perhaps because I find the disastrous events after the clifftop walk hard to re-tell, I have written a few other stories in between, skipping to happier times. But I want to finish this re-telling and I want to add a happy ending beyond season 1, so I guess I just have to bite the bullet to then be able to re-write their history. This chapter is not cheerful, but it will let you know what actually happened when Sidney went to London. This will be a chapter entirely from his POV.

Also, to put things into perspective 80 000 in 1800 is approximately 6,7 million today.

I will continue 'The only reason to marry is love' in parallel to this, so updates may continue to be a bit unpredictable.

Chapter 17: Harsh reality

In which one proposal is not made, and another unfortunately is and we find out what happens when Sidney go to London

It was late afternoon and Sidney returned back to the house at Bedford Place and slumped down in an armchair in front of the fireplace with a heavy heart. The week that had passed since that earthshattering kiss on the clifftops had been far from what he had hoped. In truth, it had been a total disaster.

After saying goodbye to Charlotte outside the dressmaker that sunny afternoon, he had gone for a walk along the beach. He needed to be alone with his thoughts, needed hear nothing but the comforting, repetitive sound of the waves and the seagulls. His senses were filled with her and he did not want anything to take that away.

Even though he had seen her but a minute ago, he missed her already. He was giddy with happiness over what had passed between them, intoxicated by the sensation of her lips to his own, desperate with need to be close to her again. He needed to hold her, kiss her, make her his... let her make him hers.

When that thought went through his mind, he stopped in his tracks. There it was. He wanted to be hers. Not just physically but in every possible way. He wanted to wake up with her every day, come home to her every night and know that home always was where she was. *Their home.*

Fondly, he reminisced their conversation in the boat the day before.

'I had convinced myself I was destined to be alone, that I was ill-suited for matrimony.'

'I suppose it is just a question of compatibility.'

Had she been talking about them already then, wiser than him? It seemed to him they were indeed compatible. Not because they were the same, but because when they polished away each other's sharp edges, they seemed to fit together in some strange way. He wanted to make her happy, but he also wanted to keep challenging her and be challenged in return. He wanted her to depend on him, but he also wanted to depend on her. He had never felt like this before, not even when he was infatuated with Eliza. He had wanted to take care of Eliza, provide for and love her, but he had never expected her to be his strength in return, an equal partner. He

knew that Charlotte could be that. He knew that a life with her would never be boring. They would always have fiery discussions, he would always desire her. He could only dream of how they could show that passion towards each other behind closed doors. He shut his eyes for a moment, overwhelmed by the physical reaction the memory of her body pressed to his provoked in him. The intensity of his feelings was almost terrifying because he knew he could lose himself in her, but nevertheless he wanted to give himself up to her without a doubt.

No matter from which angle he considered his relationship with Charlotte Heywood, he knew one thing for sure. He wanted her to be his wife so he could spend every day and night with her until the end of his days.

His decision had been made there on the beach. He would ask Charlotte to become his wife and he would do it the same evening, stealing her away for a moment at the Midsummer's ball. Once his mind was made up, he could hardly wait to ask her. He had felt so hopeful then, having had a glimpse of a wonderful life he never had expected to be his and which now suddenly seemed to be within his reach, but from there things had taken an unfortunate turn.

It started in the small things, how someone or something always seemed to come between during the evening, so they did not have a proper chance to talk or even dance. They were so close, but then Tom pulled him into a conversation, and someone asked her to dance and so it went on. It did not help much that their eyes connected almost constantly across the room, it was incredibly frustrating not to be near her, in private and tell her the things he badly needed to tell her. She was radiantly beautiful in her new blue dress. He hoped that the glow that seemed to come from within her was for him, but he had to find out for sure and needed to let her know how *he* felt. He wanted her to be in no doubt about that.

He had been surprised when Georgiana struck up conversation with him.

"Sidney."

She gave him the usual look of contempt and he wondered if he would ever win her over. He wished he would, both because she was his ward whom he wanted to trust him and because she was dear friend of Charlotte's.

"Ah, Georgiana. Have you had fun this evening?"

He tried to appease her, but his attempt to be friendly appeared to have no effect at all.

"What are you up to with Charlotte?" she asked with narrowed eyes.

"I don't understand your meaning."

"You have done your best to ruin my happiness, how could I trust you not to ruin hers?"

"Nothing could be further from my mind."

He had no intention telling her his plans before he had told Charlotte. He was not sure why her comment disturbed him, but it did. He had never intended to ruin her happiness, only to keep her safe. Despite that he had shown Georgiana Otis's true nature and paid off his debts to save her, she still did not trust him at all and blamed him for love lost. She definitely did not trust him with her friend's heart. He wished she would, but all he could do was to in time prove to her how much he loved Charlotte. Her hostility still it made him uneasy, but he forgot about it when he saw Charlotte dancing with Stringer, enjoying herself, flushed and smiling when she met his eyes. He could not stop looking at her and barely noticed when Georgiana slipped away, to be replaced by Babington by his side.

"What are you waiting for? You haven't taken your eyes off her all night."

Sidney only smiled in response, more at the dancing Charlotte than at Babington, confirming or denying nothing. It was a correct observation and he felt slightly embarrassed. Was it really so obvious, as both his friend and Georgiana approached him on the same subject? He was not ready for others to know before he knew for sure that he had her heart. He thought he did but she had not really said, only admitted she had wanted to kiss him too. When he saw her tonight he wondered if a woman like her could love a man like him, but he hoped so with everything that was him. It seemed like Babington could read him like an open book.

"I hope you receive a favourable answer, old friend. Indeed, I hope we both do."

He realised then that he was not the only one who intended to propose this evening. He knew that Babington was taken by Esther Denham's disputable charms, but he had not known there had been a development that made him think she might accept a proposal. He hoped for Babington's sake that she would but was too nervous for his own part to spend much time pondering upon it.

The dance finished and he saw her throw a glance at him over her shoulder as she headed for the refreshment table. He took that as his queue to finally approach her and whisper to her to please meet him on the balcony.

"Our balcony", he had added with a wry smile knowing she would know exactly what she meant.

It felt appropriate, closing the circle by returning to the same balcony where they had had their first clash, but now for a completely different reason. How mad he had been at her that time, how madly in love he was with her now. That time he had been disturbed when she appeared by his side. Now he waited for her eagerly, with heart pounding hard and fingers grasping around the railing to keep himself

together. When she finally came after what felt like hours even if it only was minutes, he immediately turned to her and took her hands. He could not hold her in his arms here, but he had to at least touch her hands.

"At last, I thought I'd never get you alone."

This evening had been trying for his patience to say the least, but he also felt like they had been on a journey to return to this balcony ever since they were here the first time. In a few months' time they had gone from little short of enemies to almost lovers.

"Do you remember the last conversation we had on this balcony?"

"All too well."

She took a deep breath and he wondered if she was nervous like him. Could she guess what he wanted to talk to her about?

"What a brute I was."

"I deserved everything you said."

The way she looked at him made him feel so much in love he thought his heart would burst. He found it impossible to let go of her gloved hands, instead he wrapped them in his, caressed them and felt how she squeezed his hands in return. It was as if they were letting the hands cling on to each other the way they wished their entire bodies could but were not allowed to. Not yet.

"No, you didn't."

He shook his head, he had been so harsh on her that time, much harsher than she deserved, but he was not used to being spoken to like that. Her forwardness and

honesty, combined with the pull she exerted on him already then, had made him furious. He did not understand himself then, but he did now and now he was ready to admit and welcome the feelings he had for her. How extraordinarily fortunate he was, that she wanted to stand here with him and that they could laugh at the past together. That she could forgive him his shortcomings.

"I hope that I am a different man now", he said earnestly.

"No. You're the same man but much improved."

She smiled sweetly, like she knew he would never treat her like that again. He knew she had changed him though, or at least brought out what he before had hidden deep inside. He had distanced himself from everything and everyone for so long but now he could not be close enough to her. He wanted her to know him as he was, had no wish to hide any part of himself from her. It was a transformation he had not expected but succumbed to.

"If I have changed at all it is in no small part down to you. I have never wanted to put myself in someone else's power before. I've never wanted to care for anyone but myself."

It was his turn to take a deep breath, trying to slow down his racing pulse. She did not say anything to interrupt him, just watched him intently with her big brown eyes. He knew without a shadow of a doubt that he wanted to make her happy for a lifetime.

"Miss Heywood... Charlotte..."

He paused again, but this time to prepare himself to ask her the burning question.

But once again this night, fate was against them and his words were never spoken. Some sort of commotion from below interrupted the conversation.

"Get out of my way! Unhand me, you blaggards! Esther I have been such a fool, Esther! That little vixen Clara took advantage of me."

An very drunk Edward Denham made an abrupt entrance, stumbling through the doors to the ballroom, making a spectacle of himself, trying to shame his step-sister.

With a silent curse, Sidney stepped away from Charlotte with an apologetic smile and went to deal with the situation. If he had known he would not get the chance to resume the conversation that evening, wild horses could not have made him leave her side. He would have stayed, and he would have proposed no matter if ten Edward Denhams came barging in, but he did not know then what he knew now.

As he dragged Denham outside, made sure he did not return and watched his tall, unsteady figure disappear down the street, he had suddenly heard shouts coming from the opposite direction. Fate intervened again and this time most cruelly. Tom's barely finished apartment house on the terrace was on fire.

Instead of returning to a romantic proposal as he had hoped, he and the whole town had spent hours trying to extinguish the fire. With joint efforts, they finally managed, but the building could not be saved. Sadly enough, it also turned out that Old Stringer had been trapped inside when the fire started and had not escaped the flames. They had saved him from losing his leg, but they had not been there to save his life this time.

Next morning, Sidney and his siblings had gone to watch the ruined building. He was tired to the bone after the many hours fighting the fire and all he wanted was to find Charlotte and continue their talk, but today was a day for grief and serious business. Seeing in full daylight that ashes and burned pieces were all that remained of the grand building which had been Tom's pride, was infinitely

saddening and knowing that Old Stringer had died made him feel bereaved but what had struck him with absolute horror was when Tom confessed he had not insured the building because he found the premium too high. In one fell swoop Tom had lost everything because of complete lack of responsibility. He had gambled with everything he owned and more to that, and he had lost. Sidney had felt like flooring his brother with a hard punch but chosen to turn his back on him and walk away rather than doing something he would regret.

In the next days it had dawned on them all how grave the situation truly was. Tom's debt to Lady Denham was an astonishing £80 000 and she was furious enough to have him thrown in debtors' prison right away because with the apartments burned to the ground, her investment would never pay off. She had been convinced to allow Tom a week to come up with a solution and Tom had turned to Sidney with puppy eyes, as usual pleading for his help. His only hope was if his more influential brother could pull some strings.

Sidney had wanted to scream with frustration. For the first time, he wanted nothing more than to stay in Sanditon and lead a quiet life, by Charlotte's side. Tom had prevented that, at least for now. Instead of asking the woman he loved to marry him, he had been forced to bid her goodbye and travel to London to ask people to invest in re-building Sanditon.

When she accompanied him to the waiting carriage that last morning, he had so nearly kissed her out in the open street. It took all his self-discipline not to do it, and he held back only for her. He had felt how she held back in the same way as him, had seen love and trembling desire in her eyes and told himself that it had to be enough for now.

"I'll be as quick as humanly possible, but I have to do everything I can to help the family. And how I manage that, I have no idea."

"I believe you will."

He loved that she had faith in him, more than he had himself but he had to find a way. Not only for his family's sake but for theirs too.

"When I return, we'll finally have a chance to finish our conversation."

He held her hands, and her mouth was so close to his when she looked up on him, that he could feel her breath fanning on his face. Before parting, he tried to commit her to memory, so he would survive being away from her.

He only wondered, why he had such an ominous feeling as the carriage took off. A feeling that everything might be different next time they met.

Now he had been in London for a week, pulling all possible strings on Tom's account but to no avail. He had visited banks, spoken to business contacts here and there but with no result. He could not quite put his finger on it, but he had the uncanny feeling that in addition to that the fact that it was a risky investment, there was something else preventing possible investors from getting involved.

Damnit! He emptied his wine glass in one swig. He was tired and longed for Charlotte with such fervent intensity that it hurt like an infested wound inside him.

As it seemed, he would have to return home empty handed and it would likely mean the ruin not only of Tom, but the entire Parker family. He could kill Tom for being so reckless as to not get an insurance. It was so foolish and short-sighted and a gamble with everyone they cared about. If they did not find someone else who was willing to chip in the money, Tom would have to give up not only his home but everything. He would be brought to debtors' prison, his family fall into poverty. Trafalgar House and this house would confiscate, because as the eldest son he had inherited them both, meanwhile Sidney, Diana and Arthur only had inherited

smaller sums of money. Sidney had made the most of his inheritance and he knew Arthur and Diana had savings. Together they would be able to provide for Mary and the children but the life-style they were all accustomed to would be much altered, to a significantly more modest one. Furthermore, if Tom ever made any money, every pound would go to pay off his debts. He would be ridiculed, a laughing-stock, Mary and the children would be shamed. Tom probably did not realise all the consequences and if he did, he was likely relying on Sidney to find a solution before it came to that.

Sidney felt the burden of it all, heavy on his shoulders. Their family would be disgraced, and it would have long-term consequences. Not that Diana and Arthur ever had seemed inclined to marry but now they would for sure not, and Tom's daughters would have nothing to recommend them when they came of marrying age. As for himself... He buried his face in his hands. As things were, he would never be able to ask Charlotte the question he wanted to ask her more than anything in the world. He could never ask her to be part of a dishonoured family, to be his wife. He had to find a solution to save them all, to save himself.

There was a faint knock on the door and Jenkins looked inside.

"You have a visitor, Sir."

He felt a flash of hope. Perhaps one of the investors he had courted had come around.

"A lady", Jenkins added.

"Send her in then." He was disappointed and in no mood for a social call, whoever it might be, but it would be impolite to decline.

When Jenkins returned with the visitor he was not only surprised but rather shocked to see who it was.

"Mrs. Campion?!"

"Why so formal all of a sudden, Sidney?"

She smiled but somehow that smile gave him the creeps.

"Because of how we ended our last conversation, if you remember?"

He was too tired, too desperate to waste energy on being polite.

She sat down without having been asked to and kept smirking.

"You see, that is what I have come to see you about."

"How did you even know I was here, in London?"

"Ah, *everyone* has heard about the unfortunate business of Sanditon. How very sad about that beautiful new building burned to ashes." She did not look the least sad, spiteful was more like it. "And how unfortunate for Tom... that he was so careless not to insure it and secure his investment. Or should I say Lady Denham's?"

He looked sharply at her.

"You are indeed very well-informed. I'm surprised, I did not know you took an interest in others' investments."

"Oh, I don't, not in general... but when I heard of the buffoon who is on the edge of ruin because he had no insurance and realized it was your brother, I took care to find out the details."

He watched her intently, trying to decipher her. Was it possible that she had come here to offer her help? Something told him the reason for her presence was more complicated than so.

"Now that Lady Denham has withdrawn her investment, Tom's prospects are far from bright."

"My purpose for coming to London is to find other investors..."

"And were your endeavours successful?"

There was no way he would admit defeat to her.

"Not so far but..."

She chuckled.

"Spare me the charade Sidney. I *know* you were unsuccessful."

How could she know?

"I made sure of it." She held his gaze and her blue eyes were hard as flint.

"You what?" he spat.

"I made sure of it. Remember I'm a wealthy woman now and very well-connected."

"But why would you...?"

"Oh, dearest Sidney. Didn't I tell you that I don't enter a race unless I intend to win it? I told you it was not over."

"You told me I would be sorry..." He remembered and he felt like a chilly wind blew through the room.

"Maybe you will be, maybe not, but I have a proposal for you."

He knew something bad was coming.

"Marry me and I will cover the losses."

That he had not seen coming.

"What? No ne..."

"Let me stop you before you say something rash. Know this, Sidney, that you will not find any new investors here in London." She paused for effect. "As I said, I made sure of that, because I want your only choice to be *me*."

He stared at her, trying to understand that this was the same girl he once had been very much in love with.

"I still don't get why you would want to marry me, when you know I don't love you. I think I have been very explicit in letting you know that."

"There is nothing to say you could not love me again, but no matter what this is about what *I* want. You said the choice was mine that time, long ago, but it is not true. I was expected to marry as well as I possibly could, I was an innocent pawn being played around..."

"Come on, that was hardly it! Perhaps that is your skewed view of things but your father had accepted my proposal, I did not lack money."

"You did not have enough!"

She raised her shrill voice and stomped her little foot, furious because he did not agree with her version of how things had come to be. Then it was like she realised this was not the way to convince him and her voice turned low and soft again.

"There was an opportunity to marry more advantageously and I did, so now I possess the money and can choose to marry whoever I want. I spent nearly eight years with that old goat, now I choose you."

"But I don't choose you! How can I make you understand?"

"I think it is you who do not understand the full consequences of rejecting me, dearest Sidney. Before you turn down my generous offer, also know this; if you do, I will find ways to smudge the name of Miss Heywood."

His heart skipped a beat and he clenched his fists.

"Miss Heywood? What has she got to do with any of this?"

"I think you know very well, and I won't tolerate that little insignificant girl to ruin my plans. If she is so stupid that she would still marry you even when your family's reputation is ruined, I would make sure to ruin hers too."

He snorted.

"You have nothing on Charlotte, she is completely innocent and pure."

"Is she? I saw the lustful looks she cast on you. She went rowing, alone, with a man who was practically engaged to another. She made him turn down a woman known for her beauty and large fortune and make him consider her instead. Bah! That could only be if she already carried his child and he saw himself forced to marry her. If they marry and the child never is born, it was likely so that the cunning little witch found a way to get rid of it..."

"I have never touched her like that! This is all nonsense!"

He was so furious that he soon would have to throw her out, but he felt compelled to hear what she had to say.

"I am sure you have not, you are too much of a gentleman Sidney, but others would not know. When one is in an influential position like mine, it is so easy to plant a seed which turns into widespread gossip, which turns into well-known facts. Don't think for a second that I would hesitate to do that. Would you cause her that harm when you cannot even ask her to be your wife, given the situation your family currently is in? If you marry me, I will save your family *and* I will leave Miss Heywood alone. Her reputation will be safe guarded so she can marry someone else one day, perhaps a suitable boy from her village".

She chuckled maliciously and he felt his heart sink. She had him in a trap where it seemed like everyone he cared for would be lost if he did not accept her offer, whilst if he did the only one lost would be him. Charlotte would be hurt, but if he told her the full story she would at least understand his motives.

"I can see that the advantages of my proposal are beginning to sink in. I have only one condition, or well, two. Naturally we will share a martial bed once we are wed, this will not be a marriage only by name."

The idea made him feel nauseous.

"The second is that you cannot tell others about this deal."

"What?"

"No, you have to make your family believe you marry me out of love, and you have to make Charlotte believe the same. You will let them think you met me in London, came to your senses and realised it is with me you belong. As the angel I am, I

offered to help your family as an early wedding gift. If you are already engaged to Miss Heywood you will have to break it off."

He felt panic well up inside him. How would he be able to do this to Charlotte? No promises had been made in words, but in their hearts they both knew. *He* did at least and after the balcony, after the farewell by the carriage, he was sure she did too.

"I am not engaged to her, but I cannot do that..."

"Those are my terms, take it or leave it. If you are not even engaged it should be easy to let her down."

She stood up.

"I will leave you to think about this, but as the sensible man you are, I think you already know deep down that this is your only way out. You know my address. Send me a letter when you have decided, or even better, drop by with an engagement ring."

She swept out and left him with her jeer ringing in his ears.

Paralysed, he remained in the chair, trying to convince himself it was all a bad dream but too much a realist to even be close to succeeding. Suddenly he knew with terrifying clarity that Georgiana would be made right. He *would* hurt Charlotte, but only because he saw no other solution. To save his family from ruin and to save her reputation, the only way was to break her heart. He would break his own too, but that was of less importance.

"I hope you are happy Mrs. Campion, because you know I am not, but I accept your proposal", he bitterly said out loud to the empty room.

He felt as if he was about to receive a death-sentence rather than getting engaged.