V.S.

by DM (altilis)

Summary

Sydney always hovers, and Darnay starts to notice.

1.

When Sydney goes to the tavern, he usually orders a cheap bottle of wine, direct from desolate valleys in France, or Spain, or Germany, or god knows where; he doesn’t care, and he takes it and pays for it as long as it has that kick and sting and makes him forget what a lost soul he is.

But, today is special. Sydney forks over a few more coins from his pocket for a V.S.—Very Special—bottle of Cognac, with a smooth taste. The rich golden colour swirls at the bottom of the snifter as Sydney takes his time, awakening the aromas and memories, before he takes an undignified gulp, throwing back his head to drink half the snifter without care for manner. He so loves the French.

He gets the kick he was looking for, and he sets down the glass before he drops it. In front of him lie a couple of papers the lion roared at him to figure out and another piece of paper more important than the rest. It is informal, short, and succinct, and doesn’t even carry a signature because both sender and recipient know that Sydney doesn’t get many of these invitations from anyone else.

Meet us for Easter dinner.

2.

Sydney is not a church-going man. He did not go into the church for the Darnays’ wedding, he
does not go for Christmas, and he certainly does not go for Easter. He knows everyone goes, always, but Sydney enjoys his free time and he enjoys walking around Sunday morning without everyone roaming around (as they always do) to bump into him. Soho Square, in particular, is so quiet on Sunday mornings.

The last time Sydney stepped into a house of the Lord was when his father had died. He shouldn’t have died; nevermind he was over fifty and had always been a red-faced, aggressive barrister; nevermind that he had never been quite the same since his mother died; nevermind it all!

Sydney never shed a tear at the reading of the Book, never looked more than stern when the casket was lowered. But when he got back to his flat, and the quiet of midnight washed over him from the dense noise of the tavern, he sank to his knees in the middle of the room and sobbed.

Thus, after such funerals, Sydney decided he didn’t like church.

But there was no other place to wait for the Darnays, so dutiful in their living. Reluctantly, Sydney hovers outside the church, at the bottom of the steps, all the two hours of the evening service. It is peacefully quiet, and not the first time he has loitered like such.

Later, a swarm of bourgeoisie bursts forth from the hive of God, among which were the upstanding Darnays in their Sunday best, with little Lucie, adorned with blue bonnet, at her mothers side. They all greet him with a smile, little Lucie in particular. Sydney picks her up and gives her a little kiss, and carries her all the way home[1].

“Sydney,” Her mother starts cheerfully at Darnay’s side, hand in hand with her husband and vesting her full trust in Sydney to take care of her child. “Why don’t you come in for the service? It must be dreadfully boring to wait.”

Sydney just smiles, and kept his gaze on the sidewalk ahead.

3.

Miss Pross has really been overdoing herself, or so it appears to Sydney. Easter dinner is massive and good, with a delightful lamb roast accompanied by a red wine of which Sydney takes two glasses. Then it is followed up by a wonderful baked apple charlotte; the most luscious thing he has tasted in a few months.

Then, of course, there is coffee, and then the clock strikes nine and Miss Pross and Lucie go upstairs to put little Lucie to bed; Dr. Manette retired earlier that evening after the charlotte.

Sydney sits across the table from Darnay, his mug still half empty and Darnay’s still half full. They look at each other for a moment, until he speaks.

“To-morrow, I want to come to your flat,” No matter how many years he stayed here, the Frenchman always held that subtle accent to his words and manner.

“When?” Sydney speaks calmly, as if his heart had not lurched into a sprint, thumping in his throat. “I have work to finish before the summer furlough.”

“I will meet you at the Stryver chambers, then, and accompany you back when you are done.”

“…” Sydney contemplates this for a moment, taking a sip of his lukewarm coffee as he thinks best how to reply. “I might take more than a while to finish the evening’s work.”
“Then I will wait,” Darnay matches his sip of coffee, so that both of their mugs were less than half full or more than half empty. “You are not the only one with patience.”

Sydney recalls that he was the only one who ever used it.

4.

At a quarter past six, Darnay shows up on the steps of the chambers. The clerk, that good-for-nothing, went home earlier in the eve, forcing Sydney to stop his work and greet him himself. His expression is caught between annoyance and earnest.

“You came,” Sydney remarks, stepping aside to let him into the inner offices. Alone, as Stryver was dining with his family.

“I keep my word,” Though Sydney wonders how important this manner would be if Darnay wasn’t dining with his.

“Well, we are alone here,” Sydney sits down behind his desk and Darnay, once again, sits across from him in another empty chair. “Whatever manner you have to discuss, can be said here.”

“No,” Darnay flatly denies his request to divulge his intentions, making Sydney more guarded and wary then ever. “At your apartment, perhaps, but not here.”

“Is it really that pressing?” Sydney sounds skeptical.

“It is of vital importance.” Darnay sounds stern.

5.

“This is unfair,” Sydney whines openly to Darnay as he unlocks his key and opens his door into his flat. It isn’t terribly messy, but some papers are on his coffee table, on the floor; his kettle is in the sink; the fireplace ashes aren’t swept; the sofa pillows are all tucked to one side, as he had slept there the other night; his bed’s duvet is messy and half fallen off, with the pillow on the floor.

With a rushed sense of being, he adjusts the pillows on the sofa, puts all the papers into one neat pile, makes his bed, sweeps the ashes into the fireplace, and starts to fill the kettle with water all in a matter of seconds.

Meanwhile, Darnay closes the door behind him while stepping into the flat with a more amused smirk settling on his lips. He settles on the sofa, watching Sydney as he caps the kettle and sets it on top of the stove, before lighting the fire and letting it sit there to boil.

“You give me the time of a cannon blast to prepare for this…” He trails off, turning towards Darnay, whose eyes stare up at him. Puzzled, he asks, “What is it?”

Darnay pats the seat of the sofa next to him, motioning Sydney to come over, away from the stove. He visibly hesitates, the reluctance showing on his face for a brief moment before he shuffles over and sits down next to the Frenchman. An uncomfortable sort of hotness rushes to his face, to the point he dares not look at Darnay directly.

“Sydney,” They enter a realm of confidence that Sydney finds dangerous, yet Darnay is as casual as ever. “I believe you have something important to rely to me, from you, that you’ve been hiding
since the autumn.”

“The autumn?” There is a lacing of perplexity in his voice, along with a shaky nervousness.

“The autumn, where I fetched you from the Cheshire[2] after you unceremoniously broke a glass and managed to pass out on its shards. Where, better yet, after waking up, begged me not to tell the truth to my own wife? Followed up even still by your insistence to repay me?”

“Ah,” Sydney acknowledges it with a slight nod, glancing over now to Darnay, whose eyes are still set on him. “Why would you say I’ve been hiding something of import from you, just because…”

“There is a reason why you refuse my assistance when you can, Sydney, and there is a reason why you continue coming back at my invitations. I know it is not politeness or tact, since we both very know well you care for and have neither. You love my wife and my daughter as if they were family to you,” As Darnay continues to accuse him more and more Sydney feels the anxiety rise in his chest and shake in his hands. “but we also know that to play with little Lucie is yet still not enough reason to pull you from the comfort of your work and attend our dinners, especially those in the middle of the week, especially the ones that stretch over the entire evening and leave you with no motivation to work.

“Now, Sydney, I redeem that token of reimburse and ask, what is your reason? Why?”

6.

“…”

Sydney remains silent for the longest time, staring down at the wood grain of the coffee table in front of them. His hands are clasped tightly together, almost shaking, shaking like his voice when he finally speaks:

“I think—I believe you should go, Darnay,” It’s only a hushed whisper, but the silence is so deafening Sydney thinks he’s shouting. He starts to stand from the sofa. “It is late, and you have—your family—”

As he stands, Darnay catches him by the arm, standing up by him in one smooth, mimicking movement. Sydney tries to pull away from him, stumbling towards the door, but Darnay grabs him by the arms and pulls Sydney to face him. They stand there, in the middle of the room, locked in gazes and mirroring the other feature by feature.

“Tell me, Sydney,” His voice, a low murmur, is almost as firm as his grip; Sydney can feel his long fingers grasping about his arms and elbows. “Tell me what you will not say.”

He matches Darnay’s grip, glancing down to watch his own fingers grasp the Frenchman’s arms, before he returns his gaze to his eyes. Darnay’s gaze his steady and unwavering, but Sydney’s eyes are wavering anywhere and everywhere in a desperate attempt of escape. Green eyes move from his face to the kettle to the window to the centerpiece to the bed to the mirror to the fireplace…

“Sydney.”

His eyes hold again on Darnay.

“Darnay—I—” His voice starts to break down, and his grip on Darnay’s arms starts to shudder
slightly. “I—can’t—but I do—I—I am sorry, Charles…”

Suddenly, Charles embraces him, arms wrapped strong and comforting around him. Sydney finds himself closer to Charles than he’s ever been before, with his chin resting on Sydney’s shoulder. This time, he doesn’t hesitate, and (more earnestly than he intended) wraps his arms around the Frenchman and tucks his head to his neck, hands tightening nervously around handfuls of Charles’ coat.

Then, in but a faint murmur, he whispers to him what Charles has been urging him to say, to confess:

“I love you.”

7.

After his confession, Charles leads him back to the couch to sit down and loops an arm around his shoulder. He can see the tears misting in Sydney’s eyes, and he tries desperately to hide them. Charles brings his hand up to touch his cheek and direct his gaze.

“Why did you keep such emotion from me?” It’s a hard question and both of them know it; Sydney gets the brunt of the challenge, attempting pitifully to articulate his emotions.

“Because—I—ah, Charles!” Sydney hides his face in his hands, frustration and desire melting into one, overwhelming him. “You cannot understand what it means to be me, to love what one does not deserve, and then to love again what one cannot possibly get, like the luscious red apple dangling from the garden’s tree. To have these all-consuming desires invade my thoughts every other moment, though I know they are dangerous, fatal, even, if it was reported…you just don’t know, Charles!”

The kettle starts to whistle on the stove, at which point Sydney gets up to attend to it. Charles follows him at a close distance, despite the obvious danger of boiling water in the hands of Sydney. He shadows him carefully as he talks.

“If you would tell me, I would listen,” Charles says to Sydney, right to his ear, as Sydney prepares two cups of tea, scooping black tea leaves into the single teapot he owned before adding the boiling water. Wisps of steam rise to the ceiling.

“If you told you, you wouldn’t understand,” Sydney replies as he reaches up to take the cups and saucers from the cupboard. They are his mothers, and while ill-used, they are clean. “You can hardly understand, with your situation, your security, your confidence,” Despite his love, Sydney still detests him somewhat, like he detests himself.

Sydney reaches over to push Darnay from hovering over him, giving him the space of a few more steps. Then, he carefully takes the tray of teapot, cups and saucers, sugar bowl, and teaspoons to the coffee table, while Darnay follows. He sits down on the couch and begins to prepare the cups, as Darnay sits down next to him.

“Then you will have to explain it all to me in child terms and pictographs so that I may understand it better,” Charles continues to poke and prod in an effort to understand him. And, when Sydney asks, “One lump, please. Merci.”

Sydney takes two for himself just because he can, and takes a cautious sip of the almost-boiling tea. It’s the same kind of kick he gets from his V.S. Cognac, but less dizziness and more scalding in his throat. Satisfied, he leans back against the sofa.
“Why do you seek to understand it? I have already told you that it’s impossible, that with your current status, empathy for me is unattainable, yet you still question? That is what I have to ask of you, Charles! If you wonder why I keep coming to your insistent invitations, I myself wonder why you keep sending them!” Now he feels a little bit better about himself, having bested, or at least parried, Charles at his own game of inquiry and truth.

“Sydney.”

He looks up from his constant stare at the tea tray through his entire monologue, towards Charles. And before he knows it, their lips have met.

8.

The hot warmth of passion floods through his veins and tickles the tips of his toes and his fingers. Charles’ hands moved to his under his jaw, to his neck, to hold him still; Sydney’s hand twines through his hair to keep him from leaving.

9.

Their kisses last for what seems like one blissful age, until they mutually pull away. Sydney is out of breath; Charles smiles. But Sydney is troubled.

“Charles, your wife…?” Sydney does not want to be blamed for a scandal, or breaking up a family or, worse of all, causing grief to the two people he loved the most.

“A thing we will talk about later,” Charles admits, and stands; Sydney stands with him. “I apologize that I cannot stay and have tea with you.” A glance to the neglected tray, before he starts towards the door with Sydney in tow. “But time wanes and I have to see little Lucie go to bed, or she’ll stay up all night.”

Before opening the door, Charles turns towards Sydney, who is now sulking. He recognizes this as a good sign; as long as Sydney still acts like himself, Charles can take his confession in truth, and preferably not worry too terribly much about his well-being.

“I’ll send you an invitation for lunch this week, Thursday or Friday,” Sydney brightens up a tad at this news. “There, we can discuss this—and other things, if you wish—in a time and place that does not press either of us, where we may speak freely. You will not be busy?”

“No, of course not,” Sydney still has work to finish up before the summer furlough, but he doesn’t tell Charles. He’ll just have to stay more late nights, make some extra punch and soak extra towels. “Even Stryver could not shoulder me out of such an appointment.”

“Then I will see you anon,” Charles leans closer, and Sydney brings a hand up to touch his hair. “Good-night, Sydney.”

A parting kiss.

[1] Assuming that little Lucie is ~4 years old, in 1786.
[2] Cheshire is from “Ye Olde Cheshire Cheese”, the tavern on which Dickens based the tavern in A Tale of Two Cities.

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