

**WEST NORWOOD FEAST**  
**PoetrySlabs**  
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**INTRODUCTION TO SHARED READING**  
**by John Haney**

**CHARLOTTE MEW**  
**(1869–1928)**

Charlotte Mew's relatively short, decidedly difficult, and ultimately tragic life began in a modest but not entirely unfashionable house in Bloomsbury in 1869. She was the third of seven children born to architect Henry Mew and his wife Anna Kendall. Three of the children died of various afflictions before their fifth birthdays, which may sound extravagantly unfortunate to us but would not have raised too many eyebrows at the time, given that late-Victorian infancy was all too often a series of fatal accidents waiting to happen. Charlotte, whose lesbianism was never to be rewarded with a relationship, attended the Gower Street School – where she became hopelessly infatuated with the headmistress, a charismatic educator named Lucy Harrison – and later attended lectures at University College. Her father died in 1898, having made less than adequate provision for his offspring, which meant that Charlotte – who had begun dabbling in writing in the late 1880s – and her sister Anne, who was to predecease Charlotte in 1927, would thenceforward be their mother's sole support. (The two other surviving siblings had by this time been admitted to mental asylums, where they would remain for the rest of their lives, with the costs of their care absorbing the lion's share of the family inheritance.)

In 1894 Charlotte had a short story published in *The Yellow Book*, a slightly decadent literary quarterly with a roster of writers that included Max Beerbohm, Arnold Bennett, George Gissing, Edmund Gosse, Henry James, Arthur Symons, HG Wells and WB Yeats. She was not, however, writing much poetry at this time, and her first collection, *The Farmer's Bride* – saturated with the expressions of alienation that were to become a hallmark of her verse – was not to appear until 1916, when it was published by the notably influential Poetry Bookshop. The fact that it sold very few copies did not, however, mean that it went unremarked in high places. Thomas Hardy immediately came to consider her 'the best woman poet of her day'; Virginia Woolf declared her 'very good and interesting and quite unlike anyone else'; and Siegfried Sassoon, hardened soldier though he was, had no qualms about asserting that he was incapable of reading Charlotte Mew without getting a lump in his throat. And it was thanks to the assistance of Hardy (whose wife, Florence, became a good friend to Charlotte), John Masefield and Walter de la Mare that Charlotte eventually received a Civil List pension of seventy-five pounds a year, which went a little way towards mitigating her perpetually straitened circumstances. Ultimately, however, the strain proved too much for her. Not long after the death of her sister, Charlotte sank into a deep depression and was admitted to a nursing home where she

eventually took her own life by drinking a bottle of Lysol, a particularly corrosive disinfectant.

The body of work that Charlotte left behind, created in the course of her last fifteen or twenty years, was slender – a mere seventy pages in the Carcanet edition of her *Collected Poems* – but striking, not least because her late-Victorian lamentations and occasionally Tennysonian evocations of inner turmoil have much in them that justifies her admission to the ranks of the most prominent Modernists – Wyndham Lewis, Ezra Pound, TS Eliot, and Imagists like Richard Aldington, TE Hulme, John Gould Fletcher. And her accomplishment in this regard (which I would contend was completely uncalculated) also has certain affinities with Virginia Woolf's most adventurous work. Charlotte's use of inner dialogue, visionary syntax, and half-strangled voices (a cacophony of unhappy echoes) is frequently as arresting and quietly alarming as anything in *Mrs Dalloway* and – particularly – *The Waves*. Some of her lines leap off the page with almost physical force: 'A rose can stab you across the street / Deeper than any knife'; 'There is something terrible about a child'; 'But I want your life before mine bleeds away'; 'I remember one evening a long past Spring / Turning in at a gate, getting out of a cart, and finding a large dead rat in the mud of the drive'; 'Our windows, too, are clouded glass'; 'And if for anything we greatly long, / It is for some remote and quiet stair / Which winds to silence and a space of sleep / Too sound for waking and for dreams too deep.' Very few planks are required to bridge the gap between Charlotte's tormented yet relentlessly lyrical self-absorption and the fractured otherworldliness of Ezra Pound's *In a Station of the Metro*: 'The apparition of these faces in the crowd; Petals on a wet black bough' or Richard Aldington's *Sunsets*: 'The white body of the evening is torn into scarlet ... and hung ironically with garlands of mist' or John Gould Fletcher's *Dawn*: 'Sleep drowns over the litter in the streets' or TE Hulme's *The Man in the Crow's Nest*: 'Strange to me, sounds the wind that blows / By the masthead, in the lonely night / Maybe 'tis the sea whistling – feigning joy / To hide its fright' or Amy Lowell's *In a Garden*: 'Night and the water, and you in your whiteness, bathing.'

It could therefore, I think, be said that part of Charlotte Mew's incontrovertible greatness resides in the fact that, without quite knowing it, she spoke to the early twentieth century by taking the language of the late nineteenth to its limits. It was a remarkable achievement that deserves far more attention than it has yet received.

Poems follow →

## CHARLOTTE MEW

1868 - 1928

### THE FARMER'S BRIDE

Three summers since I chose a maid,  
Too young maybe - but more's to do  
At harvest-time than bide and woo.  
    When us was wed she turned afraid  
Of love and me and all things human;  
Like the shut of a winter's day  
Her smile went out, and 'twasn't a woman -  
    More like a little frightened fay.  
    One night, in the Fall, she runned away.

"Out 'mong the sheep, her be," they said,  
    'Should properly have been abed;  
But sure enough she wasn't there  
Lying awake with her wide brown stare.  
So over seven-acre field and up-along across the down  
We chased her, flying like a hare  
Before our lanterns. To Church-Town  
    All in a shiver and a scare  
We caught her, fetched her home at last  
    And turned the key upon her, fast.

She does the work about the house  
As well as most, but like a mouse:  
    Happy enough to chat and play  
    With birds and rabbits and such as they,  
    So long as men-folk keep away.  
"Not near, not near!" her eyes beseech  
When one of us comes within reach.  
    The women say that beasts in stall  
    Look round like children at her call.  
    I've hardly heard her speak at all.

Shy as a leveret, swift as he,  
Straight and slight as a young larch tree,  
Sweet as the first wild violets, she,  
To her wild self. But what to me? >

The short days shorten and the oaks are brown,  
The blue smoke rises to the low grey sky,  
One leaf in the still air falls slowly down,  
A magpie's spotted feathers lie  
On the black earth spread white with rime,  
The berries redden up to Christmas-time.  
What's Christmas-time without there be  
Some other in the house than we!

She sleeps up in the attic there  
Alone, poor maid. 'Tis but a stair  
Betwixt us. Oh! my God! the down,  
The soft young down of her, the brown,  
The brown of her—her eyes, her hair, her hair!

### **ON THE ASYLUM ROAD**

Theirs is the house whose windows—every pane—  
Are made of darkly stained or clouded glass:  
Sometimes you come upon them in the lane,  
The saddest crowd that you will ever pass.

But still we merry town or village folk  
Throw to their scattered stare a kindly grin,  
And think no shame to stop and crack a joke  
With the incarnate wages of man's sin.

None but ourselves in our long gallery we meet.  
The moor-hen stepping from her reeds with dainty feet,  
The hare-bell bowing on its stem,  
Dance not with us; their pulses beat  
To fainter music; nor do we to them  
Make their life sweet.

The gayest crowd that they will ever pass  
Are we to brother-shadows in the lane:  
Our windows, too, are clouded glass  
To them, yes, every pane!

## IN NUNHEAD CEMETERY

It is the clay that makes the earth stick to his spade;  
He fills in holes like this year after year;  
The others have gone; they were tired, and half afraid  
But I would rather be standing here;

There is nowhere else to go. I have seen this place  
From the windows of the train that's going past  
Against the sky. This is rain on my face –  
It was raining here when I saw it last.

There is something horrible about a flower;  
This, broken in my hand, is one of those  
He threw it in just now; it will not live another hour;  
There are thousands more; you do not miss a rose.

One of the children hanging about  
Pointed at the whole dreadful heap and smiled  
This morning after *that* was carried out;  
There is something terrible about a child.

We were like children last week, in the Strand;  
That was the day you laughed at me  
Because I tried to make you understand  
The cheap, stale chap I used to be  
Before I saw the things you made me see.

This is not a real place; perhaps by-and-by  
I shall wake – I am getting drenched with all this rain:  
To-morrow I will tell you about the eyes of the Crystal Palace train  
Looking down on us, and you will laugh and I shall see what you see again.

Not here, not now. We said 'Not yet  
Across our low stone parapet  
Will the quick shadows of the sparrows fall'.

But still it was a lovely thing  
Through the grey months to wait for Spring  
With the birds that go a-gypsying  
In the parks till the blue seas call.  
And next to these, you used to care  
For the lions in Trafalgar Square,  
Who'll stand and speak for London when her bell of Judgement tolls – >

And the gulls at Westminster that were  
The old sea-captains' souls.  
To-day again the brown tide splashes step by step, the river stair,  
And the gulls are there!

By a month we have missed our Day:  
The children would have hung about  
Round the carriage and over the way  
As you and I came out.

We should have stood on the gulls' black cliffs and heard the sea  
And seen the moon's white track,  
I would have called, you would have come to me  
And kissed me back.

You have never done that: I do not know  
Why I stood staring at your bed  
And heard you, though you spoke so low,  
But could not reach your hands, your little head;  
There was nothing we could not do, you said,  
And you went, and I let you go!

Now I will burn you back, I will burn you through,  
Though I am damned for it we two will lie  
And burn, here where the starlings fly  
To these white stones from the wet sky - ;  
Dear, you will say this is not I -  
It would not be you, it would not be you!

If for only a little while  
You will think of it you will understand,  
If you will touch my sleeve and smile  
As you did that morning in the Strand  
I can wait quietly with you  
Or go away if you want me to -  
God! What is God? but your face has gone and your hand!  
Let me stay here too.

When I was quite a little lad  
At Christmas time we went half mad  
For joy of all the toys we had,  
And then we used to sing about the sheep  
The shepherds watched by night;  
We used to pray to Christ to keep  
Our small souls safe till morning light - ; >

I am scared, I am staying with you to-night –  
Put me to sleep.

I shall stay here: here you can see the sky;  
The houses in the street are much too high;  
There is no one left to speak to there;  
Here they are everywhere,  
And just above them fields and fields of roses lie –  
If he would dig it all up again they would not die.

### **THE QUIET HOUSE**

When we were children old Nurse used to say  
The house was like an auction or a fair  
Until the lot of us were safe in bed.  
It has been quiet as the country-side  
Since Ted and Janey and then Mother died  
And Tom crossed Father and was sent away.  
After the lawsuit he could not hold up his head,  
Poor father, and he does not care  
For people here, or to go anywhere.

To get away to Aunt's for that week-end  
Was hard enough; (since then, a year ago,  
He scarcely lets me slip out of his sight – )  
At first I did not like my cousin's friend,  
I did not think I should remember him:  
His voice has gone, his face is growing dim  
And if I like him now I do not know.  
He frightened me before he smiled –  
He did not ask me if he might –  
He said that he would come one Sunday night,  
He spoke to me as if I were a child.

No year has been like this that has just gone by;  
It may be that what Father says is true,  
If things are so it does not matter why:  
But everything has burned and not quite through.  
The colors of the world have turned  
To flame, the blue, the gold has burned  
In what used to be such a leaden sky.  
When you are burned quite through you die. >



No one for me–  
I think it is myself I go there to meet:  
I do not care; some day I *shall* not think; I shall not *be*!

### **MY HEART IS LAME**

My heart is lame with running after yours so fast  
Such a long way,  
Shall we walk slowly home, looking at all the things we passed  
Perhaps to-day?

Home down the quiet evening roads under the quiet skies,  
Not saying much,  
You for a moment giving me your eyes  
When you could bear my touch.

But not to-morrow. This has taken all my breath;  
Then, though you look the same,  
There may be something lovelier in Love's face in death  
As your heart sees it, running back the way we came;  
*My* heart is lame.

### **ON THE ROAD TO THE SEA**

We passed each other, turned and stopped for half an hour, then went our way,  
I who make other women smile did not make you –  
But no man can move mountains in a day.  
So this hard thing is yet to do.

But first I want your life: – before I die I want to see  
The world that lies behind the strangeness of your eyes,  
There is nothing gay or green there for my gathering, it may be,  
Yet on brown fields there lies  
A haunting purple bloom: is there not something in grey skies  
And in grey sea?  
I want what world there is behind your eyes,  
I want your life and you will not give it me.

Now, if I look, I see you walking down the years,  
Young, and through August fields – a face, a thought, a swinging dream  
perched on a stile –  
I would have liked (so vile we are!) to have taught you tears  
But most to have made you smile. >

To-day is not enough or yesterday: God sees it all –  
Your length on sunny lawns, the wakeful rainy nights – ; tell me – ;  
(how vain to ask), but it is not a question – just a call – ;  
Show me then, only your notched inches climbing up the garden wall,  
I like you best when you were small.

Is this a stupid thing to say  
Not having spent with you one day?  
No matter; I shall never touch your hair  
Or hear the little tick behind your breast,  
And as a flying bird  
Brushes the branches where it may not rest  
I have brushed your hand and heard  
The child in you: I like that best  
So small, so dark, so sweet; and were you also then too grave and wise?  
Always I think. Then put your far off little hand in mine; –  
Oh! let it rest;

I will not stare into the early world beyond the opening eyes,  
Or vex or scare what I love best.  
But I want your life before mine bleeds away –  
Here – not in heavenly hereafters – soon, –  
I want your smile this very afternoon,  
(The last of all my vices, pleasant people used to say,  
I wanted and I sometimes got – the Moon!)

You know, at dusk, the last bird's cry,  
And round the house the flap of the bat's low flight,  
Trees that go black against the sky  
And then – how soon the night!

No shadow of you on any bright road again,  
And at the darkening end of this--what voice? whose kiss? As if you'd say!  
It is not I who have walked with you, it will not be I who take away  
Peace, peace, my little handful of the gleaner's grain  
From your reaped fields at the shut of day.

Peace! Would you not rather die  
Reeling, – with all the cannons at your ear?  
So, at least, would I,  
And I may not be here  
To-night, to-morrow morning or next year.  
Still I will let you keep your life a little while,  
See dear?  
*I have made you smile.*

## THE CHANGELING

Toll no bell for me, dear Father, dear Mother,  
Waste no sighs;  
There are my sisters, there is my little brother  
Who plays in the place called Paradise,  
Your children all, your children for ever;  
But I, so wild,  
Your disgrace, with the queer brown face, was never,  
Never, I know, but half your child!

In the garden at play, all day, last summer,  
Far and away I heard  
The sweet "tweet-tweet" of a strange new-comer,  
The dearest, clearest call of a bird.  
It lived down there in the deep green hollow,  
My own old home, and the fairies say  
The word of a bird is a thing to follow,  
So I was away a night and a day.

One evening, too, by the nursery fire,  
We snuggled close and sat round so still,  
When suddenly as the wind blew higher,  
Something scratched on the window-sill,  
A pinched brown face peered in--I shivered;  
No one listened or seemed to see;  
The arms of it waved and the wings of it quivered,  
Whoo - I knew it had come for me!  
Some are as bad as bad can be!  
All night long they danced in the rain,  
Round and round in a dripping chain,  
Threw their caps at the window-pane,  
Tried to make me scream and shout  
And fling the bedclothes all about:  
I meant to stay in bed that night,  
And if only you had left a light  
They would never have got me out!

Sometimes I wouldn't speak, you see,  
Or answer when you spoke to me,  
Because in the long, still dusks of Spring  
You can hear the whole world whispering;  
The shy green grasses making love,  
The feathers grow on the dear grey dove,

The tiny heart of the redstart beat,  
The patter of the squirrel's feet,  
The pebbles pushing in the silver streams,  
The rushes talking in their dreams,  
The swish-swish of the bat's black wings,  
The wild-wood bluebell's sweet ting-tings,  
Humming and hammering at your ear,  
Everything there is to hear  
In the heart of hidden things.  
But not in the midst of the nursery riot,  
That's why I wanted to be quiet,  
Couldn't do my sums, or sing,  
Or settle down to anything.  
And when, for that, I was sent upstairs  
I did kneel down to say my prayers;  
But the King who sits on your high church steeple  
Has nothing to do with us fairy people!

'Times I pleased you, dear Father, dear Mother,  
Learned all my lessons and liked to play,  
And dearly I loved the little pale brother  
Whom some other bird must have called away.  
Why did they bring me here to make me  
Not quite bad and not quite good,  
Why, unless They're wicked, do They want, in spite,  
to take me  
Back to Their wet, wild wood?  
Now, every night I shall see the windows shining,  
The gold lamp's glow, and the fire's red gleam,  
While the best of us are twining twigs and the rest of us  
are whining  
In the hollow by the stream.  
Black and chill are Their nights on the wold;  
And They live so long and They feel no pain:  
I shall grow up, but never grow old,  
I shall always, always be very cold,  
I shall never come back again!

## THE TREES ARE DOWN

*—and he cried with a loud voice:  
Hurt not the earth, neither the sea, nor the trees—  
(REVELATION)*

They are cutting down the great plane-trees at the end of the gardens.  
For days there has been the grate of the saw, the swish of the branches as they fall,  
The crash of the trunks, the rustle of trodden leaves,  
With the 'Whoops' and the 'Whoas,' the loud common talk, the loud common laughs of  
the men, above it all.

I remember one evening of a long past Spring  
Turning in at a gate, getting out of a cart, and finding a large dead rat in the mud of the  
drive.  
I remember thinking: alive or dead, a rat was a god-forsaken thing,  
But at least, in May, that even a rat should be alive.

The week's work here is as good as done. There is just one bough  
On the roped bole, in the fine grey rain,  
Green and high  
And lonely against the sky.  
(Down now! - )  
And but for that,  
If an old dead rat  
Did once, for a moment, unmake the Spring, I might never have thought of him again.

It is not for a moment the Spring is unmade to-day;  
These were great trees, it was in them from root to stem:  
When the men with the 'Whoops' and the 'Whoas' have carted the whole of the  
whispering loveliness away  
Half the Spring, for me, will have gone with them.

It is going now, and my heart has been struck with the hearts of the planes;  
Half my life it has beat with these, in the sun, in the rains,  
In the March wind, the May breeze,  
In the great gales that came over to them across the roofs from the great seas.  
There was only a quiet rain when they were dying;  
They must have heard the sparrows flying,  
And the small creeping creatures in the earth where they were lying -  
But I, all day, I heard an angel crying:  
'Hurt not the trees.'

## NOT FOR THAT CITY

Not for that city of the level sun,  
Its golden streets and glittering gates ablaze—  
The shadeless, sleepless city of white days,  
White nights, or nights and days that are as one—  
We weary, when all is said, all thought, all done.  
We strain our eyes beyond this dusk to see  
What, from the threshold of eternity  
We shall step into. No, I think we shun  
The splendour of that everlasting glare,  
The clamour of that never-ending song.  
And if for anything we greatly long,  
It is for some remote and quiet stair  
Which winds to silence and a space for sleep  
Too sound for waking and for dreams too deep.