Charlotte Mew

1869 – 1928

British writer Charlotte Mew was born in London in 1869 into a family of seven children; she was the eldest daughter. While she was still a child, three of her brothers died. Later, another brother and then a sister were committed to psychiatric hospitals, where they would spend the rest of their lives. That left only Charlotte and her sister Anne, both of whom did not choose to have children, partly in hopes of avoiding passing these traits on to any potential children. The traumatic issues Mew grappled with during her childhood—death, mental illness, loneliness, and disillusionment—became themes in her poetry and stories.

- *Poetry Foundation*

In 1898 Mew's father passed away, leaving the family in financial straits, and putting them in the embarrassing position of having to rent out the top floor of the family home. Mew continued to publish her short fiction sporadically in journals like the *Yellow Book, Temple Bar, Englishwoman,* the *Egoist,* and the *Chapbook* over the next decade or so. However, she would gain her first real attention with the publication of a poem, "The Farmer's Bride," in the *Nation* in 1912. Having previously only published seven pieces of poetry in various journals, this work established her literary reputation. The narrative poem tells the story of a farmer and his young wife. The farmer is determined to win the love and affection of his hesitant bride, but instead, they become even more isolated from each other. The poem ends with none of the farmer's desires fulfilled, and he is left lonely, yearning for his wife.

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 'twadn'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 wadn'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 out 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!

What lies behind Mew's failure to achieve much public profile? She was both a Victorian spinster and an independent New Woman, a Georgian (for which read, really, late-Victorian) and a modernist. This, after all, was a poet who was first "discovered" by Ezra Pound in 1914 when he published "The Fete" in the Egoist magazine while her "Madeleine in Church" was so blasphemous that the printer refused to touch it. Mew's work often explores themes like those in "The Farmer's Bride": for instance, alienation ("Saturday Market") and sexuality ("The Fête"). Unusually experimental in its time, her poetry stood out for its conversational rhythms, everyday language, sprawling lines, and frank, shocking themes.

Saturday Market

Bury your heart in some deep green hollow
    Or hide it up in a kind old tree;
Better still, give it the swallow
    When she goes over the sea.

In Saturday's Market there's eggs a 'plenty
    And dead-alive ducks with their legs tied down,
Grey old gaffers and boys of twenty—
    Girls and the women of the town—
Pitchers and sugar-sticks, ribbons and laces,
    Poises and whips and dicky-birds' seed,
Silver pieces and smiling faces,
    In Saturday Market they've all they need.

What were you showing in Saturday Market
    That set it grinning from end to end
Girls and gaffers and boys of twenty—?
    Cover it close with your shawl, my friend—
Hasten you home with the laugh behind you,
    Over the down—, out of sight,
Fasten your door, though no one will find you,
    No one will look on a Market night.

See, you, the shawl is wet, take out from under
    The red dead thing—. In the white of the moon
On the flags does it stir again? Well, and no wonder!
    Best make an end of it; bury it soon.
If there is blood on the hearth who'll know it?

Or blood on the stairs,
When a murder is over and done why show it?
In Saturday Market nobody cares.

Then lie you straight on your bed for a short, short weeping
And still, for a long, long rest,
There's never a one in the town so sure of sleeping
As you, in the house on the down with a hole in your breast.

Think no more of the swallow,
Forget, you, the sea,
Never again remember the deep green hollow
Or the top of the kind old tree!

The Fete

To-night again the moon's white mat
Stretches across the dormitory floor
While outside, like an evil cat
The *pion* prowls down the dark corridor,
Planning, I know, to pounce on me, in spite
For getting leave to sleep in town last night.
But it was none of us who made that noise,
Only the old brown owl that hoots and flies
Out of the ivy—he will say it was us boys—
Seigneur mon Dieu: the *sacré* soul of spies!
He would like to catch each dream that lies
Hidden behind our sleepy eyes:
Their dream? But mine—it is the moon and the wood that sees;
All my long life how I shall hate the trees!

In the *Place d'Armes* the dusty planes, all Summer through,
Dozed with the market women in the sun and scarcely stirred
To see the quiet things that crossed the Square—,
A tiny funeral, the flying shadow of a bird,
The hump-backed barber Célestin Lemaire,
Old Madame Michel in her three-wheeled chair,
And filing past to Vespers, two and two,
The *demoiselles* of the *pensionnat*
Towed like a ship through the harbour bar,
Safe into port, where *le petit Jésus*
Perhaps makes nothing of the look they shot at you:
Si, c'est défendu, mais que voulez-vous?
It was the sun. The sunshine weaves

A pattern on dull stones: the sunshine leaves
The portraiture of dreams upon the eyes
Before it dies:
All Summer through
The dust hung white upon the drowsy planes
Till suddenly they woke with the Autumn rains.

It is not only the little boys
Who have hardly got away from toys,
But I, who am seventeen next year,
Some nights, in bed, have grown cold to hear
That lonely passion of the rain
Which makes you think of being dead,
And of somewhere living to lay your head
As if you were a child again,
Crying for one thing, known and near
Your empty heart, to still the hunger and the fear
That pelts and beats with it against the pane.

But I remember smiling too
At all the sun's soft tricks and those Autumn dreads
In winter time, when the grey light broke slowly through
The frosted window-lace to drag us shivering from our beds.
And when at dusk the singing wind swung down
Straight from the stars to the dark country roads
Beyond the twinkling town,
Striking the leafless poplar boughs as he went by,
Like some poor, stray dog by the wayside lying dead,
We left behind us the old world of dread,
I and the wind as we strode whistling on under the Winter sky.

And then in Spring for three days came the Fair
Just as the planes were starting into bud
Above the caravans: you saw the dancing bear
Pass on his chain; and heard the jingle and the thud.
Only four days ago
They let you out of this dull show
To slither down the *montagne russe* and chaff the man *à la tête de veau*
Hit, slick, the bull's eye at the *tir*,
Spin round and round till your head went queer
On the *porcs-roulants*. *Oh! là là! fête!*
Va pour du vin, et le tête-a-tête
With the girl who sugars the *gaufres! Pauvrette*,
How thin she was! but she smiled, you bet,

As she took your tip—"One does not forget
The good days, Monsieur". Said with a grace,
But *sacrebleu*: what a ghost of a face!
And no fun too for the *demoiselles*
Of the *pensionnat*, who were hurried past,
With their "*Oh, que c'est beau—Ah, qu'elle est belle!*"
A lap-dog's life from first to last! ;
The good nights are not made for sleep, nor the good days for dreaming in,
And at the end in the big Circus tent we sat and shook and stewed like sin!

Some children there had got—but where?
Sent from the south, perhaps—a red bouquet
Of roses, sweetening the fetid air

With scent from gardens by some far away blue bay.
They threw one at the dancing bear;
The white clown caught it. From St. Rémy's tower
The deep, slow bell tolled out the hour;
The black clown, with his dirty grin
Lay, sprawling in the dust, as She rode in.

She stood on a white horse—and suddenly you saw the bend
Of a far-off road at dawn, with knights riding by,
A field of spears—and then the gallant day
Go out in storm, with ragged clouds low down, sullen and grey
Against red heavens: wild and awful, such a sky
As witnesses against you at the end
Of a great battle; bugles blowing, blood and dust—
The old *Morte d'Arthur*, fight you must—.
It died in anger. But it was not death
That had you by the throat, stopping your breath.
She looked like Victory. She rode my way.

She laughed at the black clown and then she flew
A bird above us, on the wing
Of her white arms; and you saw through
A rent in the old tent, a patch of sky
With one dim star. She flew, but not so high—
And then she did not fly;
She stood in the bright moonlight at the door
Of a strange room, she threw her slippers on the floor—
Again, again
You heard the patter of the rain,
The starving rain—it was this Thing,

Summer was this, the gold mist in your eyes;—
Oh God! it dies,
But after death—,
To-night the splendour and the sting
Blows back and catches at your breath,
The smell of beasts, the smell of dust, the scent of all the roses in the world,
the sea, the Spring,
The beat of drums, the pad of hoofs, music, the dream, the dream, the
Enchanted Thing!

At first you scarcely saw her face,
You knew the maddening feet were there,
What called was that half-hidden, white unrest
To which now and then she pressed
Her finger-tips; but as she slackened pace
And turned and looked at you it grew quite bare:
There was not anything you did not dare:—
Like trumpeters the hours passed until the last day of the Fair.

In the *Place d'Armes* all afternoon
The building birds had sung "Soon, soon",
The shuttered streets slept sound that night,
It was full moon:
The path into the wood was almost white,
The trees were very still and seemed to stare:
Not far before your soul the Dream flits on,
But when you touch it, it is gone
And quite alone your soul stands there.

Mother of Christ, no one has seen your eyes: how can men pray
Even unto you?
There were only wolves' eyes in the wood—
My Mother is a woman too:
Nothing is true that is not good,
With that quick smile of hers, I have heard her say;—
I wish I had gone back home to-day;
I should have watched the light that so gently dies
From our high window, in the Paris skies,
The long, straight chain
Of lamps hung out along the Seine:
I would have turned to her and let the rain
Beat on her breast as it does against the pane;—
Nothing will be the same again;—
There is something strange in my little Mother's eyes,
There is something new in the old heavenly air of Spring—
The smell of beasts, the smell of dust—*The Enchanted Thing*!

All my life long I shall see moonlight on the fern
And the black trunks of trees. Only the hair
Of any woman can belong to God.
The stalks are cruelly broken where we trod,
There had been violets there,
I shall not care
As I used to do when I see the bracken burn.

May 1915

Let us remember Spring will come again
To the scorched, blackened woods, where all the wounded trees
Wait, with their old wise patience for the heavenly rain,
Sure of the sky: sure of the sea to send its healing breeze,
Sure of the sun. And even as to these
Surely the Spring, when God shall please
Will come again like a divine surprise
To those who sit to-day with their great Dead, hands in their hands, eyes in their eyes,
At one with Love, at one with Grief: blind to the scattered things and changing skies.

June 1915

Who thinks of June's first rose today?
Only some child, perhaps, with shining eyes and
rough bright hair will reach it down.
In a green sunny lane, to us almost as far away
As are the fearless stars from these veiled lamps of town.
What's little June to a great broken world with eyes gone dim
From too much looking on the face of grief, the face of dread?
Or what's the broken world to June and him
Of the small eager hand, the shining eyes, the rough bright head?

Mew was not comfortable in the spotlight and often dodged public scrutiny. Two of her siblings were in psychiatric hospitals. Henry, the eldest, had to be sent to Bethlem at the age of 19, when he started telling people that he was the son of the Prince of Wales. Later sister Freda was confined for her long life on the Isle of Wight. The expense of these two sets of fees gobbled up the family's modest income and built an excoriating sense of shame at a time when eugenics was suggesting that the "taint" of mental illness was carried in the blood. For that reason both Charlotte and her sister Anne were determined that they would never marry and have children.

Following the early death of her architect father in 1898 the family became systematically poorer, obliged to let out bits of their house so that eventually Mew and her elderly mother and sister Anne, a talented artist, were crammed into the grubby basement eating suppers off a tray.

- *From This Rare Spirit by Julia Copus*

Rooms

I remember rooms that have had their part
    In the steady slowing down of the heart.
The room in Paris, the room at Geneva,
The little damp room with the seaweed smell,
And that ceaseless maddening sound of the tide—
    Rooms where for good or for ill—things died.
But there is the room where we (two) lie dead,
Though every morning we seem to wake and might just as well seem to sleep again
    As we shall somewhere in the other quieter, dustier bed
    Out there in the sun—in the rain.

From a Window

Up here, with June, the sycamore throws
Across the window a whispering screen;
I shall miss the sycamore more, I suppose,
Than anything else on this earth that is out in green.
But I mean to go through the door without fear,
Not caring much what happens here
When I'm away:—
How green the screen is across the panes
Or who goes laughing along the lanes
With my old lover all summer day.

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 his 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!

Mew once lived on the periphery of London's Euston Square Gardens and was greatly disturbed when, in 1922, workers began demolishing plane trees at the south side of the gardens in preparation for new construction. "The Trees are Down" can be understood as a straightforward reaction to their death.

However, the poem contains echoes of Mew's broader experiences and preoccupations. Right around the time that the trees were demolished, Mew's mother passed away. Her father had been deceased for over two decades and three of her brothers had died in childhood, while two other siblings were committed to psychiatric asylums. Mew took her own life in 1928, shortly after this poem was written. She was distraught and paranoid following the death of her sister Anne, her sole remaining sibling, with whom she was very close. This poem reflects Mew's lifelong struggle to cope with such losses, as well as her profound awareness of death's inescapability, which is a common theme throughout her poetic work.

- *Litcharts*

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.’

Domus Caedet Arborum

Ever since the great planes were murdered at the end of the gardens
The city, to me, at night has the look of a Spirit brooding crime;
As if the dark houses watching the trees from dark windows
Were simply biding their time.

And like those trees in her poems, she too was cut down, but by her own hand. After her mother's death, and after her sister's death, despite the fact that Hardy and Walter de la Mare secured her a pension, she took her own life, dying horribly by drinking a bottle of lye. Once you know this awful fact, it hangs over her work, something to be adjusted to, or gotten rid of, or, perhaps, read through. Even with its images of death, this vigorous poem must have been written at the height of her energy, its lines running like "the great gales that came" "across the roofs from the great seas" in a spirit of outrage and shocked sympathy. It is a testament to a spirited sensuousness that keeps her work vitally alive, and whispering to us, despite our ignorance of her.

- *Poetry Foundation*

Ken

The town is old and very steep
A place of bells and cloisters and grey towers,
And black-clad people walking in their sleep—
A nun, a priest, a woman taking flowers
To her new grave; and watched from end to end
By the great Church above, through the still hours:
But in the morning and the early dark
The children wake to dart from doors and call
Down the wide, crooked street, where, at the bend,
Before it climbs up to the park,
Ken's is in the gabled house facing the Castle wall.

When first I came upon him there
Suddenly, on the half-lit stair,
I think I hardly found a trace
Of likeness to a human face
In his. And I said then
If in His image God made men,
Some other must have made poor Ken—
But for his eyes which looked at you
As two red, wounded stars might do.

He scarcely spoke, you scarcely heard,
His voice broke off in little jars
To tears sometimes. An uncouth bird
He seemed as he ploughed up the street,
Groping, with knarred, high-lifted feet

And arms thrust out as if to beat
Always against a threat of bars.

And oftener than not there'd be
A child just higher than his knee
Trotting beside him. Through his dim
Long twilight this, at least, shone clear,
That all the children and the deer,
Whom every day he went to see
Out in the park, belonged to him.

"God help the folk that next him sits
He fidgets so, with his poor wits,"
The neighbours said on Sunday nights
When he would go to Church to "see the lights!"
Although for these he used to fix
His eyes upon a crucifix
In a dark corner, staring on
Till everybody else had gone.
And sometimes, in his evil fits,
You could not move him from his chair—
You did not look at him as he sat there,
Biting his rosary to bits.
While pointing to the Christ he tried to say,
"Take it away".

Nothing was dead:
He said "a bird" if he picked up a broken wing,
A perished leaf or any such thing
Was just "a rose"; and once when I had said

He must not stand and knock there any more,
He left a twig on the mat outside my door.

Not long ago
The last thrush stiffened in the snow,
While black against a sullen sky
The sighing pines stood by.
But now the wind has left our rattled pane
To flutter the hedge-sparrow's wing,
The birches in the wood are red again
And only yesterday
The larks went up a little way to sing
What lovers say
Who loiter in the lanes to-day;
The buds begin to talk of May
With learned rooks on city trees,
And if God please
With all of these
We, too, shall see another Spring.

But in that red brick barn upon the hill
I wonder—can one own the deer,
And does one walk with children still
As one did here?
Do roses grow
Beneath those twenty windows in a row—
And if some night
When you have not seen any light
They cannot move you from your chair
What happens there?

I do not know.

So, when they took
Ken to that place, I did not look
After he called and turned on me
His eyes. These I shall see—

The Cenotaph

Not yet will those measureless fields be green again
Where only yesterday the wild sweet blood of wonderful youth was shed;
There is a grave whose earth must hold too long, too deep a stain,
Though for ever over it we may speak as proudly as we may tread.
But here, where the watchers by lonely hearths from the thrust of an inward sword have more slowly bled,
We shall build the Cenotaph: Victory, winged, with Peace, winged too, at the column's head.
And over the stairway, at the foot—oh! here, leave desolate, passionate hands to spread
Violets, roses, and laurel with the small sweet twinkling country things
Speaking so wistfully of other Springs
From the little gardens of little places where son or sweetheart was born and bred.
In splendid sleep, with a thousand brothers
To lovers—to mothers
Here, too, lies he:
Under the purple, the green, the red,
It is all young life: it must break some women's hearts to see
Such a brave, gay coverlet to such a bed!
Only, when all is done and said,
God is not mocked and neither are the dead.
For this will stand in our Market-place—
Who'll sell, who'll buy
(Will you or I
Lie each to each with the better grace)?
While looking into every busy whore's and huckster's face

As they drive their bargains, is the Face
Of God: and some young, piteous, murdered face.