

The Romance of Charlotte

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We sit on a train.

His fingers curl beside the pen, his thumb crushed in against its golden stem; I watch and think to bite the fingers off, one by one. That elegant hand, with clean and well cut nails, mocks my own: thickened and mottled now, how did it ever fit with his? Yet once they were a perfect match.

He remains absorbed in his notes. I ache to reach and take his hand, but the barriers remain. There seems no way to touch him – facing out the window, I return to Great Aunt Charlotte yet again.

Everyone of us knew the details, variously embroidered; it was the romance of the family. We feasted on our story of love at first sight.

She was a child at heart and he impressive – a tall, tanned New Zealander, mid-twenties, who had distinguished himself in the First World War. Her father brought him from the hospital in Bournemouth, for tea and “family comfort”.

Six months later, as soon as she turned eighteen, the doctor’s eldest daughter left Southampton to join that soldier in New Zealand.

She had known him two weeks.

Her life was packed into a trunk and she, being female, was handed over to the ship’s captain, to deliver, intact, across the world.

The journey took two months.

With her trunk half packed, Charlotte ran on shore, beneath black birds in the sky; long necked ducks, nine in a line, and small birds darting, scissor wings snapping, while gulls floated by.

All night she would soar, away from everything cumbersome, all clutter left behind.

There was only a whisper she barely heard, “little bird, little bird, you can’t leave for long, come back to the weight of your body where you belong; all those years you’ve taken to grow will always stay with you, you know.”

But she, busy preparing for escape in 1919, had no more than a moment for this whisper except to record it as the first entry in her diary. It took fifteen years before she added: “July 1934. Finally I begin to see how much I could never leave. What use was there in half knowing back then?”

We knew their love’s beginnings, for that was readily told but what of its disappointments? Tales of courtships were brought out again and again, along with wedding photos, yet no stories were made from struggles within marriage. No one spoke of those.

Marriage settled everything. As children, we made what we could of variations in big beds, twin beds and separate rooms. It was obvious to us that the rare divorce was more indecent for women. They were making a public display, which churned up questions better left unasked.

A wedding might not be absolute, but was sufficient in families that didn’t go in for disgrace.

However, it only tied man to wife, relations were not bound by vows to accept anyone.

Charlotte’s mother-in-law saw no reason to trust a chit of a thing, flighty enough to leave home and country in pursuit of her precious son. The romance was folly and worse; he, poor wounded boy, a hero, fit for any woman, was caught in his sickbed, right across the world, by a doctor with too many daughters to marry off.

When the bride-to-be arrived, she spoke strangely and had peculiar ways. Charlotte had grown up with servants and knew nothing of making butter. “A right young lady she might think herself, but no one can tell me she comes from a good home. What decent family would send a girl off like that?”

The more charitable sister of the groom suggested the bride’s mother might have been broken by the loss of her sons in the same battle that wounded Christopher: perhaps getting away to a better life was the hope of all the family. (When, eventually, I met Charlotte’s family in England, I learned that the mother, too, had risked all, leaving the Catholic Church and family for her husband. She expected her most spirited daughter would put love above everything.) Still, it was an extraordinary gamble to agree to send a loved young woman to such uncertainty, so far away. Charlotte never questioned her mother’s motives in the fragments of diary she passed to me the week she died. She was nearly eighty by then and knew it was time for parting. “Come, kiss me

goodbye. At your age I left the world I knew behind. I learnt most from love, and it's hard to love well. Since, my dear, you are more like me than you know, my fumblings to write things down might be a comfort one day."

I was seventeen and did not see how I could be like a tiny, decrepit lady whose translucent skin was pulled taut across pronounced cheekbones. Never-the-less hers was a love story, and so, though I barely read the words, I did keep her old notebook.

It was ten more years before I began to wonder at her in New Zealand. Did she ever resent following the man, because it brought her to such loneliness?

Long after he died – and Christopher was dead before he was sixty – she kept to the life she had made with him, and tended the grey stone grave where she would join him. She returned to England to visit three sisters but came back to live alone. If she had thoughts during his life of how differently she would live if it were all up to her, she did not change even the colour of the front door after he was dead. Presumably she had no plans to lead a different life without him. She felt no need to prove her independence as we, her great nieces, would do.

If her life from eighteen was just with him, that looked disappointing to me.

Christopher's mother had every reason to distrust a strange wife for her youngest, and the bride brought with her "notions". He soon moved to a different life, up north and in a city.

Christopher's sisters married local farmers and his elder brother took a capable wife from the neighbouring farm.

My father, who was reared on family land, was charmed by his dainty aunt, arriving when he was eight years old. "She looked as fragile as Dresden china, and spoke so queerly. But she never snapped or shouted. Gran didn't appreciate her playing and making us laugh. But our mother loved to see Charlotte reading to us and teaching us music." I, too grew up, on the farm where Charlotte once planted trees and the shrubbery. When she visited us from Auckland, she and father would sing together. They laughed recalling her first attempts to cook and spin. But he had little to say when, late in my twenties, I questioned him. "Her life is her affair," he told me. "She lived in another era and you're far too caught up in your own ideas to understand her. But if she'd been half as righteous as you have become, she'd never have survived out here. Graciousness was her great gift. It even won Gran over at the end." He wouldn't say why Charlotte never worked, for all her vitality and education, nor why she had no children. And she'd not given these facts in her diary. She mostly recorded her conflicts within herself.

Years on, and father, too, is now buried beyond questioning.

Out of my womb came prawns, not soft curled pink, but with rasping shells. Then came the fish, though gone was the slimy skin and plumped, soft flesh, instead, as from a fishmonger's rubbish bin, came the head and skeletal backbone, sharp edged.

Through opened legs I could only watch, astonished at the sour smell and at what was escaping, raw and rough, from where once was sweet and succulent.

This, while he and I sat, ankles crossed under cafe chairs, to agree on a three piece suite – one of the many niceties we can share.

Unable to concentrate on colour schemes I found myself wondering how Charlotte hated.

I dislike middle age. I dislike these blotches on the hands that write and the other signs of physical deterioration, as I disliked them in my mother. I am not quite sure what to make of that generation being dead: there is no one, now, between us and death, and no one else to hold responsible.

Most of all I can't, yet, abide that marriage beds are not for us, and beds for child birth are no longer required. Perhaps it is time to consider how best to craft a death bed, the only one still left to prepare.

Brought up on the highest hopes of love, it's easy to resent it, now, for limits that were not expected. Love might bring comfort, but may not bear fruit or soar in possibility as it once promised.

There is resentment, too, that passion put above everything does not take care of everything. Having risked for love, was Charlotte ever begrudging at finding herself stranded, alone, in a country where she was never quite at home?

“August 1920. Have I made of love my God? Smelling his sweetness and breathing deeply into him – can heaven be of different stuff?”

“December 1920. Much of ourselves is always lost, left somewhere over years. Much that we give out is seemingly gone. But gathered now in warmth against his chest, all is caught up and given back. For he, in being all the world to me, brings an enclosure that is complete.”

At the beginning of the marriage Christopher and Charlotte were often apart and had no home of their own. Charlotte stayed with a formidable mother-in-law, when she could not join him, but there was each return. “November 1921. Through dark curls of tousled hair, a molten glow of

pale, swimming limbs, melting round a candle flame, each the other's fluid. Dropping over – turned to the dense might of marble, sculptured to delight. Stilled against firmed flesh and bone, against the fresh sun whitened sheet.”

She proved remarkably adaptable and strong, though she was short as well as fine boned. For years it seemed there was the world to struggle against. “July 1923. Moths flapping round the lamp tonight – turn out the light. Turn out the light for silence, at last. So I can leave the churning day to weep in longing for you, my love too far away. Yesterday took us into today, and all that is unresolved will struggle on tomorrow, yet over and round this endless muddle circles this world of ours. Only in return to that, am I, at last, in stillness.”

Though the 1920s were financially hard, the promise of an easier life together flourished.

“February 1924. The wind is up and the summer sun, and hope soars higher – tug, tugged by the string you hold, it is not lost to the wind.”

Pleasure in each other continued. “Even at dinner, sitting separately, with eyes the only contact, each near touch across a dish highlights our union.”

After Charlotte's arrival Christopher began his legal studies, and she, too, worked systematically through courses by correspondence. He met the English wife of an academic in Christchurch, who befriended them both, inviting them to stay with her and enjoy her magnificent garden.

“Summer 1928. Roses might be picked, or crushed, yet lie suspended in their richness. And we lay to look into an opened rose, almost an hour you say?”

Charlotte began the planting which transformed the houses on the farm, before she and Christopher moved, finally, to a home of their own, in Auckland.

“1932. You promised me, and I thought I'd be a queen. You still promise me some pretty things, but I'll just face this day instead.”

“Our own place, to sit content, here with you.”

“May 1933. You draw me into life and love with relief that you exist – but dare we speak of this?”

Soon after, she began to struggle. “October 1933. Leaves shiver, fresh with spring. That same shimmering motion makes a tender outline to my face, from your fingers, soft with love. Why, dear, does it go? I can't hold it by wishing so – when I worry, maybe leaves still shake, but I no longer know – I don't see.”

Everyone who knew her speaks of her responsiveness, yet for several years she records a fight against gloom. “July 1936. Why do I sink so? He once called radiance enough from my heart to keep me outside this dulled and sunken cave. What if I subside so slowly that I barely see I'm

gone? 'You must be there for me!' I said, and called evil to our door. For he will come, and go, as all men do. Demanding an absolute is to invite my own undoing. Sometimes he comes, penetrating through my enclosure, to get through to me, but that is no permanent fixture to hold."

"October 1936. I dreamt of three grey and wizened witches watching my womb – hovering over what was once innocence. Fresh new blooms open gently to the sun. These shadows breed confusion and soured smells around the love I took as mine to have as weapon against the shades."

"January 1937. Love made of me a beauty, for a time, yet now I am returned to the usual, barely satisfactory, flesh."

"March 1937. Moments of rage are but passing furies. How little, through these busy times, I write of happy and shared moments. I put down the lonely knots."

Christopher became successful and, presumably, a busy man. In 1938, Charlotte wrote: "You called and my heart danced past three late roses in our street towards you, my dear. All in a light leap to see you there, but you stepped aside, preoccupied, and as I dropped back, in lumpen self-enclosed flesh, I remembered those opened roses and wonder when I might open out again?" He was away for much of World War II, and Charlotte writes of having him back.

"Love burned with promising again. This morning brings over-filled rubbish bins. Yet, walking through the first frost untouched by morning sun, and resisting the chill in brisk strides, you took my arm, 'it will get much colder yet, my dear.' How grateful I was to have you there, and for the softness of my smile. May 1947."

Long after Christopher's death in 1952, Charlotte wrote: "What strange peace to be returned to this long pulse of love, after disturbed, tossed up bits, which made no sense of you and left too many questions."

"I turn from love unwittingly. That is what gets replayed, even though withholding severs the only flow which makes some sense of my life. 1960."

While I turn away from love to make him pay. I can't believe Charlotte and her Christopher were not tangled up, playing that sinister game of debt I know too well, even if most chose to see only rich satisfaction between them.

*I don't want to devour their flesh, though I did dream of doing so, but their life is not just their own affair;
for us it was proud family precedent.*

*Did romance fix them in their own love story? Possibly one could cruise on that and barely face that a time
came when one grew to quite dislike the man.*

Accepting marriage might be less restricting; it binds you only to being a wife, not to being in love.

*But Charlotte did not sever his fingers when they no longer played about her face. Perhaps he got out in
time, dying in her arms at 59. And she didn't take to her bed with "I gave you everything, and now look at
me!"*

I'll not see in their lives more than I can understand of love already.

But there might be something more to find of her; something worth embracing.

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