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27 Charlotte Mew – "A blot upon the night" (September 2020)

I have been curious (and ignorant) about Charlotte Mew (1869-1928) ever since I had to teach her best-known poem, "Fame", as part of a synoptic topic on 'Modernism'. Who she was, however, and what else she had written was not seen as part of the course and it is only now, armed with Penelope Fitzgerald's excellent biography and "The Complete Poems", that I can begin to get to grips with her.

Charlotte Mew, who started off as such a lively, spirited girl ("Lotti") in her youth, had a complicated and crushing sort of life. Genteel poverty haunted the family, as did schizophrenia and madness. There were a few 'near' moments of real fame: she contributed stories to "The Yellow Book" in the 1890s and was encouraged first by May Sinclair, a rather briskly enthusiastic novelist, but more especially by Alida Klementaski (later Monro).

She was 'discovered' (more or less) in 1915, when Charlotte was by now 46, at The Poetry Bookshop, an eccentric but crucially important outlet for poetry enthusiasts (and there were surprisingly many). It was housed in a squalid part of Bloomsbury, not far from where Charlotte lived. The Bookshop was owned and run by Harold Monro, himself a poet, and it counted amongst its habitués and favoured poets, writers like Robert Graves, Walter de la Mare, Robert Frost, Wilfred Owen, W.H. Davies, Rupert Brooke, D.H. Lawrence and James Joyce, with Ezra Pound very much in contention elsewhere in London as a leading force in poetry. There were poetry readings that made an impact out of all proportion to the size of the earnest audiences who squeezed into the attic at the top of the house. These took place on Tuesdays and Thursdays. Charlotte Mew, in the years before she was 'found', had submitted a poem to a periodical, *The Nation*, called "The Farmer's Bride", which caused a few ripples, and this was followed elsewhere with two other poems, "The Changeling" and "The Pedlar".

Alida Klementaski, the young, vivacious and immensely hard-working 'secretary' of The Bookshop, who later married the adoring Harold Monro (though she knew that he was in fact a closet homosexual), had read and been very impressed by Charlotte Mew's "The Farmer's Bride" in *The Nation*. She had also read "The Changeling", which Charlotte had hopefully sent on to The Bookshop for inspection.

At a Tuesday meeting in November 1915, Alida had arranged to read from Monro, John Masefield, James Joyce, Eleanor Farjeon, D.H. Lawrence and… Charlotte Mew. But nobody knew anything about the author of "The Farmer's Bride". Her address was luckily tracked down via *The Nation* and she was invited. Her arrival has since passed into legend. There were about twelve or fifteen people there, many in uniform because of the war.

> "At about five minutes to six the swing door opened and out of the autumn fog came a tiny figure, apparently a maiden aunt, dressed in a hard-felt hat and a small-sized man's overcoat. She was asked, 'Are you Charlotte May?' and replied, with a slight smile, 'I am sorry to say I am.' "

Alida and she became friends and it was The Poetry Bookshop which finally (there were lots of problems accessing paper and the project had to be deferred) brought out the one and only collection of her poems to appear in her lifetime. *The Farmer's Bride* made its appearance in May 1916. Sales were slow; so-called 'Georgian' poetry was more in vogue, with Rupert Brooke's "The Soldier" topping the bill in *Georgian Poetry* II, brought out also by The Poetry Bookshop.

Already, however, by 1915, Georgian poetry ('Georgian', to distinguish it from the old-hat Victorians) was beginning to feel somewhat old-fashioned – rather sickly sweet, banging on about 'youth', 'health', 'joy in nature' and 'love' in the Rupert Brooke manner. The 'newest' poetry (as championed by Ezra Pound) was 'Imagist' in form and style. It felt dynamic and modern and disobeyed the 'rules'. Modelled partly on Chinese and Japanese poetry it concentrated on powerful images to create moments of heightened awareness or emotion. There were almost no other female poets on the 'Imagist' scene, apart from Hilda Doolittle ("H.D.") in the USA, not that Charlotte Mew's poetry necessarily fitted that mould.

Her verse is highly idiosyncratic. Although she could certainly master conventional forms (but not enough to suit Walter de la Mare), her lines, her rhythms and her rhymes have a spontaneous freedom, almost a fracturing of form. Lines are of uneven length (she stipulated that she did not want the lines to spill on to other lines, which is often almost impossible as far as type-setting is concerned), and her 'voices are strange and stirring'. She wrote heart-rendingly of loss, sorrow and despair. But gradually this new poetic voice began acquiring admirers, including poets of the stature of Thomas Hardy, who must have been aware of a certain kinship in her dramatized stories of loss of faith, tragic fatalism, uncertainty and disillusionment.

She was also noticed by the Director of the Fitzwilliam Museum in Cambridge, Sidney Cockerell. Though married, his wife had what we now know as multiple sclerosis and was very generously open to the idea of his befriending women who might look after him when she died. He was determined to spread the word about her poetry and his friend Siegfried Sassoon became an enthusiast. A.E. Housman liked the book with some reservations. He thought "A Quoi Bon Dire" the best:

> Seventeen years ago you said
> Something that sounded like Goodbye;
> And everybody thinks you are dead
> But I.
>
> So I, as I grow stiff and cold
> To this and that, say Goodbye too;
> And everybody sees that I am old
> But you.
>
> And one fine morning in a sunny lane
> Some boy and girl will meet and kiss and swear
> That nobody can love their way again,
> While over there
> You will have smiled, I shall have tossed your hair.

This isn't totally typical of her verse and one can see why its slightly sugary emotion might have appealed to A.E. Housman who was far more 'Georgian' in his instincts than the Imagist-modernists.

Thomas Hardy liked the collection enough to invite her to Max Gate, a huge honour. And, in due course, after a few hitches in the schedule, Charlotte visited him and Florence, his second wife, there. He read some of his own poems and liked her own piece, "Saturday Market" very much. This was a poem in the dialect of the Isle of Wight, a place from Charlotte's childhood holidays with cousins at Newfairlee. Hardy wrote that she was "far and away the best living woman poet, who will be read when others are forgotten."

Not unmitigated praise, perhaps, but coming from Hardy, this was still heart-warming stuff. Florence was a little disappointed at first with this "pathetic little creature", plain, frail and ten years older than herself, but she soon melted after reading "Madeleine in Church". Madeleine's "white geraniums in the dusk" inspired her to plant some in the Max Gate greenhouse and she came and visited Charlotte in London.

So, it's time to look at the poems that gained her such attention. Harold Monro had finally plumped for a line drawing on the cover of *The Farmer's Bride* (green paper was all they had) and the oddity of this farmhouse reflects the oddity of the title-poem.

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 but 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!

All of Charlotte Mew's poetry is painfully self-referential though often disguised, sometimes, as here, with male personae. What is extraordinary is the picture built up of the farmer himself. He feels his shy, nervous bride to be like one of his animals, yet there is also a strange mixture of compassion and physical longing. In terms of the drama alone, this is Hardy's terrain (cf poems like "The Trampwoman's Tragedy" or "The Harbour Bridge") but here there is an intensity of passion that takes us into another world. The form of the poem does not try to impose a tight structure and the irregular stanzas respond to the developing thoughts of the persona, ending with that short stanza with its impassioned cry,

> "…..Oh! My God! the down,
> The soft young down of her, the brown,
> The brown of her - her eyes, her hair, her hair!"

Meanwhile family life was racked with misery and straitened poverty. Their father, an unsuccessful architect, had shown little interest in his family. Three of the seven children had died in infancy or childhood. Later, her beloved older brother was committed to a sanatorium

in Peckham when he was 22, suffering from schizophrenia. Not long before he died of cancer in 1901, a younger sister, Freda, also had to be sent to an asylum where she remained for sixty years, with the same symptoms. These costs and looking after their ailing mother added to the two last sisters' burden of poverty.

Charlotte and the remaining sister, Anne, a jobbing artist who had to take work where she could find it, had for a long time to have lodgers in the house in order simply to make ends meet. This meant that it was very difficult to receive any friends at home. The lodgers were felt as a terrible shame for the family, forced to grub for money in this way. Charlotte's one great luxury was spending rare holidays in France, first in Brittany with women friends, but sometimes in Dieppe on her own, loving to speak French and mingling unnoticed on the quays with the fishermen and sailors.

A lot has been speculated on her "lesbian" leanings, and certainly she was attracted to May Sinclair, who took such a close interest in her. Sinclair unkindly let it be known that Charlotte had made advances to her and there was an upset in the relationship, but whatever the exact details of that occasion, Charlotte Mew always had a very strong, prudish morality, which makes it unlikely that she would ever have contemplated any physical relationship with any of her women friends. That she dressed in mannish clothes was probably no more than a bohemian affectation – an artistic style that fitted these new times. There were no men in her life, though Sydney Cockerell was certainly keen to meet up with her. She was close to Alida Monro particularly in her last years, but always maintained a reserved, 'maiden aunt' style, while in company she *could* be very engaging and amusing, telling dramatic stories and being wry and funny.

Here is the poem that Florence Hardy was so struck with. "Madeleine in Church" imagines a prostitute's thoughts, a modern 'Magdalene'. Again, the persona is very different from, but also very close to, the poet in her essence. Charlotte could feel with the suffering of Christ on the cross but couldn't accept a God who could remain so distant and unconcerned for His Creation. I'm afraid it's quite a lengthy poem – we have got out of the habit of anything that can't be crammed on to an exam paper or used in a 50-minute lesson. But this is worth the read, I assure you.

Madeleine in Church

Here, in the darkness, where this plaster saint
  Stands nearer than God stands to our distress,
And one small candle shines, but not so faint
  As the far lights of everlastingness,
I'd rather kneel than over there, in open day
  Where Christ is hanging, rather pray
    To something more like my own clay,
      Not too divine;
    For, once, perhaps my little saint
    Before he got his niche and crown,
  Had one short stroll about the town;
  It brings him closer, just that taint—
    And anyone can wash the paint
  Off our poor faces, his and mine!

Is that why I see Monty now? equal to any saint, poor boy, as good as gold,
But still, with just the proper trace
Of earthliness on his shining wedding face;
And then gone suddenly blank and old
The hateful day of the divorce:
Stuart got his, hands down, of course
Crowing like twenty cocks and grinning like a horse:
But Monty took it hard. All said and done I liked him best,—
He was the first, he stands out clearer than the rest.
It seems too funny all we other rips
Should have immortal souls; Monty and Redge quite damnably
Keep theirs afloat while we go down like scuttled ships.—
It's funny too, how easily we sink,
One might put up a monument, I think
To half the world and cut across it "Lost at Sea!"
I should drown Jim, poor little sparrow, if I netted him to-night—
No, it's no use this penny light—
Or my poor saint with his tin-pot crown—
The trees of Calvary are where they were,
When we are sure that we can spare
The tallest, let us go and strike it down
And leave the other two still standing there.
I, too, would ask Him to remember me
If there were any Paradise beyond this earth that I could see.

Oh! quiet Christ who never knew
The poisonous fangs that bite us through
And make us do the things we do,
See how we suffer and fight and die,
How helpless and how low we lie,
God holds You, and You hang so high,
Though no one looking long at You,
Can think You do not suffer too,
But, up there, from your still, star-lighted tree
What can You know, what can You really see
Of this dark ditch, the soul of me!

We are what we are: when I was half a child I could not sit
Watching black shadows on green lawns and red carnations burning in the sun,
Without paying so heavily for it
That joy and pain, like any mother and her unborn child were almost one.
I could hardly bear
The dreams upon the eyes of white geraniums in the dusk,
The thick, close voice of musk,
The jessamine music on the thin night air,
Or, sometimes, my own hands about me anywhere —

The sight of my own face (for it was lovely then) even the scent of my own hair,
Oh! there was nothing, nothing that did not sweep to the high seat
Of laughing gods, and then blow down and beat
My soul into the highway dust, as hoofs do the dropped roses of the street.

I think my body was my soul,
And when we are made thus
Who shall control
Our hands, our eyes, the wandering passion of our feet,
Who shall teach us
To thrust the world out of our heart: to say, till perhaps in death,
When the race is run,
And it is forced from us with our last breath
"Thy will be done"?
If it is Your will that we should be content with the tame, bloodless things.
As pale as angels smirking by, with folded wings—
Oh! I know Virtue, and the peace it brings!
The temperate, well-worn smile
The one man gives you, when you are evermore his own:
And afterwards the child's, for a little while,
With its unknowing and all-seeing eyes
So soon to change, and make you feel how quick
The clock goes round. If one had learned the trick—
(How does one though?) quite early on,
Of long green pastures under placid skies,
One might be walking now with patient truth.
What did we ever care for it, who have asked for youth,
When, oh! my God! this is going or has gone?

There is a portrait of my mother, at nineteen,
With the black spaniel, standing by the garden seat,
The dainty head held high against the painted green
And throwing out the youngest smile, shy, but half haughty and half sweet.
Her picture then: but simply Youth, or simply Spring
To me to-day: a radiance on the wall,
So exquisite, so heart-breaking a thing
Beside the mask that I remember, shrunk and small,
Sapless and lined like a dead leaf,
All that was left of oh! the loveliest face, by time and grief!

And in the glass, last night, I saw a ghost behind my chair—
Yet why remember it, when one can still go moderately gay—?
Or could—with any one of the old crew,
But oh! these boys! the solemn way
They take you and the things they say—
This "I have only as long as you"
When you remind them you are not precisely twenty-two—

Although at heart perhaps—God! if it were
Only the face, only the hair!
If Jim had written to me as he did to-day
A year ago—and now it leaves me cold—
I know what this means, old, old, old!
Et avec ça—mais on a vécu, tout se paie.

That is not always true: there was my Mother (well at least the dead are free!)
Yoked to the man that Father was; yoked to the woman I am, Monty too;
The little portress at the Convent School, stewing in hell so patiently;
The poor, fair boy who shot himself at Aix. And what of me—and what of me?
But I, I paid for what I had, and they for nothing. No, one cannot see
How it shall be made up to them in some serene eternity.
If there were fifty heavens God could not give us back the child who went or never came;
Here, on our little patch of this great earth, the sun of any darkened day.
Not one of all the starry buds hung on the hawthorn trees of last year's May,
No shadow from the sloping fields of yesterday;
For every hour they slant across the hedge a different way,
The shadows are never the same.

"Find rest in Him" One knows the parsons' tags—
Back to the fold, across the evening fields, like any flock of baa-ing sheep:
Yes, it may be, when He has shorn, led us to slaughter, torn the bleating soul in us to rags,
For so He giveth His belovèd sleep.
Oh! He will take us stripped and done,
Driven into His heart. So we are won:
Then safe, safe are we? in the shelter of His everlasting wings—
I do not envy Him his victories, His arms are full of broken things.

But I shall not be in them. Let Him take
The finer ones, the easier to break.
And they are not gone, yet, for me, the lights, the colours, the perfumes,
Though now they speak rather in sumptuous rooms.
In silks and in gemlike wines;
Here, even, in this corner where my little candle shines
And overhead the lancet-window glows
With golds and crimsons you could almost drink
To know how jewels taste, just as I used to think
There was the scent in every red and yellow rose
Of all the sunsets. But this place is grey,
And much too quiet. No one here,
Why, this is awful, this is fear!
Nothing to see, no face.
Nothing to hear except your heart beating in space
As if the world was ended. Dead at last!
Dead soul, dead body, tied together fast.
These to go on with and alone, to the slow end:

No one to sit with, really, or to speak to, friend to friend:
Out of the long procession, black or white or red
Not one left now to say “Still I am here, then see you, dear, lay here your head”.
Only the doll’s house looking on the Park
To-night, all nights, I know, when the man puts the lights out, very dark.
With, upstairs, in the blue and gold box of a room, just the maids' footsteps overhead,
Then utter silence and the empty world—the room—the bed—
The corpse! No, not quite dead, while this cries out in me.

But nearly: very soon to be
A handful of forgotten dust—
There must be someone. Christ! there must,
Tell me there *will* be someone. Who?
If there were no one else, could it be You?

How old was Mary out of whom you cast
So many devils? Was she young or perhaps for years
She had sat staring, with dry eyes, at this and that man going past
Till suddenly she saw You on the steps of Simon’s house
And stood and looked at You through tears.
I think she must have known by those
The thing, for what it was that had come to her.
For some of us there is a passion, I suppose,
So far from earthly cares and earthly fears
That in its stillness you can hardly stir
Or in its nearness, lift your hand,
So great that you have simply got to stand
Looking at it through tears, through tears.
Then straight from these there broke the kiss,
I think You must have known by this
The thing, for what it was, that had come to You:
She did not love You like the rest,
It was in her own way, but at the worst, the best,
She gave You something altogether new.
And through it all, from her, no word,
She scarcely saw You, scarcely heard:
Surely You knew when she so touched You with her hair,
Or by the wet cheek lying there,
And while her perfume clung to You from head to feet all through the day
That You can change the things for which we care,
But even You, unless You kill us, not the way.

This, then was peace for her, but passion too.
I wonder was it like a kiss that once I knew,
The only one that I would care to take
Into the grave with me, to which if there were afterwards, to wake.
Almost as happy as the carven dead

In some dim chancel lying head by head
We slept with it, but face to face, the whole night through—
One breath, one throbbing quietness, as if the thing behind our lips was endless life,
Lost, as I woke, to hear in the strange earthly dawn, his "Are you there?"
And lie still, listening to the wind outside, among the firs.

So Mary chose the dream of Him for what was left to her of night and day,
It is the only truth: it is the dream in us that neither life nor death nor any other thing can take away:
But if she had not touched Him in the doorway of the dream could she have cared so much ?
She was a sinner, we are what we are: the spirit afterwards, but first the touch.

And He has never shared with me my haunted house beneath the trees
Of Eden and Calvary, with its ghosts that have not any eyes for tears,
And the happier guests who would not see, or if they did, remember these,
Though they lived there a thousand years.
Outside, too gravely looking at me, He seems to stand,
And looking at Him, if my forgotten spirit came
Unwillingly back, what could it claim
Of those calm eyes, that quiet speech,
Breaking like a slow tide upon the beach,
The scarred, not quite human hand?—
Unwillingly back to the burden of old imaginings
When it has learned so long not to think, not to be,
Again, again it would speak as it has spoken to me of things
That I shall not see!

I cannot bear to look at this divinely bent and gracious head:
When I was small I never quite believed that He was dead:
And at the Convent school I used to lie awake in bed
Thinking about His hands. It did not matter what they said,
He was alive to me, so hurt, so hurt! And most of all in Holy Week
When there was no one else to see
I used to think it would not hurt me too, so terribly,
If He had ever seemed to notice me
Or, if, for once, He would only speak.

Charlotte Mew was a great reader of her poems and people spoke of how transforming it was to hear her poetry read aloud. I suggest you try reading this out loud, or in your head, perhaps, but 'speaking the words, as the poem's rhythms are very powerfully orchestrated on the page as well as in terms of the sounds and the tone of voice.

What I think is peculiarly 'modernist' about this poem is its fragmentary, impressionistic stream of consciousness. There are some elements inserted,

"… there was my Mother (well at least the dead are free!)
Yoked to the man that Father was; yoked to the woman I am, Monty too;
The little portress at the Convent School, stewing in hell so patiently"

from Charlotte's own life. One of the most intriguing phrases is "I think my body was my soul". There couldn't be a wider gap between Madeleine's" spiritual ponderings and those of Christina Rossetti. Where Rossetti seems almost smug in her faith, Mew strikes a far more precarious and ambiguous note with her relish in nature and yet that gnawing sense of loneliness, worthlessness and inner suffering. And underneath it all there is that physicality about her characters' responses which I find haunting:

"we are what we are: the spirit afterwards, but first the touch".

Of "God", she writes simply,

"I do not envy Him his victories. His arms are full of broken things."

Like Emily Dickinson, Charlotte Mew constantly imagines death – often as a bed of quietness, a bit like the graves at the end of "Wuthering Heights" – she was a great admirer of the Brontës and Emily especially. Death, however, constantly represents relief and release for Mew, though without any hope of a life beyond.

Not all her best poems are long. Here are two short ones that are quite intriguing. Like much of her work, you sense there is much that is concealed under the surface while the poems obliquely reveal more clues about *her* – her inner spirit: "this dark ditch, the soul of me".

The Shade-Catchers

I think they were about as high
As haycocks are. They went running by
Catching bits of shade in the sunny street:
" I've got one," cried sister to brother.
" I've got two." "Now I've got another."
But scudding away on their little bare feet,
They left the shade in the sunny street.

This has the spare simplicity of a fleeting moment of childhood – happiness, but with a sense of foreboding in the final line. It is only when matched with Charlotte Mew's brother and sister who both had to be locked away, that one senses that something far more acute may be going on.

"Sea Love" was a later poem, reverting back to a dialect voice. This time a girl is reflecting on how great things are happening in the world which can change relationships forever. On one level the sea represents stability, endurance, beauty, while on another it represents all that will sweep people aside. It's hard to tell if the tone is more one of nostalgia, sadness or resignation. Charlotte Mew likes the word "toss" and uses it elsewhere to suggest the exuberant physicality of love.

Sea Love

Tide be runnin' the great world over:
'Twas only last June month I mind that we
Was thinkin' the toss and the call in the breast of the lover
So everlastin' as the sea.

Here's the same little fishes that splutter and swim,
Wi' the moon's old glim on the gray, wet sand;
An' him no more to me nor me to him
Than the wind goin' over my hand.

There are three more important poems that I think are essential reading in trying to get hold of this strange and disturbing poet. Her last two or three years brought some happiness: Sydney Cockerell's friendship, Alida's devotion and, with Harold Monro, their championing of *The Farmer's Bride* (there was recognition also in the USA where the collection received praise under another imprint and title), plus a growing reputation in the literary world. Virginia Woolf, though no poet, was interested (they actually met at Florence Hardy's bedside after Hardy's wife was admitted to a nursing home in 1924 but they were both too shy to speak to each other). All of this seemed at last to be moving in the right direction.

Her mother's death in 1923, had brought an era to an end, but in that year Sydney Cockerell managed to arrange with the prime minister, Stanley Baldwin, for Charlotte Mew to be given a Civil List pension. This alleviated some of the money worries which had driven the Mew sisters to have to move to cheaper lodgings.

It was, however, the death of her artist sister Anne in 1927 that tipped the balance. Alida Monro was invited by Charlotte to visit while Anne was dying. She wrote this to her husband Harold:

> "Poor little Mew, it is more tragic than I can tell you. Her rough little harsh voice and wilful ways hiding enormous depth of feeling – now she will be entirely alone and her relation with Anne has been one of complete love, and I imagine the love of sisters (or brothers) more marvellous than any other as there can be no fleshly implications or sexual complexities, Alas - "

For Charlotte it was a devastating blow.

The Poetry Bookshop, meanwhile, had also had to move to Great Russell Street, which caused more problems. In January 1928, however, Charlotte came into an inheritance which amounted to about £8,000, but by then she was becoming steadily more and more neurotic – about dirt and illness. In March, she gave Alida a copy of "Fin de Fête", a handwritten copy made for himself by Thomas Hardy, who had liked the poem very much, and which had later come back to her. Alida was too distracted by bookshop worries to see that this was a clear farewell. (There is an interesting comment in an article by John Freeman in *The Bookman* 1929, as noted by Penelope Fitzgerald: 'She could put a constraint upon her deepest feeling,

but none upon her form… the nearer her verse keeps to the normal stanza, the more delicate its movement.')

Fin de Fête

Sweetheart, for such a day
One mustn't grudge the score;
Here, then, it's all to pay,
It's Good-night at the door.

Good-night and good dreams to you,—
Do you remember the picture-book thieves
Who left two children sleeping in a wood the long night through,
And how the birds came down and covered them with leaves?

So you and I should have slept,—But now,
Oh, what a lonely head!
With just the shadow of a waving bough
In the moonlight over your bed.

There is so much longing and tenderness that you feel that the metre has to be strained to contain it all.

Here are the two last poems I wish, with your patience, to consider. "Saturday Market" had also been a favourite with Thomas Hardy and it's a troubled and troubling poem. I disagree with Penelope Fitzgerald, her biographer, who believed the "wretched woman has to walk through the open market, hiding her pregnancy or her abortion, we can't tell which…" If you read the poem carefully it's obviously ("a hole in your breast") the woman's *actual* bleeding heart that she was first "showing" in the marketplace and then trying desperately to cover it up and hide it from the jeering eyes of the others. Society is seen as ultimately cruel – the victim is here told there is no hope nor redress. No context or explanation is given – or needed. This woman is fated to suffer loneliness and death.

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!

There is a strange muscular forcefulness about the commands in the poem; the speaker seems almost to be addressing a divided personality with cool distance and directness – 'it is what it is':

> "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?"

One senses the quiet force of Mew's inner determination. The uneven length of the lines, as elsewhere, seems to accentuate the jagged, jangling of nerves and inner pain. This is very far from the saccharine style of the late Georgians and has far more in common with the jazz age of high modernism (think of Billie Holliday's "Strange Fruit", for example).

And, here, finally, is "Fame", from *The Farmer's Bride*, which you probably already know, but is 'essential' Charlotte Mew if you don't. On 24th March 1928, tragically, she went out and bought a bottle of Lysol, a household cleaning fluid based on creosote and highly corrosive. She drank it and died in agony, telling the doctor who desperately tried to counter the effect with olive oil, "Don't keep me, please let me go."

How sad and how heroic were both her writing and her life.
"Fame" seems to sum it all up, though like the others it was written much earlier.

Fame

Sometimes in the over-heated house, but not for long,
Smirking and speaking rather loud,
I see myself among the crowd,
Where no one fits the singer to his song,
Or sifts the unpainted from the painted faces
Of the people who are always on my stair;
They were not with me when I walked in heavenly places;
But could I spare
In the blind Earth's great silences and spaces,
The din, the scuffle, the long stare
If I went back and it was not there?
Back to the old known things that are the new,
The folded glory of the gorse, the sweet-briar air,
To the larks that cannot praise us, knowing nothing of what we do
And the divine, wise trees that do not care
Yet, to leave Fame, still with such eyes and that bright hair!
God! If I might! And before I go hence
Take in her stead
To our tossed bed,
One little dream, no matter how small, how wild.
Just now, I think I found it in a field, under a fence—
A frail, dead, new-born lamb, ghostly and pitiful and white,
A blot upon the night,
The moon's dropped child!

Here we can see Charlotte Mew's ambivalence – "fame" is after all what she seeks, yet her self-consciousness gets painfully in the way. "Fame", in spite of all the negatives, is social, sexy ("the long stare", "our tossed bed"), and the antidote for "the blind Earth's great silences and spaces" that seem so threatening. She shuns society and yet needs it desperately. Yet the final image of the (sacrificial?) lamb, delivered so unsentimentally with a clear, compassionate calmness, still insists that *she*, Charlotte Mew, is the "blot upon the night, The moon's dropped child!" but stillborn.

All of her poems are worth reading - her output was slight in the end - but I would particularly recommend also, "The Changeling", "In Nunhead Cemetery" and "On the Asylum Road". Hers was clearly a deeply disturbed life and mind, but the poetry she made out of her attempts to come to grips with her disturbances is rich and assured.

(I love this watercolour drawing below of her, made in 1926 by Dorothy Hawksley)