

Miss Mew

‘New?’

‘Mew.’

‘Mute?’

‘Mew,’ I repeat the repetition.

‘Ah, Miss *Mew*.’ The man – I refuse to call him gentle – experiments with rolling my name around his mouth, thick tongue flipping over each letter as if deciding whether or not he likes the taste. Bitter? It might well be.

‘And you write little poems, do you Miss? Shining bright in our literary firmament these days, or so I’m told by Thomas ...’ If I had forgotten – and I rarely forget things – then this man would be the perfect reminder of why I no longer attend parties. As he speaks, I allow my eyes to slide out of focus, drawn away from his pompous, port-reddened face and towards the closed velvet curtains beyond. Their sheer opulence is almost oppressive, tumbling down to cover the large-paned windows in a plush waterfall sweep. On either side of the expanse, gilt candlesticks stand guard like sentries. There will be no escaping tonight. At least not until after dinner is served.

‘“As the stars that shall be bright when we are dust, moving in marches across the heavenly plain ...” Now that’s poetry for you. Those brave boys with their beautiful words.’ Reluctantly, I return my attention to my companion, now quoting from what is surely the single poem he knows by heart. We all know it. We have since 1918. ‘What do you write about, Miss Mew?’ He leans forward conspiratorially. Breath hot, eyes sharp. ‘Had a sweetheart once, did you?’

‘I ...’ Seldom am I lost for words. But which words to choose? How could I convey to this man that there is worth in what I write? Markets and beggars. Farmers and trees. When I speak of loss, it is not of the soldiers to whom monuments are made. It is of the tiny child who lives and dies without ever knowing a world beyond her sickbed. It is the loss of hope. Of faith. Or that quiet

anguish of a loss which society forbids us even to mention. The loss of a mind when the body remains.

‘Come now, sir, you have heard of *The Farmer’s Bride*?’ Impressively attuned to signs of discord amongst her guests, Florence glides across the room to arrive at my side. She truly is the perfect hostess. The florid fellow appears to swell up: no, it transpires, he does not know the *farm bride* – ‘farmer’, Florence corrects him gently – and nor does he especially wish to.

‘ *“Three summers since I chose a maid,
Too young maybe – but more’s to do
At harvest-time than bide and woo.”* ’

Florence recites my opening verse as if it were a minor-key melody, her light voice animated by emotion.

‘ *“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.”* ’

She halts. When she turns back to me, I see that her eyes are glistening soulfully: illuminated by the candlelight.

‘A young wife caught and trapped, poorly matched to a husband who will never understand her mind. Tragic, sir, is it not?’ The ungentleman raises an eyebrow. The furrows of his plump forehead quickly absorb it.

‘Well, Miss Mew, perhaps we can agree on something,’ he concedes gruffly. ‘Woman rarely recognises the good fortune of her station.’

‘On the contrary, sir. I find most women know exactly how lucky they are.’

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‘Eat, drink and be merry, my friends!’ Mr Hardy calls down to us from the head of his table, sonorous and subtly commanding as at any literary performance. The dining room, like the salon, is decorated lavishly, if a little more Victorian in style than I suspect Florence herself would choose. A further brace of straight-backed candleholders has been stationed along the table, their wax pillars serving to flatter the complexions of the company with a uniform cast of gold. Does Florence use electricity when she is alone here? Is she ever alone here?

In front of me lies the full complement of silverware that befits a London dinner party and before the first course I catch sight of my reflection, concaved and contorted in the nearest filigree spoon. My face is pale. Angular. Watchful. When I look up again, uncomfortably conscious of the indigo circles haunting my eye sockets, Mr Hardy is smiling. He looks encouragingly in my direction, the way I imagine a father might coax an unathletic young boy up to the crease. He is kind to me. So too, of course, is Florence, although tonight I sense that she is strained by something beyond the pressures of society entertainment. Their townhouse is impressive, imposing even, but surely their souls also crave a retreat to his mythical Wessex? On paper at least, if not in person. There are too many humans here. Too few trees. A new fashion for cutting them down – the trees, not the humans – is upon us and the brutality of it burns me, painfully corrosive as if I had swallowed poison. What makes man so certain that because something – someone – is trapped in silence, they cannot feel suffering? I start scribbling out a line, murmuring to myself as the sounds of a new poem take root. ‘Grate.’ ‘Swish.’ ‘Crash.’ ‘Fall.’ In lieu of a proper pen, I carve the words into a napkin with the raw edge of my fingernail.

‘Miss Mew?’ Concerned faces are peering along the table. Peppered in a few places with poorly stifled sniggers. *Odd, isn’t she? Is she mad?*

‘We were talking about the franchise.’ The colour in my new acquaintance’s cheeks is sinking deeper with every glass of wine he drinks. What were once dots of puce have now spread, spilling out into two blotchy blooms of purple. ‘First, they grant it to women ...’

‘... some women ...’ Florence quietly amends.

‘... who next: lunatics?’ The man guffaws at his own suggestion. ‘Not that there’s always a difference between the two!’ I clench my napkin tighter inside my fist, called to courage as my fingers find the faintly etched imprint of my words.

‘I think a woman no longer in her right mind was likely driven from it by men.’

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After dinner, the sexes part company. The gentlemen retire to the parlour, eager to enjoy their whisky and cigars, while the ladies indulge their own equally thrilling vice of gossip. Florence, as ever, has prepared well for the moment. When we enter the drawing room, I see that silver bowls filled with confectionary await us on every glossy side table. The nearest offering is pear drops. A favourite. Checking that no one is watching, I gather up a handful of the pastel-hued sweets, wrapping them inside my napkin as a reminder to keep them safe. When finally I take my seat on a high-backed chair – the chaises lounges have already been claimed by women quicker off the mark – it is a challenge to feign interest in the conversation. The group’s most confident characters regale us with tales of their latest household dramas, the plots of which hang invariably upon lace, lost gloves and insubordinate kitchen maids.

‘Serving red wine? With fish? Is she *insane*?’

Midway through proceedings, Florence excuses herself, murmuring about the need to thank her housekeeper before the evening’s end. I do not hesitate to take my chance. Unnoticed and unmissed, I slip outside. Even a London garden is more comforting than none. The hedges are high, diamond-leaf tendrils of ivy coiling over the iron gates, and at the far end of the lawn, a single tree stands proud. I should have known Mr Hardy would not allow his to be felled. Its winter branches twist in the wind, phantom fingers tickling the night air as if trying to touch the moon. I can discern, if only just, the small black mass that denotes a bird’s nest. The fledgeling family can no longer be in

residence, their infants surely grown and taken to the skies several months ago. Yet I am drawn to the thought that they linger nearby, watching me through the shadows as I seek the same sanctuary they once did. When close enough, I press my forehead to the tree trunk. As I lean, a hairpin is dislodged, and I allow the loosened strands of brown hair to mingle with the bark.

‘Charlotte.’ Can I trust him? Is he the Tom who understood Tess: that rare man who intuited the sorrow felt exclusively by women, bound inside stone circles of fate from which we never seem to break free? Or is he the Mr Hardy who took a lover forty years his junior: humiliating his late wife and now, in the eternal spirit of employment creating a vacancy, humiliating Florence too? His hand grazes my own. My pulse beats beneath his fingers.

‘Clever little Charlotte. Are you well, my dear?’ A rogue lock falls over my face and he brushes it away. Palm pressed against my cheek.

“Like the shut of a winter’s day

Her smile went out.”

‘Quite well, sir. But it is time for me to go.’

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When I leave, I walk. Averting my eyes from Florence’s concern – and fending off the bizarre offer of a taxicab shared with my flush-faced adversary – I set off on foot along the pavement. To travel alone feels grounding, allaying my fears that a car or, even worse, conversation will jostle the nascent rhythm of my poem out my head. I think of the napkin and am tempted to check it, but I know the roughly inscribed words will be invisible until I find better light. A few right (or wrong) turns and the true darkness of the city engulfs me. There are no gilt candleholders here. No velvet and often no curtains either. The railings are blackened not by paint but street grime, and from a bird’s eye view I imagine the decay around me: pockmarking parts of the city where post-war progress is yet to reach. Yes, its people survived, but for what? Not always a life worth living.

The nurse is slow to answer the door.

‘Late for you, Miss Mew. You’ve missed dinnertime.’

‘How is ...?’

‘Settled. And safer down there, I’m sure. We don’t want another attempt.’ She turns away to rearrange a pile of thin blankets, pressing the material down firmly as if it recently caused her offence. The new room is downstairs – after the incident, views went from being a right to a privilege – and I take each tread cautiously, mindful of how easily a loud footstep can startle. There is a window here, albeit one cut from clouded glass. As I descend, all I can see is the kerbside. Ill-defined blocks of black? The thick boots of passing men. Darting slivers of shadow? The feet of children, hurrying past the asylum.

‘Freda.’ Nothing. ‘Freda.’ I pause. ‘Sister.’ Freda blinks, then continues to stare ahead. There are scratches on her arms from before they cut her nails. Patches of raw, pulled scalp from before they cut her hair. Auburn, it was. Auburn and beautiful. Unfurling the napkin, I offer Freda the pear drops. At first, she does not seem to react, but then with a soft rippling movement her fingers start to reach for them. Tentative and weak, but reaching nonetheless. At the first taste of sweetness, she gives a half smile. I half smile, too. I take her hand in my own and, slowly, feel her skin growing warmer. Her eyelids fall. Head droops. Limbs loosen. Freda dozes and I write, concluding the lines that I began elsewhere.

‘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.’*

The Trees are Down by Charlotte Mew

[2006]