

Charlotte

by
Linda Manning

Adapted from the stage play
"Do Something With Yourself! The life of Charlotte Bronte"
by Linda Manning
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Charlotte Brontë
portrait commissioned by her publisher George Smith
painted by George Richmond, 1850

"Smith seemed to offer Charlotte the opportunity Rochester offers Jane: the freedom to become visible."

Lyndall Gordon
Charlotte Brontë: A Passionate Life

FADE IN:

SUPERIMPOSE: Northern England 1848

INT. HORSE-DRAWN CARRIAGE - DAY

CHARLOTTE, 31, petite, plain features, except for her large, piercing eyes, is squeezed into the carriage seat by the window. She is soaked. The rain pours outside. Her sister ANNE, 28, open, energetic, almost pretty is beside her, also soaked from the rain.

On the other side of Anne an OLDER MAN'S head bobs as he naps. Across from them sits a GUSHING YOUNG COUPLE with their disapproving FEMALE CHAPERONE.

The passengers are constantly jostled by the bumpy ride.

EXT. ENGLISH COUNTRYSIDE - DAY - CONTINUOUS

The DRIVER of the carriage whips the horses as they hurry down a dirt road in the summer thunderstorm through the vast, green, rolling Northern English countryside.

INT. CARRIAGE - DAY

The sky has cleared. The setting sun's light cuts sharply through the window. Charlotte, furrowed brow and clutched hands, stares out. Anne notices and places her hand over Charlotte's giving a look of reassurance.

Charlotte plays the morning's conversation in her head.

CUT TO EARLIER IN THE DAY:

INT. BRONTE PARSONAGE - PARLOR - DAY

The parlor room of the parsonage is simply furnished with a round table and four chairs in the center, fireplace, sofa, and two large windows at the front of the house looking out onto the front garden which leads to the graveyard. A set of double doors open out into the front hall.

CHARLOTTE

We must all make an appearance in
London at George's office so he can
see there are truly three of us.

EMILY, her other sister, 29, tall, gaunt and intense bolts up out of her chair.

(CONTINUED)

EMILY

What?! No!

CHARLOTTE

The only way I can repair this is to meet him and explain.

EMILY

You don't need George Smith.

CUT BACK TO THE PRESENT:

INT. CARRIAGE - DAY - CONTINUOUS

CHARLOTTE

(confidentially)

It is right that we are going?

ANNE

Yes, definitely.

Charlotte takes a letter out of the pocket of her cape. She carefully unfolds and re-reads it. It is damp but still legible. GEORGE SMITH'S signature is at the bottom.

GEORGE (V.O.) (O.C.)

Dear Mr. Bell, it is with great distress that I write to you about my receipt of a letter from an American publisher. I am dismayed to comprehend that you would choose someone else to publish your next book ...

Charlotte stares out the window again, going back over the conversation with Emily.

CUT BACK TO EARLIER THAT DAY:

INT. BRONTE PARSONAGE - PARLOR - DAY

Charlotte holds George's letter, Emily paces, and Anne stands by the parlor doors making sure no one comes in.

EMILY

You don't need George Smith.

CHARLOTTE

Newby is lying.

(CONTINUED)

ANNE

George is questioning Charlotte's integrity.

EMILY

Well, then he's an ass!

ANNE

Emily! Shhhhh!

EMILY

You want to stand in front of London literary society and announce that you are the author of *Jane Eyre*, with everything that has been written about it, about you?! Are you truly prepared to do that?

CUT BACK TO THE PRESENT:

INT. CARRIAGE - DAY - CONTINUOUS

Charlotte's face is screwed into a tight knot. She moves her lips quietly as she replays her argument to Emily.

CHARLOTTE (V.O.)

At least stand in front of George.

CUT BACK TO:

INT. BRONTE PARSONAGE - PARLOR - DAY

EMILY

The world believes we are three gentlemen! If you make an appearance in London the truth will be out, and then what? Further scorn and ridicule. "*Wuthering Heights* is a strange, inartistic story. We know nothing in the whole range of our fictitious literature which presents such shocking pictures of the worst forms of humanity."

ANNE

That was one review.

EMILY

Most of them were of that ilk.

(CONTINUED)

ANNE

Jane Eyre was received with more positive notices.

EMILY

And scathing ones.

CHARLOTTE

I cannot stay silent.

EMILY

They'd love to humiliate us, bury us under the guise of being "stupid, silly women who thought they could write."

CUT BACK TO THE PRESENT:

INT. CARRIAGE - DAY - CONTINUOUS

Charlotte grimaces and moves her head back and forth as she plays out the conversation. The young couple sitting across from her stare, and are about to break into giggles. Anne sees what is happening.

ANNE

Charlotte, Charlotte ...

CHARLOTTE

(annoyed to be pulled out of her thoughts)

What?!

ANNE

Shhhhh. You're talking to yourself.

Charlotte now notices everyone in the carriage is staring at her. She becomes further distressed.

CUT BACK TO:

INT. BRONTE PARSONAGE - PARLOR - DAY

EMILY

They don't understand us, Charlotte, they never will!

CHARLOTTE

I don't believe that.

(CONTINUED)

ANNE
Please Emily ...

EMILY
I'm not going!

CHARLOTTE
(to Anne)
If we set off for Leeds this
afternoon we can get on the night
train to London.

EMILY
It is going to rain this afternoon.

CHARLOTTE
(defiant)
Then we shall get very wet.

CUT BACK TO THE PRESENT:

EXT. LEEDS TRAIN STATION - DAY

The carriage rolls up to the LEEDS TRAIN STATION. The DRIVER
gets down and opens the door.

DRIVER
Leeds.

Charlotte and Anne climb down. The driver throws their two
small bags down from the top and drives on. The train
station is crowded with people moving in every direction.
Charlotte and Anne head toward the ticket window.

INT. TRAIN - NIGHT

Charlotte sits wide-eyed, packed into a crowded train car as
the train noisily moves through the night. Anne sleeps on
her shoulder. Charlotte daydreams.

CUT TO TEN YEARS EARLIER:

EXT. THE PENSIONNAT HEGER COURTYARD GARDEN, BRUSSELS - DAY

The Pensionnat is a small boarding school in Brussels. The
courtyard garden is lush and overflowing with blooming
flowers. Charlotte, TEN YEARS YOUNGER, and MONSIEUR
CONSTANTIN HEGER, her teacher, 35, black unruly hair, square
jaw, tiger eyes, make their way through the garden.

(CONTINUED)

Heger struggles to translate his words to English from his native French.

HEGER

For so many, many springs I sit in this garden, amazed by the power of God that is seen in every tree and in every luscious flower. But this day of spring in this garden where I am sitting since so many times, I am again amazed by the power of God. I do not see the flowers. I see you. God has given me a gift. He has brought you to me. You do not know yet what you have done, or what you will do.

CHARLOTTE

Yes, Monsieur.

HEGER

I want you to write, day and night.
I want to read everything.

CUT BACK TO THE PRESENT:

INT. TRAIN - NIGHT

Charlotte's eyes travel across the tired, sleeping faces. She lands on a YOUNG WOMAN buried in a book, it's *Jane Eyre*! She gasps. Anne moves slightly but does not wake. Charlotte watches the Young Woman read as the train thunders along.

CUT BACK TO EARLIER THAT DAY:

INT. PATRICK BRONTË'S STUDY - DAY

PATRICK, their father, mid 60's, thin, tall, white-haired, sharp featured, an imposing figure, sits at his desk reading, he does NOT look up from his work.

Charlotte stands in front of him holding a copy of *Jane Eyre*.

CHARLOTTE

Papa ... Anne and I are going to London.

PATRICK

For what purpose?

(CONTINUED)

CHARLOTTE
(she takes a deep breath)
I have written a book.

PATRICK
I cannot be troubled to read
manuscripts now.

CHARLOTTE
It is printed, Papa. It was
published a few weeks ago.

Charlotte sharply sets down the bound book in front of him
of *Jane Eyre* by Currer Bell. He finally looks up.

PATRICK
Who is Currer Bell?

CHARLOTTE
Me.

PATRICK
I hope you have not involved
yourself in any silly expense. How
much did this cost?

CHARLOTTE
Nothing. They paid me ... a fee, no
royalties. But I think I shall gain
some money writing. Some day. That
is my plan. It was reviewed in The
Times.

PATRICK
(a moment of pride)
A novel of yours has been reviewed
in the London Times?

CHARLOTTE
Currer Bell's has!

Patrick quickly becomes deeply concerned.

PATRICK
Does your brother know?

CHARLOTTE
No.

PATRICK
You cannot tell him.

CHARLOTTE

I know.

CUT BACK TO THE PRESENT:

INT. LONDON TRAIN STATION - DAY

Charlotte and Anne, blurry from exhaustion, step out onto the teeming train platform. Their first time in London or any large city, the noise, crowds and speed at which everything is moving is overwhelming.

They step into the sea of people. As they are shorter than everyone, all they can see are backs as they are swept along the platform toward the street.

EXT. CROWDED LONDON STREET - DAY

The sun is just up, but the street is full of primarily men hurriedly heading this way and that. The morning light hits both women in the eyes as they exit the train station. They immediately cough and cover their mouths from the stench of the city.

ANNE

Should we find a room first?

CHARLOTTE

No, I want to meet George.

Charlotte taps the shoulder of a MAN standing nearby.

CHARLOTTE (CONT'D)

Excuse me, could you tell me where
I might find 65 Cornhill?

The Man looks dubiously down at the small woman craning her neck up at him. He points up the street.

MAN AT TRAIN STATION

That way.

CHARLOTTE

Thank you so much.

Anne looks questioningly at Charlotte. Charlotte pushes her way through the crowd, and Anne follows.

EXT. CROWDED LONDON STREET - DAY

Charlotte's boots and tattered hem, now covered with mud, push against the traffic of gentleman's boots, ladies' skirts, horses hooves, and carriage wheels. Anne's small boots follow right behind. They round a corner.

Charlotte and Anne stop. They see a plaque on the front of a doorway, 65 Cornhill.

INT. NARROW WOODEN STAIRCASE - DAY - CONTINUOUS

Charlotte flies up a narrow stairway. Anne rushes behind her. They reach a door at the top of the stairs that reads "Smith Elder & Co. Publishers" and push it open.

INT. LONDON OFFICES OF GEORGE SMITH - DAY - CONTINUOUS

Both women step through the doorway and freeze. The office is swarming with men in shirt sleeves going about their work.

Charlotte suddenly becomes keenly aware of what a mess she looks. She attempts to smooth her skirt, but it doesn't help.

A YOUNG CLERK impatiently looks up from his desk at them raising his eyebrows asking "What?!"

CHARLOTTE

I am looking for Mr. George Smith.

YOUNG CLERK

May I tell him who is calling?

CHARLOTTE

I need to speak with Mr. Smith directly.

The clerk stalks off. Charlotte eyes the room, starting to feel panicked. The men are looking back at her. Her shyness is closing in.

A young man in his mid-20's, tall, charmingly handsome, but all business at the moment approaches her. It is GEORGE SMITH.

GEORGE

Did you wish to see me?

Charlotte is struck dumb for a moment by his appearance.

(CONTINUED)

CHARLOTTE

Are you George Smith?

GEORGE

Yes, and whom am I addressing?

CHARLOTTE

I expected someone older.

GEORGE

(impatient)

Can I help you?

Charlotte reaches under her cape and produces a bundle of letters addressed to "Mr. Currer Bell from Mr. George Smith". George SNATCHES THEM from her hands.

GEORGE

Where did you get these?

CHARLOTTE

(with a nervous, too loud
laugh)

They were addressed to me! Mr.
Smith, I am Currer Bell ...

The room goes silent. George STARES AT HER in disbelief.

WILLIAM SMITH WILLIAMS, a stout, middle-aged man, very observant and thoughtful, steps forward.

WILLIAM

May we offer you a seat in George's
office.

George doesn't move.

GEORGE

How do I know you are Currer Bell?!

Charlotte hurriedly pulls his most recent letter, tattered and curled from the rain, out of her cape pocket.

CHARLOTTE

I received your letter. Mr. Newby
is my sisters', Anne and Emily,
Acton Bell and Ellis Bell's
publisher. He does not have my new
book. He is trying to sell my
sister Anne's novel under my name.
I imagine because of the, ah
...noteriety of *Jane Eyre*. Anne and
I have come to give you ocular

(MORE)

(CONTINUED)

CHARLOTTE (cont'd)
proof of the existence of myself
and my two sisters, or rather three
brothers, three authors.

GEORGE
You are Currer Bell?

CHARLOTTE
Yes. Charlotte, Charlotte Brontë.
Mr. Smith, you and I made an
agreement. I am so grateful for
everything you've done for me. My
next two books are yours to
publish.

GEORGE
You are Currer Bell.

CHARLOTTE
Yes.

WILLIAM
Right this way ladies.

William leads Charlotte and Anne toward George's office.
George continues to stare.

All work has stopped. All eyes follow the two women. George
gives the men a fierce look and they go back to work.

INT. GEORGE SMITH'S LONDON OFFICE - DAY - CONTINUOUS

Charlotte and Anne follow William into George's small
office. Books and manuscripts cover every surface and pile
up on the floor. William calls to the Young Clerk.

WILLIAM
Clear off two chairs.

The Young Clerk comes running.

YOUNG CLERK
Where?

WILLIAM
Clear off that one and find another
one, please. And get the ladies a
cup of tea.

The Young Clerk, befuddled, clears off one chair.

(CONTINUED)

WILLIAM (CONT'D)
(to Charlotte)
Please, sit.

The Young Clerk brings in another chair and squeezes it in next to the other one.

WILLIAM (CONT'D)
Please.

Charlotte and Anne sit. George, dazed, slowly comes in and sits behind his desk.

GEORGE
Forgive my appearance. I wasn't expecting ...

He stares at Charlotte. Charlotte stares back. Long, awkward silence. William jumps in.

WILLIAM
How was your journey?

ANNE
Long. We haven't found rooms yet ...

CHARLOTTE
(still staring at George)
Beautiful. The countryside ... it was arresting.

GEORGE
So all this time I've been writing to you, *Mister Bell*?

CHARLOTTE
Yes. You understand, we had to present ourselves as men.

GEORGE
Many people said the book was written by a woman. I didn't believe it.

CHARLOTTE
Why is that?

GEORGE
(with a grin)
It is so ... brilliant.

The comment takes Charlotte's breath away. She meets his gaze with the full force of her intelligence.

(CONTINUED)

CHARLOTTE

Well, you are not what I expected either.

She is charmed, he is not insulting her, he dares to tell her the truth. For a moment, neither one can look away, they are looking into the eyes of a truly KINDRED SPIRIT.

GEORGE

I gathered.

The Young Clerk breaks the moment bringing in two stained, chipped, but piping hot cups of tea.

WILLIAM

I apologize, we are not used to entertaining ladies here in this office.

George suddenly erupts with enthusiasm.

GEORGE

How long did you say you would be in town? We must make the most of the time - tonight you will accompany me to the opera. Mr. Thackeray will be absurdly pleased to meet the author of *Jane Eyre*. If Mr. Lewes knew Currer Bell was in town he would have to be shut up - I will ask them both to dinner at my house after.

CHARLOTTE

Mr. Smith, my sister and I are here simply to clear up the matter of the errant publisher, Mr. Newby. No one else must know who we are.

GEORGE

Miss Brontë, this is an opportunity for London to meet you, and for you to be introduced in the proper manner and in the proper atmosphere.

CHARLOTTE

(forceful)

To the rest of the world, we must remain gentlemen, as before.

(CONTINUED)

WILLIAM
We understand.

GEORGE
(reluctantly giving in)
Do we?!

William gives him a look of warning.

GEORGE (CONT'D)
Will you at least be guests in my home? I live with my mother and sisters. They would be delighted to meet you.

CHARLOTTE
No one must know, Mr. Smith, except yourselves. Please refer to us as the Misses Brown.

INT. ROOM AT CHAPTER COFFEE HOUSE, LONDON - NIGHT

Anne and Charlotte's room is tiny, sparsely furnished with two small beds. One candle burns. Charlotte is lying on the bed with a wet cloth on her forehead. Anne pores over a stack of books.

CHARLOTTE
I'm sorry, this room is horrid. I didn't know where else to go, Papa stayed here once years ago.

ANNE
It will do. Very decent of Mr. Smith to lend us all of these books.

CHARLOTTE
Yes ...

ANNE
You were surprised to find out he is so young?

CHARLOTTE
Weren't you?

ANNE
He's very handsome. I did sincerely enjoy the look on his face when he realized you are the famous "Curren Bell."

(CONTINUED)

CHARLOTTE

I'm paying for all this excitement,
my head is thundering.

Charlotte breathes heavily and closes her eyes.

There is a knock on a door.

ANNE

That will be Mr. Smith.

Anne helps Charlotte to her feet.

CHARLOTTE

I will never survive this.

ANNE

Yes you will. You must.

Charlotte smooths her hair. Anne answers the door. George Smith stands in the doorway, BREATHTAKINGLY HANDSOME, dressed in black tails, white waistcoat and cravat. His eyes meet Charlotte's with sincere curiosity. She has to sit down again.

GEORGE

Charlotte, Miss Brontë, Brown, are
you well?

ANNE

She's fine. Come in.

George enters the room followed by his two young sisters - ELIZA (19) and SARAH (17), elegantly dressed. Their enormous, ornate skirts barely fit through the door. They overtake the small room.

GEORGE

I would like to present my sisters,
Eliza and Sarah Smith. These are my
dear friends, Miss Anne Brown and
Miss Charlotte Brown.

Both young ladies curtsy sneaking glances to their brother.

ELIZA

How do you do.

SARAH

Lovely to meet you.

GEORGE

Well, shall we be off? We have magnificent seats. I don't want to be late.

CHARLOTTE

For the opera?

GEORGE

Yes, of course.

EXT. STREET - ENTRANCE TO LONDON OPERA HOUSE - NIGHT

Charlotte, Anne, and George step down from his carriage. Eliza and Sarah step out of a second carriage behind them. George offers his arm to Charlotte. The scene is lush and elegant, full of formally dressed people streaming into the Opera House.

As they make their way up the staircase covered in red carpet, men and women nod to George. Heads turn at the sight of dashing George Smith and Charlotte, an odd little creature in a high-necked plain country dress.

INT. LONDON OPERA HOUSE - NIGHT

As Rosini's opera of "The Barber of Seville" plays out on stage Charlotte sits between George and Anne in a box seat, high above the audience. She is delighted and overwhelmed by the splendor all around her.

Charlotte looks out at the audience below them, two beautiful women gossip to each other and stare up at her and George. George gives them a wry look and smiles back. Charlotte spots another pair laughing and staring up at her.

A voice starts to creep in, she tries to ignore it. Charlotte smiles at George. He smiles back.

GEORGE

Are you enjoying yourself?

CHARLOTTE

I have no words.

The voice in her head becomes louder and louder, drowning out the opera and everything around her.

An image of a newspaper flashes in her mind, competing with the scene on stage.

(CONTINUED)

MALE REVIEWER (V.O.)(O.C.)

(vehement)

... a total ignorance of the habits of society, a great coarseness of taste, a heathenish doctrine of religion ... *Jane Eyre* is a dangerous picture of a natural heart, religion failed to reign over the passions ... a mere heathen mind, masquerading as a woman of self-control and principle ... a heathen mind ... a heathen mind ... a heathen mind ...

Charlotte's face is contorted with worry, her breathing is shallow, she is gripping her hands. Anne sees what is happening and grabs Charlotte's arm shaking her back to the present.

INT. GEORGE SMITH'S CARRIAGE - NIGHT

Returning from the opera Charlotte and Anne sit next to each other in the carriage. George is across from them.

GEORGE

Are you sure you cannot stay for another few days? There are so many things I want to share with you.

CHARLOTTE

It's not possible.

GEORGE

I cannot believe the author of *Jane Eyre* thinks anything is impossible. Have you ever considered living in London, working, writing, becoming intimate with all the other great authors of the day?

CHARLOTTE

The London literary world wants to meet Currer Bell, a sophisticated country gentleman with a great sensitivity to the female heart.

GEORGE

They would love to meet you!

(CONTINUED)

CHARLOTTE

You want to put me on display Mr. Smith?

ANNE

Charlotte ...

CHARLOTTE

Is that what you did tonight? The odd little woman from Yorkshire who managed to produce a popular novel?

GEORGE

Half of the London literary world suspects Currer Bell is a woman, and the other half will be charmed to know the truth.

CHARLOTTE

I know you are not that naive Mr. Smith, no one is *charmed* by women authors who are serious, let alone a woman who created the adulterous Mr. Rochester who keeps his mad wife locked in the attic.

GEORGE

Aha! The scene when Berthe sets fire to the house and Jane rescues Rochester is fantastic!

CHARLOTTE

How do you expect a woman like me to live alone in London?

We are going home to take care of our father, and to look for work teaching, and I'm going to start my next novel.

GEORGE

Charlotte, all I am trying to say is you have earned your place.

She stares out the window of the carriage at the London night.

DISSOLVE TO:

INT./EXT. CARRIAGE GOING ACROSS THE COUNTRYSIDE - DAY

Charlotte, in the same attitude, stares out the window of the carriage crossing the moors north. She closes her eyes to the rhythm of the horses.

SHE DAYDREAMS:

INT. THE PENSIONNAT HEGER - MONSIEUR HEGER'S STUDY - DAY

Charlotte, TEN YEARS YOUNGER, looks across a desk piled high with books and papers. Heger sits across from her. Behind him are bookshelves floor to ceiling. Heger struggles to find the English words.

HEGER

Miss Brontë? Constantin Heger. You call me Monsieur.

He studies her. She holds his gaze.

HEGER (CONT'D)

Your place ... before... was with a Miss Wooler?

CHARLOTTE

Yes.

HEGER

At an institution -- Roe Head?

CHARLOTTE

Yes.

HEGER

You were teacher. Why did you quit it?

CHARLOTTE

My sisters and I are ...

HEGER

I have your letter. You are come here to Brussels to strengthen your education, so that you and your sisters can open your own school in Haworth, in England. You are from Haworth?

CHARLOTTE

Yes.

(CONTINUED)

HEGER

It is only for this that you
continue to study Miss Brontë?

CHARLOTTE

Well, yes.

HEGER

So you want to be a governess?

CHARLOTTE

I'm afraid I don't understand.

HEGER

Of course that you do not
understand. You do as all the
English girls with no wealth and no
beauty do, you become a governess,
like sheep you become a governess.
You are not thinking for yourself.
If you seek an authentic education,
you must learn to think.

CHARLOTTE

Yes, sir. Monsieur.

CUT BACK TO PRESENT:

EXT. MOORS - DAY

A carriage rolls down a dirt lane that cuts through the
moors. It stops at a crossroads. Charlotte and Anne get out
with their bags. The carriage turns and drives away.
Charlotte and Anne walk off in the opposite direction down a
footpath.

EXT. BRONTË PARSONAGE GRAVEYARD - EVENING

Charlotte and Anne walk toward the Parsonage with their bags
in hand and are stopped short at the sight of a small
funeral party in the distance. Patrick comforts a man and
woman, the woman's body shakes with sobs.

Patrick walks through the graveyard toward his daughters
weary and wearing a disapproving look.

PATRICK

Your brother has returned.

He turns toward the Parsonage, Charlotte and Anne follow.

(CONTINUED)