

Charlotte's Ladies

L. M. Montgomery

Just as soon as dinner was over at the asylum, Charlotte sped away to the gap in the fence—the northwest corner gap. There was a gap in the southeast corner, too—the asylum fence was in a rather poor condition—but the southeast gap was interesting only after tea, and it was never at any time quite as interesting as the northwest gap.

Charlotte ran as fast as her legs could carry her, for she did not want any of the other orphans to see her. As a rule, Charlotte liked the company of the other orphans and was a favourite with them. But, somehow, she did not want them to know about the gaps. She was sure they would not understand.

Charlotte had discovered the gaps only a week before. They had not been there in the autumn, but the snowdrifts had lain heavily against the fence all winter, and one spring day when Charlotte was creeping through the shrubbery in the northwest corner in search of the little yellow daffodils that always grew there in spring, she found a delightful space where a board had fallen off, whence she could look out on a bit of woodsy road with a little footpath winding along by the fence under the widespreading boughs of the asylum trees. Charlotte felt a wild impulse to slip out and run fast and far down that lovely, sunny, tempting, fenceless road. But that would have been wrong, for it was against the asylum rules, and Charlotte, though she hated most of the asylum rules with all her heart, never disobeyed or broke them. So she subdued the vagrant longing with a sigh and sat down among the daffodils to peer wistfully out of the gap and feast her eyes on this glimpse of a world where there were no brick walls and prim walks and never-varying rules.

Then, as Charlotte watched, the Pretty Lady with the Blue Eyes came along the footpath. Charlotte had never seen her before and hadn't the slightest idea in the world who she was, but that was what she called her as soon as she saw her. The lady was so pretty, with lovely blue eyes that were very sad, although somehow as you looked at them you felt that they ought to be laughing, merry eyes instead. At least Charlotte thought so and wished at once that she knew how to make them laugh. Besides, the Lady had lovely golden hair and the most beautiful pink cheeks, and Charlotte, who had mouse-coloured hair and any number of freckles, had an unbounded admiration for golden locks and roseleaf complexions. The Lady was dressed in black, which Charlotte didn't like, principally because the matron of the asylum wore black and Charlotte didn't—exactly—like the matron.

When the Pretty Lady with the Blue Eyes had gone by, Charlotte drew a long breath.

“If I could pick out a mother I'd pick out one that looked just like her,” she said.

Nice things sometimes happen close together, even in an orphan asylum, and that very evening Charlotte discovered the southeast gap and found herself peering into the most beautiful garden you could imagine, a garden where daffodils and tulips grew in great ribbon-like beds, and there were hedges of white and purple lilacs, and winding paths under blossoming trees. It was such a garden as Charlotte had pictured in happy dreams and never expected to see in real life. And yet here it had been all the time, divided from her only by a high board fence.

“I wouldn’t have s’posed there could be such a lovely place so near an orphan asylum,” mused Charlotte. “It’s the very loveliest place I ever saw. Oh, I do wish I could go and walk in it. Well, I do declare! If there isn’t a lady in it, too!”

Sure enough, there was a lady, helping an unruly young vine to run in the way it should go over a little arbour. Charlotte instantly named her the Tall Lady with the Black Eyes. She was not nearly so young or so pretty as the Lady with the Blue Eyes, but she looked very kind and jolly.

I’d like her for an aunt, reflected Charlotte. Not for a mother—oh, no, not for a mother, but for an aunt. I know she’d make a splendid aunt. And, oh, just look at her cat!

Charlotte looked at the cat with all her might and main. She loved cats, but cats were not allowed in an orphan asylum, although Charlotte sometimes wondered if there were no orphan kittens in the world which would be appropriate for such an institution.

The Tall Lady’s cat was so big and furry, with a splendid tail and elegant stripes. A Very Handsome Cat, Charlotte called him mentally, seeing the capitals as plainly as if they had been printed out. Charlotte’s fingers tingled to stroke his glossy coat, but she folded them sternly together.

“You know you can’t,” she said to herself reproachfully, “so what is the use of wanting to, Charlotte Turner? You ought to be thankful just to see the garden and the Very Handsome Cat.”

Charlotte watched the Tall Lady and the Cat until they went away into a fine, big house further up the garden, then she sighed and went back through the cherry trees to the asylum playground, where the other orphans were playing games. But, somehow, games had lost their flavour compared with those fascinating gaps.

It did not take Charlotte long to discover that the Pretty Lady always walked past the northwest gap about one o’clock every day and never at any other time—at least at no other time when Charlotte was free to watch her; and that the Tall Lady was almost always in her

garden at five in the afternoon, accompanied by the Very Handsome Cat, pruning and trimming some of her flowers. Charlotte never missed being at the gaps at the proper times, if she could possibly manage it, and her heart was full of dreams about her two Ladies. But the other orphans thought all the fun had gone out of her, and the matron noticed her absent-mindedness and dosed her with sulphur and molasses for it. Charlotte took the dose meekly, as she took everything else. It was all part and parcel with being an orphan in an asylum.

“But if the Pretty Lady with the Blue Eyes was my mother, she wouldn’t make me swallow such dreadful stuff,” sighed Charlotte. “I don’t believe even the Tall Lady with the Black Eyes would—though perhaps she might, aunts not being quite as good as mothers.”

“Do you know,” said Maggie Brunt, coming up to Charlotte at this moment, “that Lizzie Parker is going to be adopted? A lady is going to adopt her.”

“Oh!” cried Charlotte breathlessly. An adoption was always a wonderful event in the asylum, as well as a somewhat rare one. “Oh, how splendid!”

“Yes, isn’t it?” said Maggie enviously. “She picked out Lizzie because she was pretty and had curls. I don’t think it is fair.”

Charlotte sighed. “Nobody will ever want to adopt me, because I’ve mousy hair and freckles,” she said. “But somebody may want you some day, Maggie. You have such lovely black hair.”

“But it isn’t curly,” said Maggie forlornly. “And the matron won’t let me put it up in curl papers at night. I just wish I was Lizzie.”

Charlotte shook her head. “I don’t. I’d love to be adopted, but I wouldn’t really like to be anybody but myself, even if I am homely. It’s better to be yourself with mousy hair and freckles than somebody else who is ever so beautiful. But I do envy Lizzie, though the matron says it is wicked to envy anyone.”

Envy of the fortunate Lizzie did not long possess Charlotte’s mind, however, for that very day a wonderful thing happened at noon hour by the northwest gap. Charlotte had always been very careful not to let the Pretty Lady see her, but today, after the Pretty Lady had gone past, Charlotte leaned out of the gap to watch her as far as she could. And just at that very moment the Pretty Lady looked back; and there, peering at her from the asylum fence, was a little scrap of a girl, with mouse-coloured hair and big freckles, and the sweetest, brightest, most winsome little face the Pretty Lady had ever seen. The Pretty Lady smiled right down at Charlotte and for just a moment her eyes looked as Charlotte had always known they ought to look. Charlotte was feeling rather frightened down in her heart but she smiled

bravely back.

“Are you thinking of running away?” said the Pretty Lady, and, oh, what a sweet voice she had—sweet and tender, just like a mother’s voice ought to be!

“No,” said Charlotte, shaking her head gravely. “I should like to run away but it would be of no use, because there is no place to run to.”

“Why would you like to run away?” asked the Pretty Lady, still smiling. “Don’t you like living here?”

Charlotte opened her big eyes very widely. “Why, it’s an orphan asylum!” she exclaimed. “Nobody could like living in an orphan asylum. But, of course, orphans should be very thankful to have any place to live in and I *am* thankful. I’d be thankfuller still if the matron wouldn’t make me take sulphur and molasses. If you had a little girl, would you make her take sulphur and molasses?”

“I didn’t when I had a little girl,” said the Pretty Lady wistfully, and her eyes were sad again.

“Oh, did you really have a little girl once?” asked Charlotte softly.

“Yes, and she died,” said the Pretty Lady in a trembling voice.

“Oh, I am sorry,” said Charlotte, more softly still. “Did she—did she have lovely golden hair and pink cheeks like yours?”

“No,” the Pretty Lady smiled again, though it was a very sad smile. “No, she had mouse-coloured hair and freckles.”

“Oh! And weren’t you sorry?”

“No, I was glad of it, because it made her look like her father. I’ve always loved little girls with mouse-coloured hair and freckles ever since. Well, I must hurry along. I’m late now, and schools have a dreadful habit of going in sharp on time. If you should happen to be here tomorrow, I’m going to stop and ask your name.”

Of course Charlotte was at the gap the next day and they had a lovely talk. In a week they were the best of friends. Charlotte soon found out that she could make the Pretty Lady’s eyes look as they ought to for a little while at least, and she spent all her spare time and lay awake at nights devising speeches to make the Pretty Lady laugh.

Then another wonderful thing happened. One evening when Charlotte went to the southeast gap, the Tall Lady with the Black Eyes was not in the garden—at least, Charlotte thought she wasn't. But the Very Handsome Cat was, sitting gravely under a syringa bush and looking quite proud of himself for being a cat.

"You Very Handsome Cat," said Charlotte, "won't you come here and let me stroke you?"

The Very Handsome Cat did come, just as if he understood English, and he purred with delight when Charlotte took him in her arms and buried her face in his fur. Then—Charlotte thought she would really sink into the ground, for the Tall Lady herself came around a lilac bush and stood before the gap.

"Please, ma'am," stammered Charlotte in an agony of embarrassment, "I wasn't meaning to do any harm to your Very Handsome Cat. I just wanted to pat him. I—I am very fond of cats and they are not allowed in orphan asylums."

"I've always thought asylums weren't run on proper principles," said the Tall Lady briskly. "Bless your heart, child, don't look so scared. You're welcome to pat the cat all you like. Come in and I'll give you some flowers."

"Thank you, but I am not allowed to go off the grounds," said Charlotte firmly, "and I think I'd rather not have any flowers because the matron might want to know where I got them, and then she would have this gap closed up. I live in mortal dread for fear it will be closed anyhow. It's very uncomfortable—living in mortal dread."

The Tall Lady laughed a very jolly laugh. "Yes, I should think it would be," she agreed. "I haven't had that experience."

Then they had a jolly talk, and every evening after that Charlotte went to the gap and stroked the Very Handsome Cat and chatted to the Tall Lady.

"Do you live all alone in that big house?" she asked wonderingly one day.

"All alone," said the Tall Lady.

"Did you always live alone?"

"No. I had a sister living with me once. But I don't want to talk about her. You'll oblige me, Charlotte, by *not* talking about her."

"I won't then," agreed Charlotte. "I can understand why people don't like to have their sisters talked about sometimes. Lily Mitchell has a big sister who was sent to jail for

stealing. Of course Lily doesn't like to talk about her."

The Tall Lady laughed a little bitterly. "My sister didn't steal. She married a man I detested, that's all."

"Did he drink?" asked Charlotte gravely. "The matron's husband drank and that was why she left him and took to running an orphan asylum. I think I'd rather put up with a drunken husband than live in an orphan asylum."

"My sister's husband didn't drink," said the Tall Lady grimly. "He was beneath her, that was all. I told her I'd never forgive her and I never shall. He's dead now—he died a year after she married him—and she's working for her living. I dare say she doesn't find it very pleasant. She wasn't brought up to that. Here, Charlotte, is a turnover for you. I made it on purpose for you. Eat it and tell me if you don't think I'm a good cook. I'm dying for a compliment. I never get any now that I've got old. It's a dismal thing to get old and have nobody to love you except a cat, Charlotte."

"I think it is just as bad to be young and have nobody to love you, not *even* a cat," sighed Charlotte, enjoying the turnover, nevertheless.

"I dare say it is," agreed the Tall Lady, looking as if she had been struck by a new and rather startling idea.

I like the tall lady with the Black Eyes ever so much, thought Charlotte that night as she lay in bed, but I love the Pretty Lady. I have more fun with the Tall Lady and the Very Handsome Cat, but I always feel nicer with the Pretty Lady. Oh, I'm so glad her little girl had mouse-coloured hair.

Then the most wonderful thing of all happened. One day a week later the Pretty Lady said, "Would you like to come and live with me, Charlotte?"

Charlotte looked at her. "Are you in earnest?" she asked in a whisper.

"Indeed I am. I want you for my little girl, and if you'd like to come, you shall. I'm poor, Charlotte, really, I'm dreadfully poor, but I can make my salary stretch far enough for two, and we'll love each other enough to cover the thin spots. Will you come?"

"Well, I should just think I will!" said Charlotte emphatically. "Oh, I wish I was sure I'm not dreaming. I do love you so much, and it will be so delightful to be your little girl."

“Very well, sweetheart. I’ll come tomorrow afternoon—it is Saturday, so I’ll have the whole blessed day off—and see the matron about it. Oh, we’ll have lovely times together, dearest. I only wish I’d discovered you long ago.”

Charlotte may have eaten and studied and played and kept rules the rest of that day and part of the next, but, if so, she has no recollection of it. She went about like a girl in a dream, and the matron concluded that something more than sulphur and molasses was needed and decided to speak to the doctor about her. But she never did, because a lady came that afternoon and told her she wanted to adopt Charlotte.

Charlotte obeyed the summons to the matron’s room in a tingle of excitement. But when she went in, she saw only the matron and the Tall Lady with the Black Eyes. Before Charlotte could look around for the Pretty Lady the matron said, “Charlotte, this lady, Miss Herbert, wishes to adopt you. It is a splendid thing for you, and you ought to be a very thankful little girl.”

Charlotte’s head fairly whirled. She clasped her hands and the tears brimmed up in her eyes.

“Oh, I like the Tall Lady,” she gasped, “but I *love* the Pretty Lady and I promised her I’d be her little girl. I can’t break my promise.”

“What on earth is the child talking about?” said the mystified matron.

And just then the maid showed in the Pretty Lady. Charlotte flew to her and flung her arms about her.

“Oh, tell them I am your little girl!” she begged. “Tell them I promised you first. I don’t want to hurt the Tall Lady’s feelings because I truly do like her so very much. But I want to be your little girl.”

The Pretty Lady had given one glance at the Tall Lady and flushed red. The Tall Lady, on the contrary, had grown very pale. The matron felt uncomfortable. Everybody knew that Miss Herbert and Mrs. Bond hadn’t spoken to each other for years, even if they were sisters and alone in the world except for each other.

Mrs. Bond turned to the matron. “I have come to ask permission to adopt this little girl,” she said.

“Oh, I’m very sorry,” stammered the matron, “but Miss Herbert has just asked for her, and I have consented.”

Charlotte gave a great gulp of disappointment, but the Pretty Lady suddenly wheeled around to face the Tall Lady, with quivering lips and tearful eyes.

“Don’t take her from me, Alma,” she pleaded humbly. “She—she is so like my own baby and I’m so lonely. Any other child will suit you as well.”

“Not at all,” said the Tall Lady brusquely. “Not at all, Anna. No other child will suit me at all. And may I ask what you intend to keep her on? I know your salary is barely enough for yourself.”

“That is my concern,” said the Pretty Lady a little proudly.

“Humph!” The Tall Lady shrugged her shoulders. “Just as independent as ever, Anna, I see. Well, child, what do *you* say? Which of us will you come with? Remember, I have the cat on my side, and Anna can’t make half as good turnovers as I can. Remember all this, Charlotte.”

“Oh, I—I like you so much,” stammered Charlotte, “and I wish I could live with you both. But since I can’t, I must go with the Pretty Lady, because I promised, and because I loved her first.”

“And best?” queried the Tall Lady.

“And best,” admitted Charlotte, bound to be truthful, even at the risk of hurting the Tall Lady’s feelings. “But I *do* like you, too—next best. And you really don’t need me as much as she does, for you have your Very Handsome Cat and she hasn’t anything.”

“A cat no longer satisfies the aching void in my soul,” said the Tall Lady stubbornly. “Nothing will satisfy it but a little girl with mouse-coloured hair and freckles. No, Anna, I’ve got to have Charlotte. But I think that with her usual astuteness, she has already solved the problem for us by saying she’d like to live with us both. Why can’t she? You just come back home and we’ll let bygones be bygones. We both have something to forgive, but I was an obstinate old fool and I’ve known it for years, though I never confessed it to anybody but the cat.”

The Pretty Lady softened, trembled, smiled. She went right up to the Tall Lady and put her arms about her neck.

“Oh, I’ve wanted so much to be friends with you again,” she sobbed. “But I thought you would never relent—and—and—I’ve been so lonely—”

“There, there,” whispered the Tall Lady, “don’t cry under the matron’s eye. Wait till we get

home. I may have some crying to do myself then. Charlotte, go and get your hat and come right over with us. We can sign the necessary papers later on, but we must have you right off. The cat is waiting for you on the back porch, and there is a turnover cooling on the pantry window that is just your size.”

“I am so happy,” remarked Charlotte, “that I feel like crying myself.”

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