

Charlie Poole By Natalie Hyde

The first time I met Charlie Poole I was locking up after a long day pushing a needle through stiff dungarees until my fingers were bleeding. I would have rather worked on mending collars and cuffs on soft wool shirts, but my basket was full of pairs of overalls, ripped and worn from scrambling through the Yukon brush chasing the golden dream.

Charlie's hands were creased and leathery from months of swinging a pickaxe and shovel. Most of his face was hidden by a brown bushy beard, except for two piercing grey eyes that followed me as I locked the door. His clothes were matted and thread-bare. I cringed at the thought of how much work it would take to make them serviceable.

"I'm sorry, but I'm closed for today. I might have some time next week to take on more mending. Come back then."

He didn't move but I heard a crinkling and saw him fingering a paper in his right hand.

He cleared his throat before he spoke so softly that I resisted the urge to step closer to him to catch what he was saying.

"I heard you knows your letters."

My shoulders drooped a little. All I wanted was to go home, have a bowl of reheated stew and put plasters on my fingers. It was not the first time I regretted helping Bob Mackie write an account of his trouble with the Jones brothers from Skagway for the Northwest Mounted Police. I once asked Bob why he didn't just get one of the other stampedeers to write it for him, for I knew many could also read and write. They stood in long lineups when news spread that mail had arrived and they waited to see if there was

anything for them. But Bob said miners didn't have time to spare to be reading and writing for others when they barely had time to write their own letters. So, ever since it got around that I "knew my letters", as Charlie put it, I had been asked, no begged, by prospectors, porters and even dance hall girls to help them with their correspondence. For a fee, of course. But the bit of money I was offered often didn't make up for the bad taste in my mouth when I had to write stories of wealth and adventure which were such hogwash that I had to grit my teeth as my fountain pen scratched out the words.

But Charlie Poole didn't seem to be the type to fabricate stories.

"What is it you need, exactly?" I asked, tilting my head to one side.

He shuffled a bit closer and held out the paper.

"I wants to know what it says."

I sighed.

"I can pay," he added, holding out two bits.

I looked at the coins. A loaf of fresh bread would go well with my stew.

"Well, come in out of the cold, then." I unlocked the door and held it open for him to follow me back into the shop. I cleared away patches and scraps off an overturned crate for him to sit. I sat on my stool and relit the lantern. I held out my hand for the letter. His hand trembled slightly as he handed to me.

I smoothed out the paper and held it close to the lamp.

My dearest Charles, I read aloud. I could see that the letter was written in an elegant hand.

At long last we have had news of your safe arrival in Dawson. What horrible stories reached us of those perishing along the Chilkoot. How I anguished that the news

of your condition would be another such terrible tale. But joyous news came by way of Maynard Dillon on his return that he had seen you with his own eyes loading your supplies in Dawson for your trek into the gold fields. I just know luck will follow you and that you will make your fortune and send for me as you promised. Mother says the northern air would not be good for my lingering cold, but I know she is wrong and that it would be much healthier than Cabbagetown smog. Please send word when you are able of your success.

Faithfully yours, Beatrice

I finished reading and we sat in silence for a few moments. Then Charlie Poole stood up, held out the coins and took his letter in exchange. He nodded his head by way of thanks and left.

I didn't see Charlie again for several weeks although I looked for him whenever I walked through town. I heard from Mr. MacArthur in the General Store that Charlie was drift mining with Hooper's crew.

"Why on earth would he do that?" I asked, knowing how dangerous it was. The tunnels were normally dug in the winter where the cold would naturally sink down into the tunnels and refresh the air. But in summer, the warm air kept the fumes from escaping and chances of dying from carbon monoxide were high. Too many men went down into the tunnels and never came out.

Mr. MacArthur snorted. "Money. Hooper's paying them a fine wage."

I paid for my molasses and thread and left. I guess Charlie hadn't found his fortune on a claim after all.

It was a few days later when I was startled to see Charlie walk into my shop. His face was sunburnt and his hat frayed at the brim. Some of the deep lines in his hands were cracked and had been bleeding, but I could swear his mouth carried a slight smile under that great bushy beard.

“Good afternoon, Mr. Poole,” I said, putting down the bloomers I was mending.

He gave a small nod as a greeting. And then stood, looking at me as if unsure of what came next in a conversation.

“Can I help you with something?”

He nodded.

“Do you want help with your correspondence again?” I tried.

“Yup.”

“Do you have another letter?”

“Nope.”

Well, this wouldn't do at all. I didn't have all afternoon to play games.

“Well, what then?”

He shifted his weight from one foot to the other.

“I'd like you to pen me a letter,” he said finally.

This whole exercise in prying information out of him had already been so exhausting that I didn't have the energy to send him away until later when I wasn't so busy. I was going to have to get it over with.

“Very well. Take a seat.”

I rummaged around in my writing slope for a piece of paper and my fountain pen. I put pen to paper and waited. Charlie eyed me uncomfortably.

“Who would you like to correspond with?”

Charlie cleared his throat. “Miss Beatrice Lithfield,” he said softly.

“*My Dearest Beatrice,*” I said aloud, as I wrote.

If it were possible for a man that sunburnt to blush, I’m sure he was.

“Yes?” I encouraged him. “Go on.”

“I hope you’s good,” Charlie said, supplying me with the next line.

“*I hope this letter finds you well,*” I wrote, not saying it aloud this time so as not to embarrass him for his lack of gentility.

“I be wanting you to know, I’s making good money now.”

“*I am happy to report that my fortunes have turned for the better.*”

“And I’m sending for you as promised. The season is almost o’er . If y’er coming, make it quick and I’ll meet the boat as she comes in.”

“*I am hoping that you are still willing to come to the Klondike now that I am able to send for you. As the last steamship leaves St. Michael early August, it is imperative that you leave as soon as possible. Let me know if you can arrange passage. I am looking forward to your arrival.*”

I couldn’t make it too flowery and romantic, as I’m sure Beatrice knew what kind of the man she was coming to meet, and I didn’t want the letter to sound completely foreign.

“How would you like me to sign it?” I asked.

Charlie looked down and mumbled something.

“Pardon?”

“With love,” he said, almost in a whisper. Then he jumped up like he’d been stung on the backside, threw some coins and a crumpled paper on my work desk and bolted out the door.

“Lovingly yours, Charles.”

The crumpled paper turned out to be the envelope that had contained her letter and had her return address on it. I prepared a new envelope and headed to the postal station to buy a stamp with Charlie’s money and keep the rest for my troubles. I wondered if Beatrice would make the journey. It was a hard go for women up here. Especially for the type of woman who had attained such elegant handwriting.

The days passed quickly with an endless stack of clothes waiting to be darned, sewed, and altered. Every time the pile got down to a manageable size, a flurry of customers coming in to town to sell their gold or buy supplies, dropped off ripped and worn articles.

As August came and went, and whenever I could spare a thought, I wondered if Beatrice had made the steamship. As the morning frost grew thicker and stayed longer on the ground, many of the miners were making their way back to Dawson. I looked for Charlie but I guessed he was squeezing every last nickel out of his wages that he could. I hoped he would come into town soon. I had picked up a letter for him from Beatrice only the week before. The postman had let me have it when I explained that I was helping Charlie with his correspondence. I had been carrying it around in my apron pocket since then.

I remember the day I felt the ground tremble as if it were shuddering at an awful thought. I set my darning aside and looked out the front window of the shop. People had

stopped in the street as if trying to discern if the trembling had really happened, or they had imagined it. After a few moments, they began moving again and the town came back to life. I stood for a while longer looking out the window. Although I tried to shrug it off like everyone else, deep in the marrow of my bones I knew something wasn't right.

Around five in the evening, as I was cleaning up for the day, I heard a commotion out on the street. I jumped to the window again in time to see Doc Greenley running past it, not even having taken the time to button his coat. It blew behind him like a black shadow and I watched him round the corner out of sight.

I finished my locking up faster than usual and ran out into the street. I plucked at the sleeve of a man running even faster than I was.

“What happened,” I asked as he pulled from my grasp.

“Explosion on Hooper's claim. Two men killed, three more in bad shape.”

“Who? Who died and who is hurt?” I called after him as he began running again. He half turned and shrugged.

I followed at a clip hoping I wouldn't go over on my ankles in my heeled boots. A crowd had gathered in front of Doc Greenley's surgery. Four men were walking slowly toward the front door, carrying a stretcher with a body covered with a cloth.

“Who is that?” I asked the woman standing beside me.

“George Attison,” she said, slowly shaking her head.

“And the rest?”

“Don Lessing and Curly Jorgen,” she said.

“I heard there were injuries, too,” I said, hoping not to hear a name I knew.

She nodded. “Charlie Poole is in a real bad way. Doc is working on him now.”

A chill raced through me. It was like my body had known before my mind.

I pushed my way up to the door. Bob Mackie blocked my way.

“I need to see him.”

Bob shook his head. “Let Doc do his work.”

I backed down the steps, feeling for the letter in my apron pocket. I stayed there, in the dimming light, waiting.

Please let him know she wrote back, I thought to myself.

The crowd that thinned until I was the only one left. Then the door opened and a weary Doc Greenley came out. He started a little when he saw me standing there.

“Have you been here all this time?” he asked.

I nodded.

“Why?”

I held out the letter. “I have something for Charlie Poole.”

Doc lowered his eyes and exhaled a deep breath.

“You’d better come in then. He hasn’t long.”

I followed him inside and was immediately accosted by the smell of camphor and menthol. He opened the door to a small room at the back where poor Charlie lay in lantern light. As I moved past the doctor, he took my arm and whispered in my ear. “Do not upset him.”

I nodded.

I lowered myself slowly onto the bed but even that small movement of the mattress elicited a moan from Charlie.

“Charlie,” I called softly. “Charlie, can you hear me?”

His eyes fluttered open and he seemed to have trouble focusing. Then, I saw a flash of recognition.

“My letter?” he rasped. “Did it come?”

“Yes, Charlie. It came.”

His eyelids slid shut and then he forced them open again.

“Read it to me.”

I slit open the envelope with my nail and pulled out the paper. It wasn't the elegant handwriting this time. It was letterhead from the Muskoka Cottage Sanitorium. It read, *To Mr. Charlie Poole: Your letter was forwarded to this address by the family of Miss Beatrice Lithfield but I am sorry to inform you that Miss Beatrice lost her battle with consumption three days prior. Our deepest condolences. Sincerely, Henry Howard, director.*

I looked up at Charlie who was staring at me intently. Doc Greenley gave a little cough to remind me how fragile Charlie's condition was.

With a quiver in my voice, I began, holding the paper but looking at his face:

“My Dearest Charles, My happiest thought is...”

Charlie's eyes began to close.

“...that I will see you soon.”