

8-25-1966

Young Charlotte (or Fair Charlotte)

Ernest Lord

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Song: "Young Charlotte" (or "Fair Charlotte")

Singer: Ernest Lord

Town: Wells, ME

NA 66.10 CD 113 Track 4

Collector: Sandy Ives

Date: August 25, 1966

Roud: 260

Laws: G17

"Young Charlotte" is an old ballad native to North America. It has been a popular ballad all over North America from Newfoundland to South Dakota, and widely studied. It was so popular, in fact, that it inspired a doll called "Frozen Charlotte." Yet it still posed problems for folklorists. Phillips Barry first credited William Lorenzo Carter, a blind poet from Benson, Vermont, with the song in 1912. According to Barry, Carter wrote the song sometime before he left Vermont in 1834, and sang it wherever he went, which accounts for its widespread popularity. Then Barry made another discovery, and in 1937 retracted his earlier argument and attributed the song to Seba Smith, a well-known journalist. Smith published the song as a poem in 1843 in *The Rover*, a newspaper in Maine, as "A Corpse Going to a Ball." Despite a later comment by Kenneth Peacock that efforts to relate the song to an actual event have failed, according to Barry, Smith based the poem on an article in the February 8, 1840 edition of *New York Observer*. The article told of a woman who froze to death on a sleigh ride to a ball on December 31, 1839. This detail of New Year's Eve remains in some versions of the song. Even with Barry's retraction, folklorists still seem confused regarding the song's origin. Some still attribute song to Carter, while others credit Smith. Eloise Hubbard Linscott even credits both: Smith with writing the song and Carter with spreading it around the continent.

Whatever the origins of "Young Charlotte," the song exhibits a number of other interesting structural aspects. For one, "Charlotte" is a cautionary tale for young women, who are warned to listen to their parents' instructions and not to concern themselves with fashion over their health. Unlike many other traditional songs that contain a cautionary element, however, "Charlotte" does not include an explicit warning in the lyrics; instead, the message is implicit. This seems to have been an odd message for a song so popular among men working in the woods, but certainly these men had sweethearts and daughters of their own who could someday be in the same position as Charlotte. There is also considerable consistency in the format of the song as it spread throughout the region. In the versions collected in the northeastern United States and Maritime provinces of Canada, there is little variation in the structure of the song. Two related tunes exist in this area, one in Maine and New Brunswick and another in Nova Scotia and Newfoundland. A third, and similar, tune is also common everywhere the song is found – that of the ancient ballad "The False-Hearted Knight." Almost all of the versions collected in this region include the full story heard here, but some end after eleven verses. This omission is also common, though not dominant, throughout the rest of the continent. This consistency speaks not only to the strength of the oral tradition in this area, but also may point to the importance of the single figure who carried the song across half of the continent. William Carter may not have written the song, but he is as important in its history as Seba Smith, the man who likely did write it.

1.

Young Charlotte lived by the mountainside,

In a lonely, dreary spot;
No other dwelling for three miles round,
Except her father's cot.
And yet on many a winter's eve,
Young swains would gather there,
For her father kept a social abode,
And she was very fair

2.

Her father liked to see her dressed,
Just like some city belle;
She was the only child he had,
He loved his daughter well.
Her hair was black as raven's wings,
Her skin was lily fair,
And her teeth were like the pearls of white,
None with her could compare

3.

At a village just sixteen miles off,
There's a merry ball tonight,
Although the air is freezing cold,
Her heart is warm and light.
And there she watched with an anxious look,
'Til a well-known voice she heard,
And driving up to the cottage door,
Young Charles in his sleigh appeared.

4.

The mother to her daughter said,
"These blankets round you fold;
For it is a dreadful night, you know,
You'll catch your death of cold."
"Oh, no! Oh, no!" the darling cried,
She laughed like a gypsy queen,
"For to ride in blankets muffled up,
I never could be seen."

5.

"My silken cloak, it's quite enough –
You know it's lined throughout.
Besides I have a silk mantle,
To tie my face about."
The gloves and bonnet being on,
They jumped into the sleigh,
And away they did ride o'er the mountainside
And the hills so far away.

6.

There is music in the sounds of bells,
As over the hills they go;
What a creaking wake the runners make,
As they bite the frozen snow.
And away they then go silently,
'Til five cold miles were passed,
And Charles with these few frozen words,
The silence broke at last.

7.

"Such a night as this I never knew,
My lines I scarce can hold."
With a trembling voice young Charlotte cried,
"I am exceeding cold."
He cracked the whip, he urged his steed
Much faster than before,
Until at last five other cold miles,
In silence they rode o'er.

8.

"How very fast the freezing air
Is gathering on my brow."
With a trembling voice young Charlotte cried,
"I'm growing warmer now."
And away they did ride o'er the mountainside,
And through the pale star light,
Until the village inn they reached,
And the ballroom hove in sight.

9.

When they reached the inn, young Charles jumped out,
And gave his hand to her,
"Why sit you there like a monument,
And have no power to stir?"
He called her once, he called her twice,
She answered not a word;
He called all for her hand again,
But still she never stirred.

10.

He stripped the mantle off her brow,
And the pale stars on her shone,
And quickly into the lighted hall,
Her helpless form was born.
They tried all within their power,
Her life for to restore,
But Charlotte was a frozen corpse,

And is never to speak more.

11.

He threw himself down by her side,
And the bitter tears did flow,
He said, "My dear and intended bride,
You never more shall know."
He threw his arms around her neck,
He kissed her marble brow,
And his thoughts went back to the place where she said,
"I am growing warmer now."

12.

They bore her out into the sleigh,
And Charles with her rode home,
And when they reached the cottage door,
Oh, how her parents mourned!
They mourned the loss of their daughter dear,
And Charles mourned o'er her doom,
Until at last his heart did break,
Now they both slumber in one tomb.

Sources: Linscott, Eloise Hubbard. *Folk Songs of Old New England*. New York: MacMillan Co., 1939, 305-09; Gray, Ronald Palmer. *Songs and Ballads of the Maine Lumberjacks with Other Songs from Maine*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1924, 94-97; Peacock, Kenneth. *Songs of the Newfoundland Outports*. Volume 3. Ottawa: National Museum of Man, 1965, 735-37; Creighton, Helen. *Songs and Ballads from Nova Scotia*. New York: Dover Publications, 1966, 328-31; Creighton, Helen. *Folksongs from Southern New Brunswick*. Ottawa: National Museum of Man, 1971, 141-42; Laws, G. Malcolm. *Native American Balladry*. Philadelphia: The American Folklore Society, 1964, 221 (G17); and Barry, Phillips, "William Carter, the Bensontown Homer." *Journal of American Folklore* 25, 156-68.