

# *Chronicles of Brunonia*

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## Charlotte Perkins Gilman: Letters to Martha

Abigail Rabinowitz

Starting in 1878, teenage friends on the East Side of Providence become inseparable, then go their separate ways when Martha weds. But even as Charlotte gains fame as the writer of *The Yellow Wallpaper* and as an activist for women's rights, she never forgets Martha.

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Written in partial fulfillment of requirements for E. Taylor's EL18 or 118:

"Tales of the Real World" in the Nonfiction Writing Program, Department of English, Brown University.

In January 1890, after two and a half years of depression and mental illness, Charlotte Perkins Stetson began to keep her journal again. Basking in the "steady windless weather" of Pasadena and the support of her friend Grace Channing, Charlotte slowly regained her strength, ambition, and ability to write. Concentrating on a new life on a new coast, her first brief entries express each day's essential details. On January 20, she says only "Began writing with Grace...". Charlotte does not record that on that clear, sun-shot Californian day, her thoughts turned once more to frigid New England and a friend from a former life.

Despite her exhaustion, Charlotte gathered up a pile of stationery and began to write in a refined version of her usual scrawl. "Dear Martha", she wrote, "You knew and loved me once. You do not know me now, and I am not sure that you would love me if you did... I have grown and changed wildly, darkly, strangely, beyond a mother's recognition, beyond my own."

Perhaps here Charlotte paused, raised her head, and, contemplating her moonlit grove of orange trees, pondered Martha's reaction to her bold statements. Although these words were painful, Charlotte would not soften them for the sake of her gentle, distant friend. Bound still by a pact of "mutual understanding" nine years old, Charlotte owed Martha complete honesty in "word and deed". Nine years ago, before courtship, marriage, and childbirth, Mrs. Charles Lane of Hingham Massachusetts was simply Martha Luther and Charlotte's dearest friend.

Their friendship began in 1878 when Charlotte was seventeen and Martha was sixteen. Both girls lived on the East Side of Providence: Charlotte on

Manning Street and Martha on Arnold. They shared a love of reading, a desire to write, and had experienced a similar tragedy: the loss of a father. Martha's father, John Luther, died when she was fourteen. During Charlotte's childhood, her parents' separation reduced her father to a mere correspondent and occasional provider. Charlotte's numerous letters, diaries, and autobiography characterize her own mother as overly strict, disapproving, and physically distant. In her autobiography, *The Living of Charlotte Perkins Gilman*, Charlotte wrote that, denied affection from her mother as a child and adolescent, Martha became one of her "first memories of loving any one".

At seventeen, athletic and energetic Charlotte roamed the streets and hills of Providence. One day she would attend a class at the Rhode Island School of Design, the next she would stride down the hill to browse through the shops, or go for a rousing, giddy carriage ride in Roger Williams Park with a pack of friends. She would relish the brisk winds that freed the dark frizzy waves of hair at her temples and that raised color in her pale cheeks.

As their friendship strengthened over the years, Martha joined Charlotte on various excursions and long, aimless rambles. They would giggle and gossip, discuss books and stories, and speak absurd French: *Ma tante a un feuteuil violet. Quelle est la couleur du poisson de ton oncle.* (My aunt has a violet chair. What is the color of your uncle's fish?) Aided by their study of French and German, Charlotte and Martha created pet names for each other - *Chere amie*, *Petit canard*, *Engel*. In conversation, Charlotte's narrow face with the long jaw and serious dark eyes under straight eyebrows became animated with spirit and affection. Turning to Martha, or "Marfa" as she liked to say, Charlotte saw a soft

pretty girl with glossy hair and large grey eyes. Glorifying in their youth and respective beauties, Charlotte and Martha walked endlessly, clasping hands and swinging arms, full skirts billowing out behind them.

According to her diary entries of 1880 and 1881, Charlotte saw Martha nearly every day, if only for a spare hour. They served each other tea, shared new books and sewing techniques, and often conversed and played whist with their mutual friends, Brown students Sam and Jim Simmons.

In the spring of 1881, Charlotte and Martha decided to seal their friendship with a "compact of mutual understanding", faithfully promising that "neither would ever 'put on' any pretence of feeling, and never have the slightest falsehood or deceit". In her diary entry, Charlotte wrote that they bought gold-latticed red bracelets "to be worn as a badge, an ornament, a bond of union". In her autobiography, Charlotte describes their agreement as her "first deep personal happiness".

This happiness was interrupted in the summer when Martha left with her mother to vacation on the shores of New Hampshire. Charlotte, working as a designer of greeting cards, could not afford to join them. On the bright side, their separation spurred a period of intense correspondence. Charlotte wrote to Martha almost every day, scrawling out eight, twelve, and twenty page letters. Martha apparently wrote almost as frequently, although, unfortunately, her letters have not survived.

Charlotte often began her letters late at night, still elated from a social outing or thoughtful from an intense conversation with Sam. She liked to sit in her window and breathe in the cooled air, and several times she strained her eyes

and wrote by moonlight alone. While her mother and aunt slept, Charlotte's mind was alight with thousands of ideas and her pen raced along her creamy stationery. Page after page filled with exhaustive descriptions of her daily activities, tidbits of gossip, philosophical musings, tongue-in-cheek baby talk directed at Martha, and explorations of her own soul.

On July 27, she opened her letter with a lengthy discussion of her friendship with Jim Simmons, finally concluding that she had begun to outgrow him intellectually and emotionally. After six pages, Charlotte interrupted her own musings with a light, satirical comment addressed directly to Martha: "What say you to this tirade? Don't you think I am getting quite sage for one so young?" Remembering her duties as a correspondent, Charlotte went on to inform Martha of the latest happenings in their social sphere. On July 25, Charlotte, Cassie, Richard, and Robert went for a hike and spent a sunny afternoon chatting under the large oaks of Roger Williams Park. The next day Charlotte "went downtown, shopped a bit, rode home, called on Miss Manchester, took a bit of supper, and walked down red bridge and up Pitirino eating bread and butter, cake & blackberries". Deprived of Martha's actual presence, Charlotte continually attempted to cram two days of thoughts, activities, and personal revelations into one slender envelope.

As Martha relished the fresh, salt-laden air of New Hampshire and enjoyed her "luxurious laziness," Charlotte worked hard. Each day she painted greeting cards, gilded ornate letters and agonized over the tiny faces of rosy cherubs. In her August 8th letter to Martha, she proudly stated that "Perkins & Co. Designers" had attained a \$373 profit. Fervently committed to self-

improvement, Charlotte exercised frequently, read Emerson, planned to learn Latin, and tried to keep her fingernails clean. Charlotte admitted that one purpose of her extensive correspondence with Martha was to examine her own intellectual and emotional progress and to uncover her goals for the future. "I am writing to you half from personal love and half because I must talk..."

Greatly ambitious, Charlotte harbored high hopes for her yet-undefined career. In one moment of elation, she declared "when I see the future... Martha, as I am feeling now, I wouldn't change with Shakespeare!"

But, before she tackled worldly greatness, Charlotte believed that she had to attain greatness within herself. In her letter of July 29th, 1881, Charlotte wrote that she wanted "to be the sort of woman, handsome, self-poised, well-read, keen-sighted, refreshing, whom men will delight to talk with." Charlotte's drive towards this ideal, aimed not at romance but at intellectual and social equality, resounds through her correspondence: "I've dropped the heart business, once and for all, it never was as strong as my head and the sooner I squelch it altogether the more firmly I shall progress." In order to be a strong woman and "take the broad road of individuality apart from sex", Charlotte concluded that she must dispose of certain aspects of womanhood. "I have decided. I am not domestic and I don't want to be a mother."

Although Charlotte shared some of her goals with Sam, Martha alone received her free, unadulterated thoughts and unfailingly provided the "loving toleration" that Charlotte required. Bold and unconventional, Charlotte's resolutions would have shocked most of her contemporaries. Embedded in detailed descriptions of shopping expeditions, raucous boating parties, and

complaints about dishwashing are tantalizing glimpses of the feminist to come.

"I am really getting glad not to marry. I should rage as I do now at confinement and steady work... If I let that business alone and go in my own way, what I gain in individual strength and development of personal power of character, myself as self, you know, not merely as a woman, or that useful animal a wife and mother, will I think make up, and more than make up in usefulness and affect for the other happiness that part of me would so enjoy."

How did Martha receive Charlotte's bold new ideas? Certainly, Martha had been privy to the gradual evolution of Charlotte's personal philosophy. On those long, rainy afternoons over cups of steaming tea, they talked for hours, perhaps debating the role of women in society and in the home. Eyes blazing, Charlotte asserted that women ought to be financially independent; she cursed housework and questioned the value of marriage. Crumbling cake between her fingers, Martha protested, "But I want to be both wife and mother. I want to be loved and taken care of and helped. "

"And to, in turn, care for your husband's socks?" Charlotte might reply. Both laughing now, they would go on to discuss the merits of their respective suitors. Charlotte and Martha debated and speculated to pass the time, and, at twenty and twenty-one years of age, no idea or philosophy was set in stone.

In the brilliant sunlight and salty breezes of the New Hampshire shore, Martha read Charlotte's letters once, twice. With the screaming of gulls and pounding of waves, her eyes inevitably rose from the delicate paper to the beach before her. Men and women strolled together, arm in arm, and children ran throwing sand in the shallow surf. Martha knew without doubt that she would

marry, and probably assumed that for all of her independent talk, Charlotte would marry too.

On August 15, Charlotte worried that her "letters must strike in queerly amongst all [of Martha's] merry-making". As Martha socialized and flirted, Charlotte dedicated her nights to imagining her future, setting intellectual goals, and letter writing. Although she continued to make social calls and to see her wide circle of friends, her thoughts focused increasingly on Martha.

Martha figured prominently in Charlotte's hazy visions of the future. In her July 24 letter, Charlotte proclaimed that Martha's "manifold little dearnesses" would make up to her "for husband and children and all that I shall miss." Charlotte expressed her intensity of emotion for Martha humorously in loving names like "little kitten" and "my own little girl" and in more serious declarations of affection. On August 6th, Charlotte wrote "you are slowly dawning on me, I am gradually realizing what you are, and what you are to me ... You are my stay and support — my other self." On August 8th, Charlotte proclaimed "It is no longer friendship between us, it is love. Why, I feel it in me to be the friend of thousands, but you — "

From the perspective of 1999, it would be easy to categorize Charlotte's relationship with Martha as an example of lesbianism in Victorian times or to view it primarily as a prelude to her unsuccessful marriage and the feminist-utopian novels that she would write a few decades later. Yet, did Charlotte herself categorize the relationship as socially deviant? The answer, according to her letters, is yes and no. She believed that society probably would deem her unique friendship with Martha inappropriate. In her letter of July 24 Charlotte expressed



her gratitude for the "intrinsic perversity of character that led me to love you" and, a week later, exclaimed "What horrid stuff these letters would be for the Philistines! Lock 'em up, and some time we'll have a grand cremation". Yet, Charlotte believed that any societal disapprobation would originate from misunderstanding: "Why have we so confounded love with passion that it sounds to our century-tutored fears either wicked or absurd to name it between women?" Years later, in her autobiography, Charlotte wrote that their relationship "was love, but not sex... in our perfect concord there was no Freudian taint."

As she scribbled out letters to her distant friend, Charlotte concentrated not on future controversy but on the pure intensity of her affections. Her love was threatened not by society or an army of unborn scholars, but by a vacationing businessman, Charles A. Lane.

Over the course of her New Hampshire summer, Martha gradually grew enamored of Charles, or "Halicarnassus", as Charlotte called him. Martha wrote of him often and received a variety of replies from her jealous friend. While Charlotte was satisfied with Martha alone, she knew that Martha dreamed of marriage and motherhood. So, although Charlotte feared losing Martha, she encouraged her to "go ahead and enjoy [her]self heartily" and even asserted the benefits of "steady contact with a fresh, wholesome manly nature". Yet despite Charlotte's valiant attempts to hide her true feelings towards Charles, Martha apparently sensed her friend's disapproval and hostility. In her letter of July 29, Charlotte felt obliged to pacify Martha and remove any semblance of pressure: "I think you misunderstand me a trifle. I don't want you to be the same kind of humbug that I am... You are to be your own sweet lovely self, marry all you

please, and be loved and cared for to your heart's content."

Charlotte vacillated in her approach towards Martha's budding romance. On August 16th, she replied to a giddy, excited letter from Martha with words of caution and warning. "Suppose you love that man as I think you do- fear you will. Suppose he's cold and proud enough to suppress his own feelings forever. Well now is that sort of thing going to satisfy you?" Where Martha saw an honest, protective, and tender man, Charlotte perceived a stuffy, staid rival who could imprison her tender friend in a stifling marriage. She painted a dismal picture of the future to enlighten the love-struck Martha:

"It would be dreadful some twenty years hence to have you wishing that your heart had not carried you where you were no longer happy. To find the grand virtues that you worship dormant for lack of use, the clear and logical mind unnecessary at the breakfast table, and all that 'undiscovered country' lying in the distance dimmer, grander, and more unapproachable than ever. Rather a lonesome life for my kitten... A side of you likes a side of him, but oh! The others!"

After tearing her opponent to shreds and playing the prophet of doom, Charlotte added, rather insincerely: "I am so glad you are happy."

As Charlotte painted daily, called on friends, and walked the hills of Providence alone, Martha grew to love Charles. They walked together on the beach and shared a gently swaying hammock on cool September evenings. Charlotte continued to jest about "Halicarnassus" and tried to treat the romance lightly. "What if he was going to propose, that would have been even funnier," she wrote in response to Martha's description of a tender but vexing moment, "Just

open your big eyes and tell him you are spoke for by a female in Providence and can't marry just yet." Charlotte often refused to recognize the seriousness of the situation: " I have settled your business finally, you are to marry, of course, you would never be satisfied if you didn't and after a certain period of unmerited (his) happiness your young man is to drop off, die somehow, and lo! I will be all in all! Now isn't that a charming plan?"

As September wore on, Charlotte continued to relate the social events that marked each day, periodic conflicts with her mother and aunt, and descriptions of her work and personal progress. "I never knew before what it was to be busy every minute of a day. From the time I wake up at 5 to the time when I sit in my little chair just long enough to review the events of the day and crawl into my sheeted paradise, there is not a moment wasted... And I like it." In the middle of the month, Charlotte wrote irritably, "I have said full enough concerning your man, I think." She half-teasingly berated Martha for her long absence and entreated her, "Do come home to me, do!" And, on September 17th, Martha finally returned to Providence

Their intense correspondence ended and their friendship resumed with long walks, cozy afternoon teas, and free-ranging conversations. But, things had changed irrevocably. At first, Charlotte's brief diary entries reveal little of this transformation. Once again, almost every day there is mention of Martha "M. called" or "Call on Martha" or "Chat with Martha". Yet, "Mr. Lane" appears there too — an unwelcome interloper. When Charlotte walked into Martha's familiar parlor after a long day of teaching art classes, Mr. Lane might have possession of her preferred chair. When the three walked together, Mr. Lane would have

possession of her friend's arm. And even when Martha and Charlotte spent a solitary evening chatting on Charlotte's front steps, the name Mr. Lane would insidiously overtake their conversation.

And then, on November 1, Martha and Charles Lane became engaged. Martha rushed over to Charlotte's house, nearly tripping over the stoop in her excitement. Cheeks flushed, grey eyes luminous, fair hair curling and mussed by the rain — Charlotte must have found her more beautiful than ever. Her news, though hardly a surprise, pierced Charlotte with its finality. In her diary, Charlotte wrote "She hath a ring. I hath a pain." The grey, rainy weather persisted for several days, providing an appropriate atmosphere for Charlotte's despair. Although Martha loved her still, she loved dull and staid Charles A. Lane much more. On November 5th, Charlotte wrote bitterly, "Pleasant, to ring at the door where you've always been greeted with gladness; to be met with the smile that you value all others above — to see that smile flicker and vanish and change into sadness because she was met by your presence instead of her love!"

For the next several months, Charlotte buried herself in her work and tried to survive the loss of Martha. On New Years Eve, twenty-one year-old Charlotte looked back upon 1881, and deemed it a year of hard work and personal growth, and "a year in which I knew the sweetness of a perfect friendship, and have lost it forever."

1882 was a year of change for both Martha and Charlotte, and was perhaps the last of those long, idyllic "years of girlhood" that Charlotte had so relished. On January 12th, Charlotte met Charles Walter Stetson, a serious young painter

whom she later described as "quite the greatest man, near my own age, that I had ever known". Walter immediately became infatuated with her dark-eyed beauty and intelligence, and rashly proposed marriage a mere seventeen days later. Unsurprisingly, the independent-minded Charlotte declined. However, Walter continued his pursuit and, despite her bold resolutions to forgo marriage and motherhood, Charlotte granted him permission to see her for a year. Charlotte, who had repeatedly written to Martha of her intentions to remain a spinster forever and who had mocked Martha's suitor, became involved in a romance of her own. By May of 1883, Charlotte and Walter were engaged.

Why did Charlotte surrender her desire for independence to the prospect of marriage with Walter Stetson? In her autobiography, Charlotte described their prolonged courtship as a period of "conflicting emotions". On the one, Charlotte continued to believe that for her, marriage "was not right" and that her ambitions demanded that she "forgo the more intimate personal happiness for complete devotion to [her] work." Yet, over the winter of 1882, Charlotte and Walter had developed an intimate friendship based on their mutual passion for art, literature, long walks, and poetry. And, "there was the natural force of sex-attraction between two young lonely people." Charlotte was indeed lonely, and Walter's flattering attentions lessened the pain of Martha's defection. As Charlotte wrote to Walter early in their courtship, "You give me rich new happiness which bids fair to make up for the dear love, which I have lost".

Throughout the winter, spring, and early summer of 1882, Charlotte saw Martha rather infrequently — perhaps once a week. Martha, absorbed with marriage plans and social engagements with Charles Lane, had little time and

emotional energy left over for her best friend. Charlotte, unable to bear the knowledge that Martha would soon belong to another, felt compelled to create a protective distance in their friendship.

This period of alienation ended, or eased, in the middle of August when Martha joined Charlotte for a brief vacation on Martha's Vineyard. In her diary entry of August 12th, Charlotte wrote that she was "so glad" to see her. For a few days, beachside walks, amusing word-games, and general loafing resurrected their friendship. This newfound closeness lasted well into their return to Providence. Even with the last-minute sewing, baking, and buying that preceded her October wedding, Martha found time to accompany Charlotte to her numerous portrait-sittings in Walter Stetson's studio. Walking there with Martha, Charlotte once again confided her plans for the future — only this time they focussed on her dream of a shared life with Walter. And then, all too soon, Martha's own future plans were dreams no longer: On October 5, 1882, surrounded by her family and friends, Martha Luther married and became Mrs. Charles A. Lane.

After their wedding, Charles and Martha Lane moved to Hingham, Massachusetts — Charles' hometown. As Martha arranged furniture, hemmed curtains, and enjoyed the first blissful months of her marriage, Charlotte's life went on much as it had before. She continued to live with her mother, teach art classes, read, go to the gym, and, of course, see Walter. Soon after a five-week long separation spurred by a quarrel over Whitman's *Leaves of Grass* (Walter thought that Charlotte should not read it due to its sexual undertones), the reconciled pair became engaged. In June, Charlotte paid a brief visit to a very-

pregnant Martha in Hingham. Charlotte's diary, ever concise, reveals little of her feelings regarding this visit. Beyond terse mentions of events such as "supper" and "talk", Charlotte noted only that she was "glad" to see her "kind & thoughtful" friend.

In early August, Charlotte, who had taken a temporary position as governess with the Jackson family, left Providence with her employers for Maine. Although Charlotte was at first thrilled with her new job and her young charge, she gradually grew frustrated with the "despicable boy" and his mother. Stranded in the countryside, she wrote very frequently to Walter and somehow managed to squeeze in time for a letter to Martha. In her letter of September 6, 1883, Charlotte praised Chester, Martha's chubby new baby, and complained about her difficulties with Mrs. Jackson. Once again, Charlotte asked Martha to play the role of confidante and friend: "Do cuddle me a little. I don't want to tell Walter all about it because it would make him angry — furious, and does little good. But I want you to get 'real mad' at all these folks who have not been good to your best friend." Yet, while Charlotte affirmed their friendship, she stressed that Walter had supplanted Martha as the primary love of her life: "I'm glad you want to see me pussy, and so do I want to see you. But there is a man in Providence whom I would not stay away from for an extra minute even to see you... I wish I was married. I want Walter."

Nearly eight months later, her wish was granted: on the evening of May 2, 1884, Charlotte married Walter Stetson. At first, she attacked household chores with a new enthusiasm, contentedly washing dishes and sweeping floors while Walter read her poetry. She experimented with cooking, creating "a most

delectable dinner of veal" one day and "a most delectable dinner, soup, hash, and potato" a week later. Yet, as the summer wore on, housework regained its usual tediousness. In August, Charlotte learned that she was pregnant and, although she knew that she should be happy, she began to experience a deepening, all-consuming depression.

In her autobiography, Charlotte wrote that, despite Walter's patience and tender care, "something was going wrong from the first. The steady cheerfulness, the strong tireless spirit sank away. A sort of gray fog drifted across my mind, a cloud that grew and darkened." On March 23, 1885, their daughter Katherine was born. Charlotte, weak from her pregnancy, hired a nurse for a month. After her contract ran out, Charlotte tried to care for young Katherine alone and learned, to her horror, that she simply could not. "We sent for my mother, and that baby-worshipping grandmother came to take care of the darling, I being incapable of doing that — or anything else, a mental wreck."

By the end of the summer, Charlotte felt overcome by nervous hysteria and the feeling that she was trapped in her life and marriage. In her diary entry of August 30th, Charlotte noted that she wrote a letter to Martha wherein she told her "grief" and hopelessness as "strongly" as she could (unfortunately, the letter has not survived). On September 5th, she recorded her dissatisfaction with Martha's response: "I wrote her my heart and she answers with not otherwise head." No one, not Walter, her mother, or even Martha, seemed to comprehend the seriousness of her mental suffering and utter devastation.

In early October, Walter and Charlotte agreed that travel might cure her mysterious depression, and so, leaving little Kate in the care of her mother, she



headed west. After visiting her brother in Utah and her father in San Francisco, Charlotte spent the winter in Pasadena with her old friend Grace Channing and her gracious, welcoming family. On January 4, 1886, Charlotte finally felt able to write a brief letter to Martha. Charlotte began by addressing the issue of her poor correspondence: "The mere writing — is still an effort, and then my mental condition has made me oblivious of even my best friends." She described the green beauty of California, the kindness of the Channing family, and her modest recovery: "I gain rapidly, was actually able to paint a little for X-mas — three cards."

Charlotte's next letter to Martha, written in March, displayed more convincing signs of mental health. She wrote enthusiastically about a short play that she had co-authored with Grace and gloated that her little Kate soon would be old enough to talk. Yet, Charlotte concluded on an ambivalent note: "Shall start for home in a week or two more. I look forward with both joy and dread. Joy to see my darlings again, and dread of further illness under family cares." As it turned out, Charlotte's fears were completely and tragically justified.

Over the next year, Charlotte's happiest moments occurred outside of her home — that suffocating sphere of housework and childcare. She began to write articles for the *Women's Journal*, attended her first Women's Suffrage Convention, and made friends with women activists. However, financial troubles, marital tensions, and her growing conviction that she was an inadequate mother conspired to defeat her newfound enthusiasms. In the winter of 1887, Kate's constant illnesses and Charlotte's own exhaustion fueled another dangerous lapse into depression. By spring, Charlotte was desperate for outside help and

guidance. In her diary entry of April 19th, Charlotte wrote that she must "write an account of myself for the doctor." This was to be her last diary entry for two-and-a-half years. Upon the recommendation of friends and family, she departed the next day to seek treatment from Dr. S. Weir Mitchell, a Philadelphia doctor widely renowned for his "rest cure".

Twenty-six-year-old Charlotte spent an agonizing month in Philadelphia under the care of Dr. Mitchell. He informed her that her illness was "hysteria", and confined her to bed without reading material or even a sketchpad. Upon her departure, he instructed her to "Live as domestic a life as possible. Have your child with you all the time. Lie down for an hour after each meal. Have but two hours' intellectual life each day. And never touch pen, brush or pencil for as long as you live." For extroverted, intelligent, ambitious, and decidedly undomestic Charlotte, his prescription provided only a sure path to insanity. After a few months of unbearable "mental agony" for Charlotte and heartbreak for Walter, the couple decided to divorce.

Due to financial problems, Charlotte had to remain in Providence for another year. Finally, with the help of her good friend Grace Channing, Charlotte left for Pasadena California in the fall of 1888 with Kate, ten dollars, and tentative hopes for the future.

During these tumultuous years in Charlotte's life, Martha apparently lived a quiet, conventional, and happily married existence. In the winter of 1886, she had given birth to a girl, Margaret. Martha focussed her energy upon her children and husband, and, at least from Charlotte's perspective, proved herself the ideal wife and mother. Yet, Martha was not completely content. She was twenty-seven,

and youth with its carefree adventures and gleaming dreams of literary success seemed like it had happened alarmingly long ago. Martha missed Charlotte and longed to recapture the friendship that had blessed the last years of her "girlhood". It was Martha, not Charlotte, who began writing letters again in February of 1889.

Charlotte, deeply engaged in her new life in California and in the all-consuming process of recovery, could barely summon the energy to put pen to paper. She explained to Martha that, despite her "gain in the winter and summer here", the act of writing remained nearly impossible. Still, Charlotte wrote for Martha's sake. Somehow, despite her successful marriage, Martha was lonely and needed her again. Emotionally exhausted and already involved in rebuilding one relationship — Walter had moved to Pasadena for a second try at their marriage — Charlotte, once so generous with her love for Martha, could offer but little. She allowed that the "time might yet come when we should again be much to each other". But Charlotte seemed resigned that, for the foreseeable future, Martha was to be not a friend but a mere memory buried in the wreckage of a painful past. She could not fully explain this decision to Martha for nearly another year.

On January 20, 1890, as she gazed out upon her moonlit grove of oranges and listened for the sound of Kate's breathing in the next room, Charlotte remembered her friendship with Martha. She reflected upon her former passion for Martha, the pain of Martha's engagement to Charles, and the twisted, tormented route her own life had taken since the idyllic summer of 1881. I am a different person from the girl whom Martha loved, she thought, I am a different

person from the girl who loved Martha. I must somehow explain...She bent her head to half-covered sheet of stationery before her and continued to write, "I have grown wildly, darkly, strangely, beyond a mother's recognition, beyond my own. The girl you knew, the woman you loved died some years past... a distance incalculable, an impassible gulf lies between me and your old friend. We may be friends again, new ones, but I do not dare to hope it."

Then, the loss hit her with an unexpected blow. Rereading her own words, she felt again the ancient loss of young Martha to Mr. Lane, and suddenly feared the prospect of losing the familiar handwriting and gentle voice that emerged from a travel-stained envelope six times a year. Would she inflict that pain, that rejection, that awful sensation of loneliness upon Martha? Or would she maintain a façade of friendship even if no true friendship existed between them? Charlotte steeled herself to tell the truth.

"This I will say of my love for you. Through the first year or two of my marriage, in every depth of pain and loss and loneliness, yours was the name my heart cried — not his. I loved you better than any one, in those days when I had a heart to loved and ache. And now always in the future of wealth and fame which I dangled before my own eyes as an incentive to life and effort, I always think first of you as a sort of haven.

Grace Channing saved what there is left of me... and I love her, I think, as well as any one on earth. But it is different with you. With you I was happy, and I think that is a word I have forgotten. More years with you, that blessed summer of 81 — I doubt that most people have more happiness in all their lives as I did then. I do not forget, but neither do I remember because it hurts."

Here Charlotte reinforced the reality of her transformation and stressed that Martha did not know her anymore. "You cannot understand," she wrote, "Unless we could live together again, or indeed if I wrote daily and vitalized each letter with my present self, we can come to no contact whatever."

Yet, Charlotte could not, in the end, leave Martha without the precious glimmer of hope: "But time may turn the wheel to our old gladness again... or may turn it to something better. Can there be anything better? Different let me say. You ask me to 'reassure you'. This is but sad reply, and yet I can do no better."

Charlotte paused again. She had written a more than fair reply to Martha, and yet her letter felt incomplete. So, drawing a line beneath what she had written so far, she continued to write. Charlotte wrote about her work, complimented the photograph of Chester, commiserated with Martha about her case of the flu, and congratulated her on her amateur play. She fell into the easy rhythm of pen and paper, telling Martha that Walter had finally gone back east, hinting that their marriage was finally over. She critiqued the works of Stevenson, described her own social successes in Pasadena, and proclaimed with joyful relief that she was "getting very fond of Kate." Charlotte wrote still more.

In the end, when Charlotte folded the pile of paper and shoved it into its thin envelope, it possessed a thick, satisfying weight reminiscent of the letters she had scrawled nearly ten years earlier. She mailed it the next day, and Martha wrote back, and so she wrote again. They exchanged letters once or twice a month, not daily as they had as young girls, but Charlotte's language did regain its old ease and familiarity. Unfortunately, Charlotte's letters to Martha after

1890 have been lost. Their relationship after 1890 is recorded only by brief entries in Charlotte's journals and encapsulated by a single phrase in Charlotte's autobiography: "As grandmothers [we] are still friends."

In 1890, Charlotte wrote her most famous piece of short fiction, "The Yellow Wallpaper", which related the story of a troubled wife whose husband's attempt to inflict the "rest cure" after the birth of her child eventually drives her insane. And, in 1890, Charlotte began her celebrated career as an educator and lecturer on women's issues. Over the years, Charlotte Perkins Gilman's stories, poems, and essays found their way into magazines across the country and she published multiple books expounding upon her innovative social theories. True to her youthful ambitions, Charlotte Perkins Gilman became a celebrated leader of the struggle for women's rights.

After the publication of one of her best-known works, *Women and Economics*, in 1898, Charlotte embarked upon a series of highly successful lectures. When she was in the Boston area, she made a quick side trip to Hingham, a town she had not seen for some time. In her diary entry of October 3, 1899, Charlotte wrote in her usual abbreviated style, "Go to Martha Lane's. Glad to see me."