

The True Confessions of Charlotte Doyle

by Avi

Readers theatre excerpt. 13 voices.

VOICE 1 (CHARLOTTE)

Not every thirteen-year-old girl is accused of murder, brought to trial, and found guilty. But I was just such a girl, and my story is worth relating even if it did happen years ago.

I can recall the first time I stepped upon the deck of the *Seahawk*.

VOICE 2 (VOICE)

The *Seahawk* was a brig, a two-masted ship, seven hundred tons in weight. The one unique aspect of her was a carved figurehead of a pale white seahawk beneath the bowsprit. Its wings were thrust back against the bow; its head extended forward, beak wide open, red tongue protruding as if screaming rather like an angry, avenging angel.

VOICE 3 (MR. GRUMMAGE)

Now Miss Doyle, since both Captain Jaggery and the first mate are ashore. May I present the second mate, Mr. Keetch.

VOICE 4 (MR. KEETCH)

Miss Doyle, forgive me but I've no choice but to stand in the captain's place. And it's my strong opinion, miss, that you should take another ship for your passage to America.

VOICE 3 (GRUMMAGE)

And I can allow of no such thing.

VOICE 1 (CHARLOTTE)

But Mr. Grummage, I'm sure my father would not want me to be traveling without a chaperone.

VOICE 3 (GRUMMAGE)

Miss Doyle, my orders were clear and allow for no other construction. I met you. I brought you here. I had you placed under the protection of this man, who fulfilled his obligation by signing a receipt for you. Therefore, Miss Doyle, nothing remains save to wish you a most pleasant journey to America.

VOICE 1 (CHARLOTTE)

But Mr. Grummage –

VOICE 4 (MR. KEETCH)

Begging your pardon, Miss Doyle. There's nothing to be done now, is there? I'd best show you your cabin.

VOICE 1 (CHARLOTTE)

My trunk ...

VOICE 4 (MR. KEETCH)

Not to worry, miss. We'll fetch it for you.

VOICE 1 (CHARLOTTE)

Very well. Please lead me.

VOICE 5 (VOICE)

The cabin was but six feet in length. Four feet wide. Four and a half feet high. Charlotte, though none too tall, could only stoop to see in.

VOICE 4 (MR. KEETCH)

Regular passengers pay a whole four pounds for this, miss.

VOICE 1 (CHARLOTTE)

I forced myself into the cabin.

VOICE 6 (VOICE)

Against the opposite wall, she could make out a narrow shelf. When she noticed something that looked like a pillow and a blanket, she realized it was meant to be a bed. Then, when Mr. Keetch held up the light she saw something crawl on it.

VOICE 1 (CHARLOTTE)

What's that?!

VOICE 4 (MR. KEETCH)

Roach, Miss. Every ship has 'em.

VOICE 6 (VOICE)

As for the rest of the furnishings, there were none save a small built-in chest in the bulkhead wall, the door of which dropped down and served as a desktop. There was nothing else.

VOICE 7 (VOICE)

No porthole.

VOICE 8 (VOICE)

No chair.

VOICE 9

Not so much as a single piece of polite ornamentation.

VOICE 10

It was ugly, unnatural, and as Charlotte stooped there, impossible.

VOICE 1 (CHARLOTTE)

In a panic I turned toward Mr. Keetch, wanting to utter some new protest. Alas – he had gone – and had shut the door behind him as though to close the spring on a trap.

VOICE 2 (VOICE)

Within moments there was a knock on the door.

VOICE 1 (CHARLOTTE)

Come in!

VOICE 11 (BARLOW)

I'm Mr. Barlow, Miss. I've got your trunk. But it's too big, isn't it?

VOICE 1 (CHARLOTTE)

I ... I think so.

VOICE 11 (BARLOW)

Best put it in top cargo. Right bellow. You can always fetch things there, Miss.

VOICE 1 (CHARLOTTE)

Yes, I suppose.

VOICE 11 (BARLOW)

Very good miss. But begging your pardon, Miss. It's not my business or place to tell you, miss, some of the others here, Jack Tars like myself, have deputized me to say that you should not be on this ship. Not alone as you are. Not this ship. Not this voyage, miss.

VOICE 1 (CHARLOTTE)

What do you mean? Why would they say that?

VOICE 11 (BARLOW)

You're being here will lead to no good, miss. No good at all. You'd be better off far from the Seahawk.

VOICE 1 (CHARLOTTE)

Mr. Barlow, my father has arranged this.

VOICE 11 (BARLOW)

Very good, miss. I've but done my duty, which is what I was deputized to do.

VOICE 1 (CHARLOTTE)

I shut my door, but by doing so I made the space completely dark, so I quickly moved to keep it ajar. Then suddenly I realized I must relieve myself. But where was I to go? I had not the slightest idea!

VOICE 5 (VOICE)

If you will recollect that during Charlotte's whole life she had never once – not for a moment – been without the support, the guidance, the protection of her elders, you will accept my words as being without exaggeration when I tell you that at that moment Charlotte was certain she had been placed in her coffin. She burst into tears of vexation, crying with fear

VOICE 6 (Voice)

rage

VOICE 7 (Voice)

and humiliation.

VOICE 1 (CHARLOTTE)

I was still crying, when yet another knock came upon my cabin door. I turned about to see an old black man.

VOICE 2 (VOICE)

In the light of the little lantern he was carrying, he looked like the very imp of death in search of souls.

VOICE 1 (Charlotte)

Yes?

VOICE 12 (ZACHARIAH)

Zachariah at your service, Miss Doyle. And wondering if you would not like a bit of tea. I have my own special store and I'm prepared to offer some.

VOICE 1 (CHARLOTTE)

That's very kind of you. Could you bring it here?

VOICE 12 (ZACHARIAH)

If Miss Doyle desires tea – captain's orders – she must come to the galley.

VOICE 1 (CHARLOTTE)

Galley?

VOICE 12 (ZACHARIAH)

Kitchen to you, miss.

VOICE 1 (CHARLOTTE)

Who are you?

VOICE 12 (ZACHARIAH)

Zachariah, miss. Cook, surgeon, carpenter and preacher to man and ship. And all those things to you, too, miss, in that order if comes the doleful need. Now then, shall you have tea?

VOICE 1 (CHARLOTTE)

Very well. Would you lead me to this ... galley.

VOICE 12 (ZACHARIAH)

Most assuredly.

VOICE 6 (VOICE)

Zachariah led Charlotte down a flight of steps into what appeared a fairly large area. In the dimness she could make out piles of sails, as well as extra rigging, all chaotic and unspeakably filthy.

VOICE 5 (VOICE)

Then off to one side, she saw a small room. The old man went to it, started to entre, but paused and pointed to a small adjacent door she had not noticed.

VOICE 12 (ZACHARIAH)

The head, miss.

VOICE 1 (CHARLOTTE)

The *what*?

VOICE 12 (ZACHARIAH)

Privy, miss.

VOICE 1 (CHARLOTTE)

My cheeks burned. Even so, never have I felt so grateful so secretly. Without a word I rushed to use it. In moments I returned and Zachariah let me into the galley.

VOICE 8 (VOICE)

It was a small kitchen complete with cabinets, wood stove, even a table and a little stool. The space, though small, had considerable neatness. Knives placed just so. An equal number of spoons and forks.

VOICE 1 (CHARLOTTE)

Zachariah offered me some tea.

VOICE 12 (ZACHARIAH)

It may well be that Miss Doyle will have use for a friend. I can assure you, Zachariah can be a fine friend.

VOICE 1 (CHARLOTTE)

And I can assure you that the Captain will have made arrangements for my social needs.

VOICE 12 (ZACHARIAH)

Ah, but you and I have much in common.

VOICE 1 (CHARLOTTE)

I don't think so.

VOICE 12 (ZACHARIAH)

But we do. Miss Doyle is so young. I am so old. And you, the sole girl, and I, the one black, are special on this ship. In short, we begin with things in common enough to begin a friendship.

VOICE 1 (CHARLOTTE)

I don't need a friend.

VOICE 12 (ZACHARIAH)

One always needs a final friend.

VOICE 1 (CHARLOTTE)

Final friend?

VOICE 12 (ZACHARIAH)

Someone to sew the hammock.

VOICE 1 (CHARLOTTE)

I don't understand you.

VOICE 12 (ZACHARIAH)

When a sailor dies on voyage, Miss, he goes to his resting place in the sea with his hammock sewn about him by a friend.

VOICE 2 (VOICE)

Charlotte swallowed her tea in haste handed the cup back and made a move to go.

VOICE 12 (ZACHARIAH)

Miss Doyle, please, I have something else to offer.

VOICE 1 (CHARLOTTE)

No more tea, thank you.

VOICE 12 (ZACHARIAH)

No, Miss, it is this.

VOICE 5 (VOICE)

He held out a knife.

VOICE 1 (CHARLOTTE)

(Screams)

VOICE 12 (ZACHARIAH)

No, no, Miss Doyle. Don't misunderstand! I only wish to give you the knife as protection – in case you need it. Miss Doyle doesn't know what might happen.

VOICE 1 (CHARLOTTE)

But I know nothing about knives.

VOICE 12 (ZACHARIAH)

A ship sails with any wind she finds. Take it, Miss. Place it where it can be reached.

VOICE 10 (VOICE)

He took Charlotte's hand and closed her fingers over the knife. Cringing, she took it.

VOICE 12 (ZACHARIAH)

Now Miss Doyle may return to her cabin. Do you know the way?

VOICE 1 (CHARLOTTE)

I'm not certain.

VOICE 12 (ZACHARIAH)

I will guide you.

VOICE 2 (VOICE)

Zachariah left Charlotte at her door. Once inside she hurriedly stowed the knife under the thin mattress and somehow struggled into the bunk.

VOICE 1 (CHARLOTTE)

There, fully dressed, I sought rest,

VOICE 7 (VOICE)

fitfully dozing only to be awaked by the sway of the ship and a banging sound

VOICE 8 (VOICE)

her cabin door swinging back and forth, its rusty hinges rasping.

VOICE 9 (VOICE)

Then she heard:

VOICE 4 (KEETCH)

The only one I could get to come, Captain Jaggery, sir, is the Doyle girl. And with *them* looking on I had to put on a bit of a show about wanting to keep her off.

VOICE 13 (JAGGERY)

Quite all right, Mr. Keetch. If there has to be only one, she's the trump. With her as witness, they'll not dare to move. I'm well satisfied.

VOICE 4 (KEETCH)

Thank you, sir.

VOICE 2 (VOICE)

The voices trailed away.

VOICE 1 (CHARLOTTE)

For a while I tried to grasp what I'd heard, but I gave it up as incomprehensible.

VOICE 6 (VOICE)

Then, for what seemed forever, she lay listening as the *Seahawk*, tossed by the ceaseless swells,

VOICE 7 (VOICE)

heaved and groaned

VOICE 8 (Voice)

like a sleeper beset by evil dreams.

VOICE 1 (CHARLOTTE)

At last I slept, only to have the ship's dreams become my own.