

## Fallen Women

As the carriage turned into the courtyard of their house, Charlotte glimpsed one of the street sleepers beside the gate. She decided she would take a closer look.

The coach stopped beside the front door. Charles handed Mama down, then Charlotte. Charlotte ran across the courtyard. William was closing the gates. "Just a minute," Charlotte called.

She heard Papa say: "What the devil..."

She ran out into the street.

The sleeper was a woman. She lay slumped on the pavement with her shoulders against the courtyard wall. (...) Her head was slumped sideways and her face was turned toward Charlotte. There was something familiar about the round face and the wide mouth. The woman was young...

Charlotte cried: "Annie!"

The sleeper opened her eyes.

Charlotte stared at her in horror. Two months ago Annie had been housemaid at Walden Hall in a crisp clean uniform with a little white hat on her head, a pretty girl with a large bosom and an irrepressible laugh.

"Annie, what happened to you?"

Annie scrambled to her feet and bobbed a pathetic curtsy. "Oh, Lady Charlotte, I was hoping I would see you, you was always good to me, I've nowhere to turn"

"But how did you get like this?"

"I was let go, m'lady, without a character, when they found out I was expecting the baby; I know I done wrong—"

"But you're not married!"

"But I was courting Jimmy, the under-gardener." Charlotte recalled Belinda's revelations, and realized that if all that was true it would indeed be possible for girls to have babies without being married. "Where is the baby?"

"I lost it." (...)

"How horrible," Charlotte whispered. That was something else she had not known to be possible. "And why isn't Jimmy with you?"

"He run away to sea. He did love me, I know, but he was frightened to wed, he was only seventeen..."

Annie began to cry.

Charlotte heard Papa's voice. "Charlotte, come in this instant." (...)

Mama appeared and said: "Charlotte, get away from that creature!"

"She's not a creature, she's Annie."

"Annie!" Mama shrilled. "She's a fallen woman!"

"That's enough," Papa said. "This family does not hold discussions in the street. Let us go in immediately—"

Charlotte put her arm around Annie. "She needs a bath, new clothes and a hot breakfast."

"Don't be ridiculous!" Mama said. The sight of Annie seemed to have made her almost hysterical.

"All right," Papa said. "Take her into the kitchen. The parlour-maids will be up by now. Tell them to take care of her. Then come and see me in the drawing-room." (...)

They went in.

Charlotte took Annie downstairs to the kitchen. A skivvy was cleaning the range and a kitchen-maid was slicing bacon for breakfast. It was just past five o'clock: Charlotte had not realized they started work so early. (...)

Charlotte said: "This is Annie. She used to work at Walden Hall. She's had some bad luck but she's a good girl. She must have a bath. Find new clothes for her and burn her old ones. Then give her breakfast."

For a moment they were both dumbstruck; then the kitchen maid said: "Very good, m'lady."

"I'll see you later, Annie," Charlotte said.

Annie seized Charlotte's arm. "Oh, thank you, m'lady."

Charlotte went out. Now there will be trouble, she thought as she went upstairs. She did not care as much as she might have. She almost felt that her parents had betrayed her. What had her years of education been for, when in one night she could find out that the most important things had never been taught her? No doubt they talked of protecting young girls, but Charlotte thought deceit

might be the appropriate term. When she thought of how ignorant she had been until tonight, she felt so foolish, and that made her angry.

She marched into the drawing room. Papa stood beside the fireplace holding a glass. Mama sat at the piano, playing double-minor chords with a pained expression on her face. (...) Everything looked different today.

"Now, then, Charlotte," Papa began. "You don't understand what kind of woman Annie is. We let her go for a reason, you know. She did something very wrong which I cannot explain to you "

"I know what she did," Charlotte said, sitting down. "And I know who she did it with. A gardener called Jimmy."

Mama gasped.

Papa said: "I don't believe you have any idea what you're talking about."

"And if I haven't, whose fault is it?" Charlotte burst out. "How did I manage to reach the age of eighteen without learning that some people are so poor they sleep in the street, that maids who are expecting babies get dismissed, and that-that-men are not made the same as women? Don't stand there telling me I don't understand these things and I have a lot to learn! I've spent all my life learning and now I discover most of it was lies! How dare you! How dare you!" She burst into tears, and hated herself for losing control.

She heard Mama say: "Oh, this is too foolish."

Papa sat beside her and took her hand. "I'm sorry you feel that way," he said. "All young girls are kept in ignorance of certain things. It is done for their own good. We have never lied to you. If we did not tell you just how cruel and coarse the world is, that was only because we wanted you to enjoy your childhood for as long as possible. Perhaps we made a mistake." (...)

Charlotte's rage evaporated. She felt like a child again. She wanted to put her head on Papa's shoulder, but her pride would not let her.

"Shall we forgive each other, and be pals again?" Papa said.

An idea which had been quietly budding in Charlotte's mind now blossomed, and she spoke without thinking. "Would you let me take Annie as my personal maid?"

Papa said: "Well..."

"We won't even think of it!" Mama said hysterically. (...)

"Then what will she do?" Charlotte asked calmly.

"She should have thought of that when She should have thought of that before."

Papa said: "Charlotte, we cannot possibly have a woman of bad character to live in this house. Even if I would allow it, the servants would be scandalized. Half of them would give notice. We shall hear mutterings even now, just because the girl has been allowed into the kitchen. You see, it is not just Mama and I who shun such people it is the whole of society." (...)

"Then what is to be done with her?" Charlotte said desperately.

"I'll make a bargain with you," Papa said. "I will give her money to get decent lodgings, and I'll see that she gets a job in a factory."

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