

# The fallen woman 🙄

London, in the early 20th century. The Waldens, a wealthy aristocratic family, live in Walden Hall, Norfolk, and also have a residence in London. As Charlotte, 18, and her parents are coming back home from a ball, she notices people sleeping in the street.

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. [...] 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 a housemaid at Walden Hall in a crisp<sup>2</sup> clean uniform with a little white hat on her head, a pretty girl with a large bosom<sup>3</sup> and an irrepressible laugh.

"Annie, what happened to you?"

Annie scrambled to her feet and bobbed a pathetic curtsey<sup>4</sup>. "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<sup>5</sup>, m'lady, without a character<sup>6</sup>, 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<sup>7</sup> 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."

"You *lost* it?"

"I mean, it came too early, m'lady, it was born dead."

"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<sup>8</sup>, he was only seventeen..." Annie began to cry.

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

She turned to him. He stood at the gate in his evening clothes, with his silk hat in his hand, and suddenly she saw him as a big, smug<sup>9</sup>, cruel old man. She said: "This is one of the servants you care for so well."

Papa looked at the girl. "Annie! What is the meaning of this?"

Annie said: "Jimmy run away, m'lord, so I couldn't wed, and I couldn't get another position because you never gave me a character, and I was ashamed<sup>10</sup> to go home, so I come to London..."

"You came to London to beg<sup>11</sup>," Papa said harshly<sup>12</sup>.

"Papa!" Charlotte cried.

1. *que diable*
2. *impeccable*
3. *poitrine*
4. *faire une pitoyable petite révérence*
5. *(informel) renvoyer*
6. *certificat de moralité*
7. *se souvenir de*
8. *se marier*
9. *suffisant*
10. *avoir honte*
11. *mendier*
12. *rudement*

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

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

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

"That's enough," Papa said. "This family  
50 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. [...]

55 "All right," Papa said. "Take her into the  
kitchen. The parlourmaids will be up by now.  
Tell them to take care of her. Then come and  
see me in the drawing room<sup>13</sup>."

Mama said: "Stephen, this is insane<sup>14</sup>."

60 "Let us go *in*," said Papa. They went in.



Charlotte took Annie downstairs to the kitchen. A skivvy<sup>15</sup> was cleaning the  
range<sup>16</sup> and a kitchenmaid was slicing bacon for breakfast. It was just past five  
o'clock: Charlotte had not realized they started work so early. They both looked at  
her in astonishment when she walked in, in her ball gown<sup>17</sup>, with Annie at her side.

65 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<sup>18</sup>, then the kitchenmaid said: "Very  
good, m'lady."

70 "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  
75 most important things had never been taught her. [...]

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. [...]

80 "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."

85 "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<sup>19</sup>, and that - that -  
men are not made the same as women? 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.

13. *salon*

14. *insensé*

15. *bonne à tout faire*

16. *cuisinière*

17. *robe*

18. *stupéfait*

19. *renvoyer*