

load of deceit and hypocrisy has made me old before my time. Better any poverty, any hardship, than to be the living lie that I have been for nearly seven years. You tempted me too far; I was weak, though I hope not wicked, inasmuch as I harmed no one but myself, and I yielded; but the punishment has been severe indeed. To bear the weight of self-contempt and shame that has crushed me down—to know that while looked up to and respected I am in reality a sham, a vile cheat—to feel that could I be known as I am I should be the despised of all, both for what I am and what I pretend to be—if you knew what I have suffered—but you cannot know—you cannot even understand it.”

Charlotte listened, a new light breaking over her mind. This then was the secret care which even more than Elsie's death had contributed to work in Allan so great a change. So little had she suspected his real character that she had believed him content with the false part he had acted, and she was now taken by surprise. It made what she had now to say the harder, and the proud woman faltered, hesitated, and trembled more and more.

“I could not guess you felt it so much. Allan,” she said at last.

“No, I suppose not; you thought you were doing me a favor, I daresay. Did you ever consider that, whatever I might be by birth, I had received the training of him I seemed to be, and that by nature and education I was taught to abhor a lie? You did not know me.”

She had not done so, and the knowledge was terrible to her now. She clasped her hands in one another and almost gasped for breath in her agitation; he remarked it now.

“You never betrayed what you felt, Allan.” She uttered commonplace remarks, as though to gain time or courage for some disclosure.

“No, because I was still weak. What was the use of speaking when I was still content to be what I despised? I have not suffered in vain. Thank God, I am strong now to bear whatever the truth can bring. You may object, but I am firm; and though you may dread the disclosure, the surprise and remark will soon be over,

and you will be the better—it will be better for all that the truth should be known.”

During these words Mrs. Falconer had sat still and silent. She now fixed her eyes on Allan, and spoke with desperate effort: “Yes, Allan, the time has come when the truth must be made known; but it is not what you suppose.”

She stopped, unable to say more; he motioned her to continue, but did not speak.

“Allan, for six years I have tried to tell you the truth, and have not dared. You call yourself weak, but what was your cowardice compared with mine? I dare not ask you to forgive me,—I should ask in vain—but will you *believe* me when I tell you now that I deceived you all those years ago?”

She had risen, and approached her brother with clasped hands and an agony in her face that might have moved a sterner nature than his. He did not see her; he staggered, and put up his hand as though to ward off a blow.

“Charlotte, say that again.”

“Brother, I deceived you; you are my brother—” but she stopped again terrified at his aspect. White and rigid, he leaned on the table for support; and though his lips moved, no sound could be heard. She laid her hand on his arm; at the touch he started and sank on his knees and buried his face in his hands; and while a heavy sob broke from him he murmured some low words, of which she only heard “My darling—have your own—I have not suffered quite in vain.”

There was silence for a long time; silence so deep that the humming of the summer insects in the flowers outside was distinctly audible. When at last Allan raised his head, he was calm and composed, though pale as Mrs. Falconer herself. He rose, and standing before his sister, looked her full in the face. “Now, Charlotte, the whole truth.”

But Charlotte could not speak. “You forged the story then?”

“Oh, no, no! the story was all true.”

“How did you deceive me then? Speak, and trifle with me no more.”

“It was all true; but—but the changing was Anne—not you.”

Another long silence.