

Young People

The Dream Baby

By Brown Linnet

The rude boys that peeped down the area and caught a glimpse of her at her work called her "Foxey." She never retaliated, because, firstly, she was very much afraid of the boys, and secondly, her mistress would have descended to the basement to see what she was after; and Foxey was a very bad hand at explaining herself. She never even seemed to know how she broke things, or why she so often forgot to do as she was told. It was no use scolding or shouting at her; she always said the same thing, "I don't know," with a slow indecision which, it must be confessed, was very exasperating.

Mrs. Tickle was not in very prosperous circumstances, and it suited her to adopt Foxey, because Foxey was destitute of home ties of any sort, and there was no one to suggest, much less insist, upon the possibility of wages due for service rendered; though there were many who appreciated the kindness of heart that had prompted Mrs. Tickle to give a poor orphan girl a home, and save her from the degradation of the workhouse.

These kind people often complimented Foxey on her good fortune when she opened the door to admit them to the "little sewing party for the poor heathen" (which was another outward proof of Mrs. Tickle's kindness of heart); but when they asked her if she did not think she ought to be a very good girl under the circumstances Foxey always answered, "I don't know," and went down to the basement again to await the bell that, sooner or later, would summons her to stagger upstairs with the tea-tray.

Foxy was thirteen; but she never seemed to have outgrown her ninth year. The tea-tray was far too heavy for her thin arms; the daily work bowed her weak back, the constant scoldings dulled her feeble spirits, and there were only short spaces of time when she was the real Foxey. That was when Mrs. Tickle went out or was busy upstairs; then Foxey would sit down on the edge of a chair (ready to start to her feet at the slightest sound), and think about her little self. She, Foxey, with the thick red hair, the tiny sharp face, and the childish form, was no longer like that—she was tall, she was most, most beautiful; there were foams and foams of white lace under her skirts, just like the lady who had once got out of a carriage and gone to see someone next door. Foxey did not exactly know what else; but it was all soft and happy, and nobody spoke to her, only they looked and looked at her because she was so beautiful and smart.

But after Foxey had thought all this for some time it suddenly occurred to her that something lacked. This was after she had watched the new neighbours that had come to the house where the lady's carriage had stopped. There were three of them: the young man, who went whistling off down the street every morning, and caught the eight o'clock bus at the corner; the young woman, who was always smiling; and the little white bundle that she carried out every day, and talked to and kissed and dandled.

Foxy was still tall and beautiful, with foams and foams of lace; but now she had a white bundle too. In the shimmer of the kitchen fire she sat on the edge of her chair, with her small arms scooped out and in constant motion; gazing through the open space—not at the kitchen floor, but at the dream baby, the baby that smiled back at her and felt warm and heavy to hold, and was her very, very own!

Somehow, after the advent of the dream baby Foxey began to live a new life—to invest it with a fancied reality which filled her little mind with a new and an absorbing interest. When she swept the kitchen or brushed down the stairs, she did it as quietly as possible, so that the dream baby in its dream cradle should not be disturbed. Sometimes, when Mrs. Tickle was out of sight and hearing, she just stopped a moment to give the cradle a rock, to smile, and "cluck" to the baby; and once, when her mistress was out, she even murmured a

strange little scrap of song, that might have been the soft chirping of one of the sooty little street sparrows outside.

Mrs. Tickle noticed a difference in her hand-maiden, and began to congratulate herself that she was breaking in the girl nicely. There had not been a broken cup or saucer now for a week or more. She did not know of the dream baby in the washing-up tub; she would not have believed it possible that the brown pewter tea-pot and the china cups and saucers were clothed with warm soft flesh, that must be handled tenderly and dried with such care.

Of old, Foxey had been wont to leave smears of butter on the plates—tea-rim marks inside the cups, and leaves within the teapot; but now curved handles were baby's ears, or its tiny toes and fingers; plates, cups, saucers, and all were parts of its precious body.

Mrs. Tickle's friends said that patient endurance and true kindness of heart must prevail in the end; and Mrs. Tickle smoothed her creased face into a humble smile of gratification, and really forgot all about her scolding tongue and the stinging slaps that had been her chief idea of educating her little maid. "The girl is really improving," she said. She always called Foxey "The girl," even when the tiny childish figure was under her very eyes; and perhaps she was right, for Foxey had never had any childhood in the true sense of the word.

"Improving" was a new word to Foxey, and she did not understand it when she heard it laid to her charge. She looked wonderingly into her mistress's face; but there were not the usual signs of anger to be read there; and at dinner time, to mark her approval, Mrs. Tickle enlarged the usual allowance of food, so that Foxey really had as much to eat as she wanted. She felt almost afraid.

What was "improving"? Lying? She understood that—"stupid," "careless," even "wicked." At last a new idea presented itself to her. Perhaps she was growing, and that was why she had been given enough to eat. She waited her opportunity, and when her mistress had gone upstairs to prepare for the working party she mounted on to a chair and tried to see her own reflection in the polished lid of the warming-pan upon the kitchen wall. The warm brass caught the firelight in places, and in other places shone clear blue; but there, in the very centre of the shining disc, was the uncertain representation of a small, sharp face, fluctuating as the fire in the grate flickered up or burnt low.

Foxy scanned the image anxiously, dimming the bright brass with her warm breath; but she could discover no appreciable change in her appearance, and suddenly the heavy foot-fall of her mistress fell on the top stair with a warn-

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