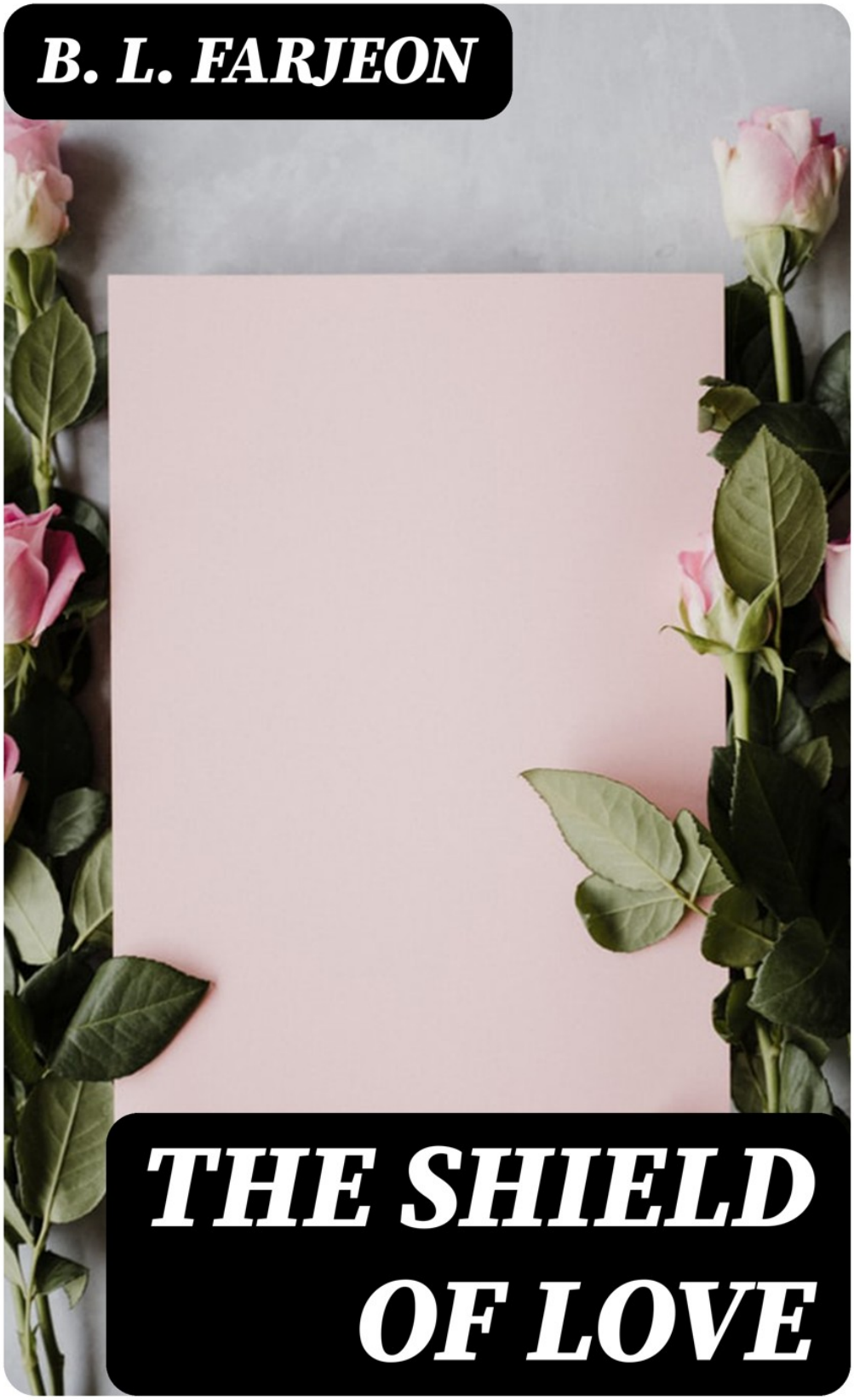
B. L. FARJEON

THE SHIELD OF LOVE


B. L. FARJEON
THE SHIELD OF LOVE

B. L. Farjeon

The Shield of Love

EAN 8596547046127

DigiCat, 2022
Contact: DigiCat@okpublishing.info

Table of Contents

CHAPTER I.

In which some particulars are given of the Fox-Cordery Family.

This is not exactly a story of Cinderella, although a modern Cinderella--of whom there are a great many more in our social life than people wot of--plays her modest part therein; and the allusion to one of the world's prettiest fairy-tales is apposite enough because her Prince, an ordinary English gentleman prosaically named John Dixon, was first drawn to her by the pity which stirs every honest heart when innocence and helplessness are imposed upon. Pity became presently sweetened by affection, and subsequently glorified by love, which, at the opening of our story, awaited its little plot of fresh-smelling earth to put forth its leaves, the healthy flourishing of which has raised to the dignity of a heavenly poem that most beautiful of all words, Home.

Her Christian name was Charlotte, her surname Fox-Cordery, and she had a mother and a brother. These, from the time her likeness to Cinderella commenced, comprised the household.

Had it occurred to a stranger who gazed for the first time upon Mr. and Miss Fox-Cordery, as they sat in the living-room of the Fox-Cordery establishment, that for some private reason the brother and sister had dressed in each other's clothes, he might well have been excused the fancy. It was not that the lady was so much like a gentleman, but

that the gentleman was so much like a lady; and a closer inspection would certainly have caused the stranger to do justice at least to Miss Fox-Cordery. She was the taller and stouter of the twain, and yet not too tall or stout for grace and beauty of an attractive kind. There was some color in her face, his was perfectly pallid, bearing the peculiar hue observable in waxwork figures; her eyes were black, his blue; her hair was brown, his sandy; and the waxwork suggestion was strengthened by his whiskers and mustache, which had a ludicrous air of having been stuck on. There was a cheerful energy in her movements which was conspicuously absent in his, and her voice had a musical ring in it, while his was languid and deliberate. She was his junior by a good ten years, her age being twenty-eight, but had he proclaimed himself no more than thirty, only those who were better informed would have disputed the statement. When men and women reach middle age the desire to appear younger than they are is a pardonable weakness, and it was to the advantage of Mr. Fox-Cordery that it was less difficult for him than for most of us to maintain the harmless fiction.

This was not the only bubble which Mr. Fox-Cordery was ready to encourage in order to deceive the world. His infantile face, his appealing blue eyes, his smooth voice, were traps which brought many unwary persons to grief. Nature plays numberless astonishing tricks, but few more astonishing than that which rendered the contrast between the outer and inner Mr. Fox-Cordery even more startling than that which existed in the physical characteristics of this brother and sister.

There were other contrasts which it may be as well to mention. As brother and sister they were of equal social rank, but the equality was not exhibited in their attire. Mr. Fox-Cordery would have been judged to be a man of wealth, rich enough to afford himself all the luxuries of life; Charlotte would have been judged a young woman who had to struggle hard for a living, which, indeed, was not far from the truth, for she was made to earn her bread and butter, if ever woman was. Her clothing was common and coarse, and barely sufficient, the length of her frock being more suitable to a girl of fifteen than to a woman of twenty-eight. This was not altogether a drawback, for Charlotte had shapely feet and ankles, but they would have been seen to better advantage in neat boots or shoes than in the worn-out, down-at-heels slippers she wore. Depend upon it she did not wear them from choice, for every right-minded woman takes a proper pride in her boots and shoes, and in her stockings, gloves, and hats. The slippers worn at the present moment by Charlotte were the only available coverings for her feet she had. True, there was a pair of boots in the house which would fit no other feet than hers, but they were locked up in her mother's wardrobe. Then her stockings. Those she had on were of an exceedingly rusty black, and had been darned and darned till scarcely a vestige of their original self remained. Another and a better pair she ought to have had the right to call her own, and these were in the house, keeping company with her boots. In her poorly furnished bedroom you would have searched in vain for hat or gloves; these were likewise under lock and key, with a decent frock and mantle she was allowed to wear on special occasions,

at the will of her taskmasters. So that she was considerably worse off in these respects than many a poor woman who lives with her husband and children in a garret.

But for all this Charlotte was a pleasant picture to gaze upon, albeit just now her features wore rather a grave expression. She had not an ornament on her person, not a brooch or a ring, but her hair was luxuriant and abundant, and was carefully brushed and coiled; her neck was white, and her figure graceful; and though in a couple of years she would be in her thirties, there was a youthfulness in her appearance which can only be accounted for by her fortunate inheritance of a cheerful spirit, of which, drudge as she was, her mother and her brother could not rob her.

This precious inheritance she derived from her father, who had transmitted to her all that was spiritually best in his nature: and nothing else. It was not because he did not love his daughter that she was left unendowed, but because of a fatal delay in the disposition of his world's goods. Procrastination may be likened to an air-gun carrying a deadly bullet. Mr. Fox-Cordery, the younger, "took" after his mother. Occasionally in life these discrepant characteristics are found grouped together in one family, the founders of which, by some strange chance, have become united, instead of flying from each other, as do certain violently antagonistic chemicals when an attempt is made to unite them in a friendly partnership. The human repulsion occurs afterward, when it is too late to repair the evil. If marriages are made in heaven, as some foolish people are in the habit of asserting, heaven owes poor mortality a debt it can never repay.

Far different from Charlotte's was Mr. Fox-Cordery's appearance. As to attire it was resplendent and magnificent, if these terms may be applied to a mortal of such small proportions. He was excruciatingly careful in the combing and brushing of his hair, but in the effect produced he could not reach her point of excellence, and this drawback he inwardly construed into a wrong inflicted upon him by her. He often struck a mental balance after this fashion, and brought unsuspecting persons in his debt. Moreover, he would have liked to change skins with her, and give her his waxy hue for her pearly whiteness. Could the exchange have been effected by force he would have had it done. At an early stage of manhood he had been at great pains to impart an upward curly twist to his little mustache, in the hope of acquiring a military air, but the attempt was not successful, and his barber, after long travail, had given it up in despair, and had advised him to train his mustache in the way it was inclined to go.

"Let it droop, sir," said the barber, "it will look beautiful so. There's a sentiment in a drooping mustache that always attracts the sex."

The argument was irresistible, and Mr. Fox-Cordery's little mustache was allowed to droop and to grow long; and it certainly did impart to his countenance a dreaminess of expression which its wearer regarded as a partial compensation for the disappointment of his young ambition. No man in the world ever bestowed more attention upon his person, or took greater pains to make himself pleasing in the sight of his fellow-creatures, than did Mr. Fox-Cordery; and this labor of love was undertaken partly from vanity,

partly from cunning. A good appearance deceived the world; it put people off their guard; if you wished to gain a point it was half the battle. He spent hours every week with his tailor, the best in London, discussing fits and fashions, trying on coats, vests, and trousers, ripping and unripping to conquer a crease, and suggesting a little more padding here, and a trifle less there. His hats and boots were marvels of polish, his shirts and handkerchiefs of the finest texture, his neckties marvels, his silk socks and underwear dainty and elegant, and his pins and, rings would have passed muster with the most censorious of fashion's votaries. He was spick and span from the crown of his head to the soles of his feet. As he walked along the streets, picking his way carefully, or sat in his chair with his small legs crossed, he was a perfect little model of a man, in animated pallid waxwork. He preferred to sit instead of stand; being long-waisted it gave beholders a false impression of his height.

From his cradle he had been his mother's idol and his father's terror. Mrs. Fox-Cordery ruled the roost, and her husband, preferring peace to constant warfare, gave the reins into her hands, and allowed her to do exactly as she pleased. This meant doing everything that would give pleasure to the Fox-Cordery heir, who soon discovered his power and made use of it to his own advantage. What a tyrant in the domestic circle was the little mannikin! The choicest tidbits at meals, the food he liked best, the coolest place in summer, and warmest in winter, all were conceded to him. He tortured birds and cats openly, and pinched servants on the sly. The good-tempered, cheerful-hearted

father used to gaze in wonder at his son, and speculate ruefully upon the kind of man he was likely to grow into.

When young Fox-Cordery was near his eleventh birthday Charlotte was born, and as the mother held the son to her heart, so did the father hold the daughter to his. They became comrades, father and daughter on one side, mother and son on the other, with no sympathies in common. Mr. Fox-Cordery took his little daughter for long rides and walks, told her fairy stories, and gave her country feasts; and it is hard to say who enjoyed them most.

The introduction of Charlotte into young Fox-Cordery's life afforded him new sources of delight. He pinched her on the sly as he pinched the servants, he pulled her ears, he slapped her face, and the wonder of it was that Charlotte never complained. Her patience and submission did not soften him; he tyrannized over her the more. Hearing his father say that Charlotte ought to have a doll, he said that he would buy her one, and the father was pleased at this prompting of affection. Obtaining a sum of money from his mother, young Fox-Cordery put half of it into his pocket, and expended the other half in the purchase of a doll with a woebegone visage, dressed in deep mourning. Presenting it to his sister he explained that the doll had lost everybody belonging to her, and was the most wretched and miserable doll in existence.

"She will die soon," he said, "and then I will give you a coffin."

But the young villain's purpose was foiled by Charlotte's sweet disposition. The poor doll, being alone in the world, needed sympathy and consolation, and Charlotte wept over

her, and kissed and fondled her, and did everything in her power to make her forget her sorrows. Eventually Charlotte's father suggested that the doll had been in mourning long enough and he had her dressed like a bride, and restored to joy and society; but this so enraged young Fox-Cordery that he got up in the night and tore the bridal dress to shreds, and chopped the doll into little pieces.

The fond companionship between Mr. Fox-Cordery and his daughter did not last very long. Before Charlotte was seven years old her father died. On his deathbed the thought occurred to him that his daughter was unprovided for.

His will, made shortly after his marriage, when he was still in ignorance of his wife's true character, left everything unreservedly to her; and now, when he was passing into the valley of the Shadow of Death, he trembled for his darling Charlotte's future. The illness by which he was stricken down had been sudden and unexpected, and he had not troubled to alter his will, being confident that many years of life were before him. And now there was little time left. But he lived still; he could repair the error; he yet could make provision for his little girl. Lying helpless, almost speechless, on his bed, he motioned to his wife, and made her understand that he wished to see his lawyer. She understood more; she divined his purpose. She had read the will, by which she would become the sole inheritor of his fortune--she and her son, for all she had would be his. Should she allow her beloved Fox to be robbed, and should she assist in despoiling him? Her mind was quickly made up.

"I will send for the lawyer," she said to her husband.

"At once, at once!"

"Yes, at once."

A day passed.

"Has the lawyer come?" whispered the dying man to his wife.

"He was in the country when I wrote yesterday," she replied. "He returns to-morrow morning, and will be here then."

"There must be no delay," said he.

His wife nodded, and bade him be easy in his mind.

"Excitement is bad for you," she said. "The lawyer is sure to come."

He knew that it would be dangerous for him to agitate himself, and he fell asleep, holding the hand of his darling child. In the night he awoke, and prayed for a few days of life, and that his senses would not forsake him before the end came. His wife, awake in the adjoining room, prayed also, but it will be charitable to draw a veil over her during those silent hours.

Another day passed, and again he asked for his lawyer.

"He called," said his wife, "but you were asleep, and I would not have you disturbed."

It was false; she had not written to the lawyer.

That night the dying man knew that his minutes were numbered, and that he would not see another sunrise in this world. Speech had deserted him; he was helpless, powerless. He looked piteously at his wife, who would not admit any person into the room but herself, with the exception of her children and the doctor. She answered his look with a smile, and with false tenderness smoothed his

pillow. The following morning the doctor called again, and as he stood by the patient's bedside observed him making some feeble signs which he could not understand. Appealing to Mrs. Fox-Cordery, she interpreted the signs to him.

"He wishes to know the worse," she said.

The doctor beckoned her out of the room, and told her she must prepare for it.

"Soon?" she inquired, with her handkerchief to her dry eyes.

"Before midnight," he said gravely, and left her to her grief.

She did not deprive her husband of his last sad comfort; she brought their daughter to him, and placed her by his side. Mrs. Fox-Cordery remained in the room, watching the clock. "Before midnight, before midnight," she whispered to herself a score of times.

The prince of the house, soon to be king, came to wish his father farewell. There was not speck or spot upon the young man, who had been from home all day, and had just returned. During this fatal illness he had been very little with his father.

"What is the use of my sitting mum chance by his bedside?" he said to his mother. "I can't do him any good; and I don't think he cares for me much. All he thinks of is that brat."

Charlotte was the brat, and she gazed with large solemn eyes upon her brother as he now entered the chamber of death. He was dressed in the height of fashion, and he did not remove his gloves as he pressed his father's clammy hand, and brushed with careless lips the forehead upon

which the dews of death were gathering. Then he wiped his mouth with his perfumed handkerchief, and longed to get out of the room to smoke. The father turned his dim eyes upon the fashionably attired young man, standing there so neat and trim and fresh, as if newly turned out of a bandbox, and from him to Charlotte in an old cotton dress, her hair in disorder, and her face stained with tears. Maybe a premonition of his little girl's future darkened his last moments, but he was too feeble to express it. Needless to dwell upon the scene, pregnant and suggestive as it was. The doctor's prediction was verified; when the bells tolled the midnight hour Mr. Fox-Cordery had gone to his rest, and Charlotte was friendless in her mother's house.

CHAPTER II.

Poor Cinderella.

Then commenced a new life for the girl; she became a drudge, and was made to do servants' work, and to feel that there was no love for her beneath the roof that sheltered her. She accepted the position unmurmuringly, and slaved and toiled with a willing spirit. Early in the morning, while her tyrants were snug abed, she was up and doing, and though she never succeeded in pleasing them and was conscious that she had done her best, she bore their

scolding and fault-finding without a word of remonstrance. They gave her no schooling, and yet she learned to read and write, and to speak good English. There were hidden forces in the girl which caused her to supply, by unwearying industry, the deficiencies of her education. Hard as was her life she had compensations, which sprang from the sweetness of her nature.

Her early acquaintance with errand boys and tradesmen's apprentices led her into the path strewn with lowly flowers. She became familiar with the struggles of the poor, and, sympathizing with them, she performed many acts of kindness which brought happiness to her young heart; and though from those who should have shown her affection she received constant rebuffs, she was not soured by them.

The treatment she and her brother met with in the home in which they each had an equal right, and should have had an equal share, was of a painfully distinctive character. Nothing was good enough for him; anything was good enough for her. Very well; she ministered to him without repining. He and his mother took their pleasures together, and Charlotte was never invited to join them, and never asked to be invited. There was no interchange of confidences between them. They had secrets which they kept from her; she had secrets which she kept from them. Those shared by Mr. Fox-Cordery and his mother savored of meanness and trickery; Charlotte's were sweet and charitable. They did not open their hearts to her because of the fear that she might rebel against the injustice which was being inflicted upon her; she did not open her heart to them

because she felt that they would not sympathize with her. They would have turned up their noses at the poor flowers she cherished, and would have striven to pluck them from her--and, indeed, the attempt was made, fortunately without success.

Charlotte's practical acquaintance with kitchen work, and the economical spirit in which she was enjoined by her mother to carry out her duties, taught her the value of scraps of food, a proper understanding of which would do a great many worthy people no harm. Recognizing that the smallest morsels could be turned to good account, she allowed nothing to be thrown away or wasted. Even the crumbs would furnish meals for birds, and they were garnered with affectionate care. She was well repaid in winter and early spring for her kindness to the feathered creatures, some of which she believed really grew to know her, and it is a fact that none were frightened of her. Many pretty little episodes grew out of this association which was the cause of genuine pleasure to Charlotte, and she discovered in these lowly ways of life treasures which such lofty people as her mother and brother never dreamed of. If she had authority nowhere else in her home she had some in the kitchen, so every scrap of food was looked after, collected, and given to pensioners who were truly grateful for them. These pensioners were all small children, waifs of the gutters, of whom there are shoals in every great city. Thus it will be seen that the position assigned to Charlotte by her mother and brother ennobled and enriched her spiritually; it brought into play her best and sweetest qualities.

Her charities were dispensed with forethought and wisdom, and Mr. Fox-Cordery took no greater pains in the adornment of his person than Charlotte did to make her scraps of food palatable to the stomachs of her little pensioners. With half an onion, nicely shredded, and the end of a stray carrot, she produced of these scraps a stew which did her infinite credit as a cook of odds and ends; and it was a sight worth seeing to watch her preparing such a savory meal for the bare-footed youngsters who came at nightfall to the kitchen entrance of her home.

When these proceedings were discovered by her mother she was ordered to discontinue them, but in this one instance she showed a spirit of rebellion, and maintained her right to give away the leavings instead of throwing them into the dustbin. That she was allowed to have her way was perhaps the only concession made to her in her servitude.

For an offense of another kind, however, she was made to pay dearly.

She obtained permission one evening to go out for a walk, an hour to the minute being allowed her. On these occasions, which were rare, she always chose the poorer thoroughfares for her rambles, and as she now strolled through a narrow street she came upon a woman, with a baby in her arms, sitting on a doorstep. Pity for the wan face, of which she caught just one glance, caused Charlotte to stop and speak to the woman. The poor creature was in the last stage of want and destitution, and Charlotte's heart bled as she listened to the tale of woe. The wail of the hungry babe sent a shiver through the sympathizing girl. She could not bear to leave the sufferers, and yet what good

could be done by remaining? She had not a penny to give them. Charlotte never had any money of her own, it being part of the system by which her life was ruled to keep her absolutely penniless. She learned from the poor woman that every article of clothing she possessed that could with decency be dispensed with had found its way to the pawn-shop.

"See," said the wretched creature, raising her ragged frock.

It was all there was on her body.

The pitiful revelation inspired Charlotte. She had on a flannel and a cotton petticoat. Stepping aside into the shadow of an open door she loosened the strings of her petticoats, and they slipped to the ground.

"Take these," said the young girl, and ran home as fast as she could.

She was a few minutes behind her time, and her mother was on the watch for her. Upon Charlotte making her appearance she was informed that she would never be allowed out again, and she stood quietly by without uttering a word of expostulation. The scene ended by Charlotte being ordered instantly to bed, and to secure obedience Mrs. Fox-Cordery accompanied her daughter to her bedroom. There, on undressing, the loss of the two petticoats was discovered. Mrs. Fox-Cordery demanded an explanation and it was given to her, and the result was that every article of Charlotte's clothing was taken from her room, and locked in her mother's wardrobe. There was not so much as a lace or a piece of tape left. But, stripped as she was of every possession, Charlotte, as she lay in the

darkness and silence of her dark room, was not sorry for her charitable deed. She thought of the poor woman and her babe, and was glad that they had something to eat; and she was sure, if the same thing occurred again, that she would act as she had already done.

The next morning early, Mrs. Fox-Cordery unlocked the door of her daughter's bedroom, and entered with a bundle of clothes in her arms. Though it was imperative that Charlotte should be punished for her bad behavior, there was work in the kitchen to do, and the girl was not to be allowed to dawdle all day in bed because she had misconducted herself. That would be a reward, not a punishment.

"Your brother and I have been talking about you," said Mrs. Fox-Cordery. "He is shocked at your behavior. If you have the least sense of what is right you will beg him to forgive you."

"Why should I do that?" asked Charlotte, pondering a little upon the problem presented to her. "I have not hurt him in any way."

"Did you not hear me say," exclaimed Mrs. Fox-Cordery, frowning, "that he is shocked at your behavior? Is that not hurting him?"

"Not that I can see, mother," replied Charlotte. "I cannot help it if he looks upon what I have done in a wrong light."

"In a wrong light, Miss Impertinence!" cried Mrs. Fox-Cordery. "The view your brother takes of a thing is always right."

"If you will give me my clothes," said Charlotte, with pardonable evasion, "I will get up."

"You will get up when I order you, and not before. I am speaking to you by your brother's instructions, and we will have this matter out, once and for all."

Charlotte lay silent. It did not appear to her that she had anything to defend, and she instinctively felt that the most prudent course was to say as little as possible.

"Will you tell your brother that you are sorry for what you have done, or shall I?"

"I am not sorry, mother."

Mrs. Fox-Cordery was rather staggered by this reply.

"There is an absence of moral perception in you," she said severely, "that will lead to bad results. If you were not my daughter I should call in a policeman."

Charlotte opened her eyes wide, and she shivered slightly. She was neither a theorist nor a logician; she never debated with herself whether a contemplated action was right or wrong; she simply did what her nature guided her to do. A policeman in her eyes was a blue-frocked, helmeted creature who held unknown terrors in his hand, which he meted out to those who had been guilty of some dreadful action. Of what dreadful action had she been guilty that her mother should drag a policeman into the conversation? It was this reflection that caused her to shiver.

"You gave away last night," said Mrs. Fox-Cordery, regarding the symptom of fear with satisfaction, "what did not belong to you."

"My clothes are my own," pleaded Charlotte.

"They are not your own. They represent property, and every description of property in this family belongs to me and to your brother. The clothes you wear are lent to you for

the time being, and by disposing of them as you have done you have committed a theft. You are sharp enough, I presume, to know what a theft is."

"Yes," said Charlotte. Monstrous as was the proposition, she was unable to advance any argument in confutation.

"That we do not punish you as you deserve," pursued Mrs. Fox-Cordery, "is entirely due to your brother's mercy. We will take care that you do not repeat the offense. Such clothes as you are permitted to wear will be given to you as occasion requires; and everything will be marked in my name--you shall do the marking yourself--in proof that nothing belongs to you. Dress yourself now, and go to your work."

"Mother," said Charlotte, getting out of bed, opening her little chest of drawers, and looking round the room, "you have taken everything away from me."

"Yes, everything."

"But something is mine, mother."

"Nothing is yours."

"Father gave me his picture; let me have that back."

"You will have nothing back. We will see how you behave in the future, and you will be treated accordingly. Before you go downstairs pray for a more thankful heart, and for sufficient sense to make you appreciate our goodness. Have you any message to send to your brother?"

"No, mother."

"As I supposed. It is a mystery to me how I ever came to have such a child."

Charlotte said her prayers before she left her bedroom; her father had taught her to do so, night and morning; but