



SLY ROGUES. (See A. 41.)

THE KING OF CUNNING ANIMALS.



REYNARD the fox, in spite of his many failings, is always regarded with a certain kindly toleration. It is true that his "weakness" for poultry is far from amiable, especially in the eyes of the farmer whose geese have been stolen in a midnight raid. But this and other faults are generally forgotten in the admiration of the immense resources of his cunning, and the pluck and gameness with which he has over and over again extricated himself out of apparently insuperable difficulties. This admiration may be unwillingly extorted in some cases, yet there can be no doubt that our vulpine hero never excites the same detestation as such a purely savage and brutal animal as, let us say, a wolf. And even as regards the hens and rabbits which so often fall victims to his guile, it has to be said that foxes *must* live; and if they cannot obtain a meal without resorting to nefarious practices, they will probably risk detection and punishment rather than die of starvation. No man or woman could take greater interest in house-hunting than the fox family. They make burrows to screen them from cold and to hide in; but they never settle in a district which is not thoroughly respectable. They soon know the whole locality—the houses where the dog is very fierce and noisy, those where the stock of poultry is large and select. The country must not be too open, for they find hedges and bushes useful shelters in times of trouble. When they do not care to build a house, they do not scruple to appropriate the burrow of rabbits, having perhaps, first of all, eaten up the unhappy owners.

What would old Æsop have done without his never-failing fox? You will remember the various occasions on which the venerable fabulist uses the animal to point a moral or adorn a tale. The "Fox and the Grapes" is one of the best known of these stories, but it has a solid foundation in fact that most of them lack, for it is quite true that a ripe cluster of vine-fruit offers a tempting mouthful to Reynard. Æsop, with the impartiality of a judge, sometimes makes his fables tell as much against Mr. Fox as at other times they speak volumes in his favour. In the familiar one which narrates the case of the fox without a tail, the laugh is decidedly against him; while in that which sets forth how a crow was foolish enough to drop a piece of cheese through opening her mouth to display her fine voice to a fox which had bestowed

some empty praise upon her personal charms, we see his cleverness rewarded. Then, as a rule, we find the braggart fox coming to grief, as in the fable in which he is represented as explaining to a cat that though things be ever so bad he has always a hundred other plans if one should not succeed. Puss, in a humbler mood, replies that she, on the other hand, has but one, and that if that fail her she is undone. At that moment a pack of hounds appear. The cat flies up a tree and, from her secure perch, beholds the fox, whose hundred shifts have proved useless, destroyed by the dogs. Thus, then, Æsop holds the mirror up to nature, and so we learn that artfulness and braggadocio were recognised as characteristics of our vulpine friend at an early period of history.

However, leaving the mists of antiquity and the region of fable, and coming down to our own day, abundance of evidence exists testifying to the unrivalled cunning of the fox. Both in avoiding danger and procuring food he exhibits a craft that is really remarkable. His senses, of course, are extremely keen. It has been stated that the shepherds of Thrace ascertain whether a frozen river will "bear" or not by sending a fox across. The creature is observed to place the side of its head upon the ice, as if listening for the flow of water underneath, and should it cross, it is considered safe to follow its example. The difficulty of catching foxes by means of traps is notorious. They seem to have an instinctive knack of spying a snare, and iron in any shape or form is avoided with such pertinacity as to render the material almost useless in the construction of a trap. Moreover, they are just as acute in approaching their prey as they are in escaping themselves. They have been seen to swim slowly towards water-fowl with a turf in their mouth, so as not only to remain hidden, but to avoid attracting attention.

Foxes caught red-handed—that is, in the very act of theft or murder—have been known to imitate death, and to submit to a great amount of rough handling in the chance of an opportunity of escape presenting itself.

Instances are on record where a fox, tracked to its hole—which had been surrounded by traps—has endured starvation for many days rather than come out of hiding, and so be captured. Truly, an animal which could so readily take in the situation at a glance must be acknowledged to be the king of cunning creatures. Take another example of his extraordinary sagacity. A farmer in Bogside, Beith, on looking out of window one morning

early, saw a fox making off with a large duck. On coming to a stone wall, four feet high, he attempted, prey and all, to leap over thrice, but each time fell back into the field. But he was not to be baffled; the problem was a difficult one, but not incapable of solution, as the event showed. Having surveyed the wall for a few minutes, he rose up, as if he had settled upon a plan of action, seized the duck by the head, planted his fore-paws against the wall as high as he could reach, forced the duck's bill into a hole in the wall, and then sprang up on the top. He now reached downwards, and grasping the duck, pulled it up, and dropped it on the other side. He then jumped down, picked up his victim, and went his way homewards, doubtless chuckling to himself, in a sly foxy fashion, upon the success with which he had rescued himself out of an awkward dilemma.

Need it be said that so cunning an animal has formed the subject of several proverbs? "He sets a fox to keep his geese" explains itself. "A wise fox will never rob his neighbour's hen-roost," because he would probably be speedily discovered: consequently he wanders farther afield, where he is not so likely to be identified. And then, as showing how often the wily over-reach themselves, and are in the long run caught by their own craft, we are told that "every fox must pay his skin to the furrier."

The different kinds of foxes are doubtless as cunning in their way as the common fox, though we do not know nearly so much about them. That the red fox of Eastern America exhibits the same reluctance

to "walk into" the trap as his cousin at home is evident from the fact that the trappers are altogether unable to entice him to enter it, and are compelled to resort to poison. Professor Leith Adams informs us of the highly interesting circumstance that civilisation exercises a marked influence on the habits of several of the forest animals. The wild hare and birch partridge are drawing nearer and nearer to the settlements, and the lynx and red fox are following on their trail. The last-named labours under an odd disadvantage in the winter-time. His feet are small and narrow, and consequently sink deeply into the snow, thus making it difficult for him to escape from enemies whose feet are broader and more furred. Next to our own fox, however, the most interesting kind is the Arctic fox, about which Sir John Richardson, Dr. Rink, and Dr. Robert Brown have supplied so much valuable information; but we must for the present be content with this passing allusion to him.

The British fox is slowly dying out. Not that its extinction is desired by some people; on the contrary, those who consider fox-hunting to be a noble sport view the slaughter of the animal by any other means than by their own hounds as a heinous crime, and a farmer who would dare to kill a creature which may have worked great havoc amongst his poultry would be placed under a social ban for his offence. When, however, the ingenuity and skill of the king of cunning animals shall fail to protect his skin, we may feel sure that the race of Reynard—in this country, at all events—has been run.

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RETURNING FROM MARKET.