

## A Surprise for Mrs. Fox

THE SMALL FOX ran back along the tunnel as fast as he could, carrying the three plump hens. He was exploding with joy. "Just wait!" he kept thinking, "just wait till Mummy sees these!" He had a long way to run but he never stopped once on the way and he came bursting in upon Mrs. Fox. "Mummy!" he cried, out of breath. "Look, Mummy, look! Wake up and see what I've brought you!"

Mrs. Fox, who was weaker than ever now from lack of food, opened one eye and looked at the hens. "I'm dreaming," she murmured and closed the eye again.





"You're not dreaming, Mummy! They're real chickens! We're saved! We're not going to starve!"

Mrs. Fox opened both eyes and sat up quickly. "But, my *dear* child!" she cried. "Where on earth . . . ?"

"Boggis's Chicken House Number One!" spluttered the Small Fox. "We tunnelled right up under the floor and you've never seen so many big fat hens in all your life! And Dad said to prepare a feast! They'll be back soon!"

The sight of food seemed to give new strength to Mrs. Fox. "A feast it shall be!" she said, standing up. "Oh, what a fantastic fox your father is! Hurry up, child, and start plucking those chickens!"

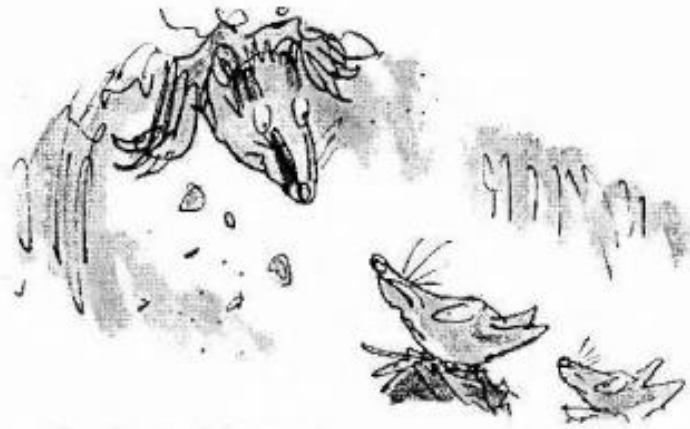
Far away down in the tunnel, the fantastic Mr. Fox was saying, "Now for the next bit, my darlings! This one'll be as easy as pie! All we have to do is dig another little tunnel from *here* to *there*!"

"To where, Dad?"

"Don't ask so many questions. Start digging!"

Mr. Fox and the three remaining Small Foxes dug fast and straight. They were all too excited now to feel tired or hungry. They knew they were going to have a whacking great feast before long and the fact that it was none other than Boggis's chickens they were going to eat made them churgle with laughter every time they thought of it. It was lovely to realize that while the fat farmer was sitting up there on the hill waiting for them to starve, he was also giving them their dinner without knowing it. "Keep digging," said Mr. Fox. "It's not much farther."





All of a sudden a deep voice above their heads said, "Who goes there?" The foxes jumped. They looked up quickly and they saw, peering through a small hole in the roof of the tunnel, a long black pointed furry face.

"Badger!" cried Mr. Fox.

"Foxy!" cried Badger. "My goodness me, I'm glad I've found *someone* at last! I've been digging around in circles for three days and nights and I haven't the foggiest idea where I am!"

Badger made the hole in the ceiling bigger and dropped down beside the foxes. A Small Badger (his son) dropped down after him. "Haven't you *heard* what's happening up on the hill?" Badger said excitedly. "It's chaos! Half the wood has disappeared and there are men with guns all over the countryside! None of us can get out, even at night! We're all starving to death!"

"Who is *we*?" asked Mr. Fox.

"All us diggers. That's me and Mole and Rabbit and all our wives and children. Even Weasel, who can usually sneak out of the tightest spots, is right now hiding down my hole with Mrs. Weasel and six kids. What on earth are we going to do, Foxy? I think we're finished!"

Mr. Fox looked at his three children and he smiled. The children smiled back at him, sharing his secret. "My dear old Badger," he said, "this mess you're in is all my fault . . ."

"I *know* it's your fault!" said Badger furiously. "And the farmers are not going to give up till they've got you. Unfortunately, that means *us* as well. It means everyone on the hill." Badger sat down and put a paw around his small son. "We're done for," he said softly. "My poor wife up there is so weak she can't dig another yard."





"Nor can mine," said Mr. Fox. "And yet at this very minute she is preparing for me and my children the most delicious feast of plump juicy chickens . . ."

"Stop!" cried Badger. "Don't tease me! I can't stand it!"

"It's true!" cried the Small Foxes. "Dad's not teasing! We've got chickens galore!"

"And because everything is entirely my fault," said Mr. Fox, "I invite you to share the feast. I invite *everyone* to share it—you and Mole and Rabbit and Weasel and all your wives and children. There'll be plenty to go round, I can assure you."

"You mean it?" cried Badger. "You *really mean* it?" Mr. Fox pushed his face close to Badger's and

whispered darkly, "*Do you know* where we've just been?"

"Where?"

"Right inside Boggis's Chicken House Number One!"

"No!"

"Yes! But that is nothing to where we are going now. You have come just at the right moment, my dear Badger. You can help us dig. And in the meanwhile, your small son can run back to Mrs. Badger and all the others and spread the good news." Mr. Fox turned to the Small Badger and said, "Tell them they are invited to a Fox's Feast. Then bring them all down here and follow this tunnel back until you find my home!"

"Yes, Mr. Fox!" said the Small Badger. "Yes, sir! Right away, sir! Oh, thank you, sir!" and he scrambled quickly back through the hole in the roof of the tunnel and disappeared.

