

Badger Has Doubts

"JUST ONE MORE VISIT!" cried Mr. Fox.

"And I'll bet I know where that'll be," said the only Small Fox now left. He was the Smallest Fox of them all.

"Where?" said Badger.

"Well," said the Smallest Fox. "We've been to Boggis and we've been to Bunce but we haven't been to Bean. It must be Bean."

"You are right," said Mr. Fox. "But what you don't know is which *part* of Bean's place we are about to visit."

"Which?" they said both together.

"Ah-ha," said Mr. Fox. "Just you wait and see." They were digging as they talked. The tunnel was going forward fast.

Suddenly Badger said, "Doesn't this worry you just a tiny bit, Foxy?"

"Worry me?" said Mr. Fox. "What?"

"All this . . . this *stealing*."

Mr. Fox stopped digging and stared at Badger as though he had gone completely dotty. "My dear old furry frump," he said, "do you know anyone in the *whole world* who wouldn't swipe a few

chickens if his children were starving to death?"

There was a short silence while Badger thought deeply about this.

"You are far too respectable," said Mr. Fox.

"There's nothing wrong with being respectable," Badger said.

"Look," said Mr. Fox, "Boggis and Bunce and Bean are out to *kill* us. You realize that, I hope?"

"I do, Foxy, I do indeed," said the gentle Badger.

"But *we're* not going to stoop to *their* level. We don't want to kill *them*."

"I should hope not, indeed," said Badger.



"We wouldn't dream of it," said Mr. Fox. "We shall simply take a little food here and there to keep us and our families alive. Right?"

"I suppose we'll have to," said Badger.

"If *they* want to be horrible, let them," said Mr. Fox. "We down here are decent peace-loving people."

Badger laid his head on one side and smiled at Mr. Fox. "Foxy," he said, "I love you."

"Thank you," said Mr. Fox. "And now let's get on with the digging."

Five minutes later, Badger's front paws hit against something flat and hard. "What on earth is this?" he said. "It looks like a solid stone wall." He and Mr. Fox scraped away the soil. It *was* a wall. But it was built of bricks, not stones. The wall was right in front of them, blocking their way.

"Now who in the world would build a wall under the ground?" asked Badger.

"Very simple," said Mr. Fox. "It's the wall of an underground room. And if I am not mistaken, it is exactly what I'm looking for."

Bean's Secret Cider Cellar

Mr. Fox examined the wall carefully. He saw that the cement between the bricks was old and crumbly, so he loosened a brick without much trouble and pulled it away. Suddenly, out from the hole where the brick had been, there popped a small sharp face with whiskers, "Go away!" it snapped. "You can't come in here! It's private!"

"Good Lord!" said Badger. "It's Rat!"

"You saucy beast!" said Mr. Fox. "I should have guessed we'd find you down here somewhere."



"Go away!" shrieked Rat. "Go on, beat it! This is my private pitch!"

"Shut up," said Mr. Fox.

"I will not shut up!" shrieked Rat. "This is *my* place! I got here first!"

Mr. Fox gave a brilliant smile, flashing his white teeth. "My dear Rat," he said softly, "I am a hungry fellow and if you don't hop it quickly I shall eat-you-up-in-one-gulp!"

That did it. Rat popped back fast out of sight. Mr. Fox laughed and began pulling more bricks out of the wall. When he had made a biggish hole, he crept through it. Badger and the Smallest Fox followed him in.

They found themselves in a vast, damp, gloomy cellar. "This is it!" cried Mr. Fox.

"This is *what*?" said Badger. "The place is empty."

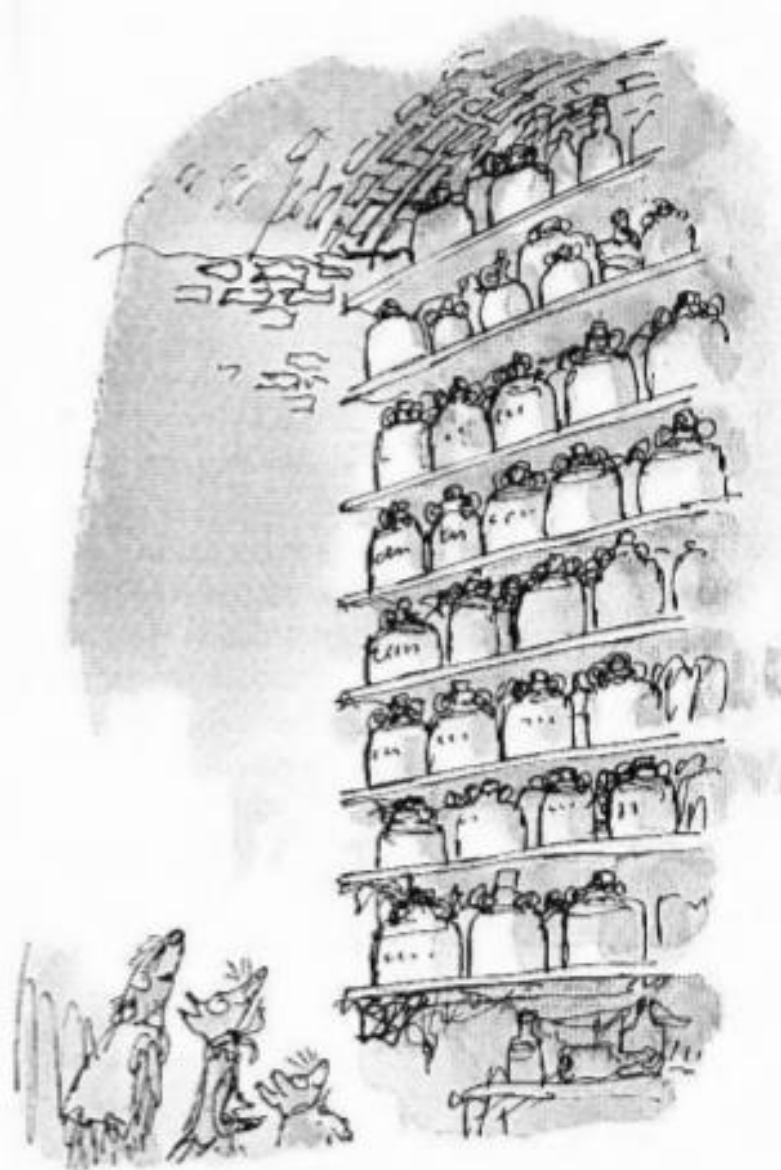
"Where are the turkeys?" asked the Smallest Fox, staring into the gloom. "I thought Bean was a turkey man."

"He is a turkey man," said Mr. Fox. "But we're not after turkeys now. We've got plenty of food."

"Then what *do* we need, Dad?"

"Take a good look round," said Mr. Fox. "Don't you see *anything* that interests you?"

Badger and the Smallest Fox peered into the half-darkness. As their eyes became accustomed to the gloom, they began to see what looked like a whole lot of big glass jars standing upon shelves around the walls. They went closer. They *were* jars. There were hundreds of them, and upon each one was written the word CIDER.





The Smallest Fox leaped high in the air. "Oh, Dad!" he cried out. "Look what we've found! It's cider!"

"Ex-actly," said Mr. Fox.

"Tremendous!" shouted Badger.

"Bean's Secret Cider Cellar," said Mr. Fox. "But go carefully, my dears. Don't make a noise. This cellar is right underneath the farmhouse itself."

"Cider," said Badger, "is especially good for Badgers. We take it as medicine—one large glass three times a day with meals and another at bedtime."

"It will make the feast into a banquet," said Mr. Fox.

While they were talking, the Smallest Fox had sneaked a jar off the shelf and had taken a gulp. "Wow!" he gasped. "Wow-ee!"

You must understand this was not the ordinary weak fizzy cider one buys in a store. It was the real stuff, a home-brewed fiery liquor that burned in your throat and boiled in your stomach.



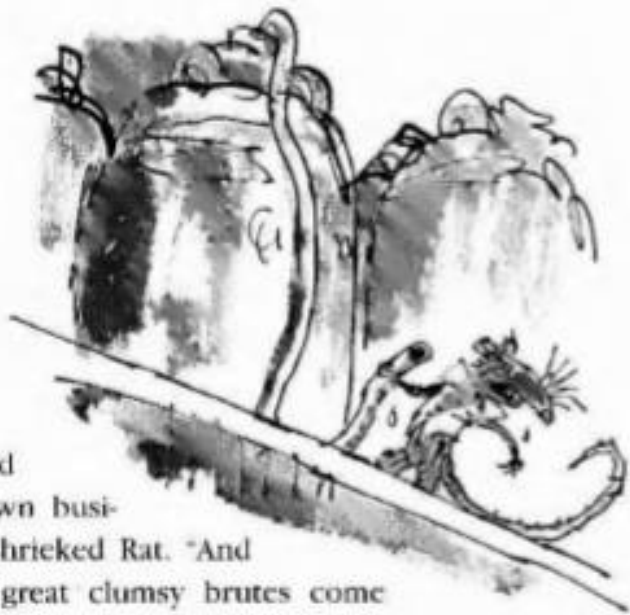
"Ah-h-h-h-h!" gasped the Smallest Fox. "This is *some cider!*"

"That's quite enough of that," said Mr. Fox, grabbing the jar and putting it to his own lips. He took a tremendous gulp. "It's miraculous!" he whispered, fighting for breath. "It's fabulous! It's beautiful!"

"It's my turn," said Badger, taking the jar and tilting his head well back. The cider gurgled and bubbled down his throat. "It's . . . it's like melted gold!" he gasped. "Oh, Foxy, it's . . . like drinking sunbeams and rainbows!"

"You're poaching!" shrieked Rat. "Put that down at once! There'll be none left for me!" Rat was perched upon the highest shelf in the cellar, peering out from behind a huge jar. There was a small rubber tube inserted in the neck of the jar, and Rat was using this tube to suck out the cider.

"You're drunk!" said Mr. Fox.



"Mind your own business!" shrieked Rat. "And if you great clumsy brutes come messing about in here we'll all be caught! Get out and leave me to sip my cider in peace."

At that moment they heard a woman's voice calling out in the house above them. "Hurry up and get that cider, Mabel!" the voice called. "You know Mr. Bean doesn't like to be kept waiting! Especially when he's been out all night in a tent!"

The animals froze. They stayed absolutely still, their ears pricked, their bodies tense. Then they heard the sound of a door being opened. The door was at the top of a flight of stone steps leading down from the house to the cellar.

And now someone was starting to come down those steps.

