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The Woman

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"QUICK!" SAID MR. FOX. "HIDE!" He and Badger and the Smallest Fox jumped up on to a shelf and crouched behind a row of big cider jars. Peering around the jars, they saw a huge woman coming down into the cellar. At the foot of the steps, the woman paused, looking to right and left. Then she turned and headed straight for the place where Mr. Fox and Badger and the Smallest Fox were hiding. She stopped right in front of them. The only thing between her and them was a row of cider jars. She was so close, Mr. Fox could hear the sound of her breathing. Peeping through the crack between two bottles, he noticed that she carried a big rolling-pin in one hand.





"How many will he want this time, Mrs. Bean?" the woman shouted. And from the top of the steps the other voice called back, "Bring up two or three jars."

"He drank four yesterday, Mrs. Bean."

"Yes, but he won't want that many today because he's not going to be up there more than a few hours longer. He says the fox is bound to make a run for it this morning. It can't possibly stay down that hole another day without food."

The woman in the cellar reached out and lifted a jar of cider from the shelf. The jar she took was next but one to the jar behind which Mr. Fox was crouching.

"I'll be glad when the rotten brute is killed and strung up on the front porch," she called out. "And by the way, Mrs. Bean, your husband promised I could have the tail as a souvenir."

"The tail's been all shot to pieces," said the voice from upstairs. "Didn't you know that?"

"You mean it's *ruined*?"

"Of course it's ruined. They shot the tail but missed the fox."

"Oh heck!" said the big woman. "I did so want that tail!"

"You can have the head instead, Mabel. You can get it stuffed and hang it on your bedroom wall. Hurry up now with that cider!"

"Yes, Ma'am, I'm coming," said the big woman, and she took a second jar from the shelf.



*If she takes one more, she'll see us,* thought Mr. Fox. He could feel the Smallest Fox's body pressed tightly against his own, quivering with excitement.

"Will two be enough, Mrs. Bean, or shall I take three?"

"My goodness, Mabel, I don't care so long as you get a move on!"

"Then two it is," said the huge woman, speaking to herself now. "He drinks too much anyway."

Carrying a jar in each hand and with the rolling-pin tucked under one arm, she walked away across the cellar. At the foot of the steps she paused and

looked around, sniffing the air. "There's rats down here again, Mrs. Bean. I can smell 'em."

"Then poison them, woman, poison them! You know where the poison's kept."

"Yes, Ma'am," Mabel said. She climbed slowly out of sight up the steps. The door slammed.

"Quick!" said Mr. Fox. "Grab a jar each and run for it!"

Rat stood on his high shelf and shrieked. "What did I tell you! You nearly got nabbed, didn't you? You nearly gave the game away! You keep out of here from now on! I don't want you around! This is my place!"

"*You,*" said Mr. Fox, "are going to be poisoned."

"Poppycock!" said Rat. "I sit up here and watch her putting the stuff down. She'll never get *me*."

Mr. Fox and Badger and the Smallest Fox ran across the cellar clutching a gallon jar each. "Goodbye, Rat!" they called out as they disappeared through the hole in the wall. "Thanks for the lovely cider!"

"Thieves!" shrieked Rat. "Robbers! Bandits! Burglars!"



## The Great Feast

BACK IN THE TUNNEL they paused so that Mr. Fox could brick up the hole in the wall. He was humming to himself as he put the bricks back in place. "I can still taste that glorious cider," he said. "What an impudent fellow Rat is."

"He has bad manners," Badger said. "All rats have bad manners. I've never met a polite rat yet."

"And he drinks too much," said Mr. Fox, putting the last brick in place. "There we are. Now, home to the feast!"

They grabbed their jars of cider and off they went. Mr. Fox was in front, the Smallest Fox came next and Badger last. Along the tunnel they flew . . . past the turning that led to Bunce's Mighty Storehouse . . . past Boggis's Chicken House Number One

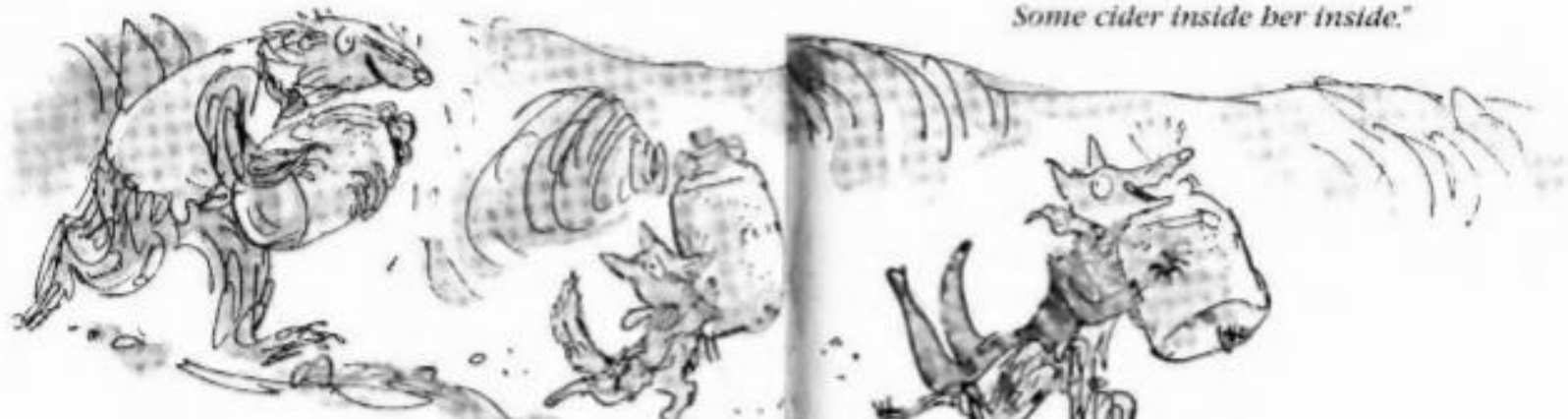
and then up the long home stretch towards the place where they knew Mrs. Fox would be waiting.

"Keep it up, my darlings!" shouted Mr. Fox. "We'll soon be there! Think what's waiting for us at the other end! And just think what we're bringing home with us in these jars! That ought to cheer up poor Mrs. Fox." Mr. Fox sang a little song as he ran:

*"Home again swiftly I glide,  
Back to my beautiful bride.  
Sbe'll not feel so rotten  
As soon as sbe's gotten  
Some cider inside ber inside."*

Then Badger joined in:

*"Oh poor Mrs. Badger, be cried,  
So hungry sbe very near died.  
But sbe'll not feel so hollow  
If only sbe'll swallow  
Some cider inside ber inside."*



They were still singing as they rounded the final corner and burst in upon the most wonderful and amazing sight any of them had ever seen. The feast was just beginning. A large dining-room had been hollowed out of the earth, and in the middle of it, seated around a huge table, were no less than twenty-nine animals. They were:

Mrs. Fox and three Small Foxes.

Mrs. Badger and three Small Badgers.

Mole and Mrs. Mole and four Small Moles.

Rabbit and Mrs. Rabbit and five Small Rabbits.

Weasel and Mrs. Weasel and six Small Weasels.

The table was covered with chickens and ducks and geese and hams and bacon, and everyone was tucking into the lovely food.



"My darling!" cried Mrs. Fox, jumping up and hugging Mr. Fox. "We couldn't wait! Please forgive us!" Then she hugged the Smallest Fox of all, and Mrs. Badger hugged Badger, and everyone hugged everyone else. Amid shouts of joy, the great jars of cider were placed upon the table, and Mr. Fox and Badger and the Smallest Fox sat down with the others.

You must remember no one had eaten a thing for several days. They were ravenous. So for a while there was no conversation at all. There was only the sound of crunching and chewing as the animals attacked the succulent food.

At last, Badger stood up. He raised his glass of cider and called out, "A toast! I want you all to stand and drink a toast to our dear friend who has saved our lives this day—Mr. Fox!"

"To Mr. Fox!" they all shouted, standing up and raising their glasses. "To Mr. Fox! Long may he live!"



Then Mrs. Fox got shyly to her feet and said, "I don't want to make a speech. I just want to say one thing, and it is this: MY HUSBAND IS A FANTASTIC FOX." Everyone clapped and cheered. Then Mr. Fox himself stood up.



"This delicious meal . . ." he began, then he stopped. In the silence that followed, he let fly a tremendous belch. There was laughter and more clapping. "This delicious meal, my friends," he went on, "is by courtesy of Messrs Boggis, Bunce and Bean." (More cheering and laughter.) "And I hope you have enjoyed it as much as I have." He let fly another colossal belch.

"Better out than in," said Badger.





"Thank you," said Mr. Fox, grinning hugely. "But now, my friends, let us be serious. Let us think of tomorrow and the next day and the days after that. If we go out, we will be killed. Right?"

"Right!" they shouted.

"We'll be shot before we've gone a yard," said Badger.

"Ex-actly," said Mr. Fox. "But who *wants* to go out, anyway; let me ask you that? We are all diggers, every one of us. We hate the outside. The outside is full of enemies. We only go out because we have to, to get food for our families. But now, my friends, we have an entirely new set-up. We have a safe tunnel leading to three of the finest stores in the world!"

"We do indeed!" said Badger. "I've seen 'em!"

"And you know what this means?" said Mr. Fox. "*It means that none of us need ever go out into the open again!*"

There was a buzz of excitement around the table.

"I therefore invite you all," Mr. Fox went on, "to stay here with me for ever."

"For ever!" they cried. "My goodness! How marvelous!" And Rabbit said to Mrs. Rabbit, "My dear, just think! We're never going to be shot at again in our lives!"

"We will make," said Mr. Fox, "a little underground village, with streets and houses on each side—separate houses for Badgers and Moles and Rabbits and Weasels and Foxes. And every day I will go shopping for you all. And every day we will eat like kings."

The cheering that followed this speech went on for many minutes.



## 18 Still Waiting

OUTSIDE THE FOX'S HOLE, Boggis and Bunce and Bean sat beside their tents with their guns on their laps. It was beginning to rain. Water was trickling down the necks of the three men and into their shoes.



"He won't stay down there much longer now," Boggis said.

"The brute must be famished," Bunce said.

"That's right," Bean said. "He'll be making a dash for it any moment. Keep your guns handy."

They sat there by the hole, waiting for the fox to come out.

And so far as I know, they are still waiting.

