

HALF-PAST SEVEN STORIES



1. The Little Lost Fox



Marmaduke was sitting on the fence. He wasn't thinking of anything in particular, just looking around. Jehosophat called to him from the barnyard,—

“Come'n an' play 'I spy.'”

But Marmaduke only grumbled,—

“Don't want to.”

“Well, let's play 'Cross Tag' then,” Jehosophat suggested.

“Don't want to,” repeated his brother again, not very politely.

Jehosophat thought for a moment, then he suggested something worth-while:

“I'll tell you what, let's play 'Duck-on-the-Rock.'”

Now as every boy in the world—at least in America—knows, that is a wonderful game, but Marmaduke only said very crossly,—

“I don't want to play any of your ol' games.” Now when Marmaduke acted that way there must have been something the matter. Perhaps he had gobbled down his oatmeal too fast—in great big gulps—when he should have let the Thirty White Horses “champ, champ, champ,” all those oats. They were cooked oats, but then the Thirty White Horses, unlike Teddy and Hal and ole Methusaleh, prefer cooked oats to raw.

Perhaps he had eaten a green apple. Sometimes he did that, and the tart juice puckered his mouth all up, and—what was worse—puckered his stomach all up, too.

Anyway, he felt tired and out-of-sorts; tired of his toys, tired of all the games, even such nice ones as “Duck-on-the-rock” and “Red Rover.”

There was nothing to do but sit on the fence.

Still, the world looked pretty nice from up there. It always looked more interesting from a high place, and sometimes it gave you an excited feeling. Of course, the big elm was a better

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perch, or the roof of the barn, and Marmaduke often wondered what it would be like to see the world from a big balloon, but the fence was good enough. It curved up over a little hill, and he could see lots of the world from there.

He looked over towards the West, where the Sun marched into his barn every night. Fatty Hamm declared that the Sun kept a garage behind that hill, but Marmaduke insisted it was a barn, for he liked horses best, and the Sun must drive horses. There was a real hill there, not little like the one where he sat on the fence, but a big one, 'most as big as a mountain, Marmaduke thought. Sometimes it was green, and sometimes grey or blue, and once or twice he had seen it almost as purple as a pansy.

But it was Fall now, and the hill had turned brown. Over it he could see little figures moving. He looked at them very carefully, with one eye shut to see them the better. Then he decided that the bigger ones were men on horses, the little ones dogs. They all looked tiny because they were so far away.

As they came nearer and the sun shone on them, he was pretty sure the men had red coats. Could they be soldiers ?

Just then the Toyman came by, with coils of wire and clippers in his hand. He was on his way to mend the fence in the North Pasture.

"Llo Toyman!" said Marmaduke.

"Howdy, little fellow!" replied the Toyman, "what are you doing there? Settin' on the top of the world and enjoyin' yourself?"

"I was wondering what those men over there were doing." And the boy waved his hand towards the little black figures on the hill.

"Why, that's the hunt," explained the Toyman. "The rich folks, having nothing better to do, are killin' time."

Marmaduke was puzzled.

"Are they really hunting Time ?" he asked. "I thought maybe they were hunting lions or tigers."

"No, not today," the Toyman responded, "I'm sorry to disappoint you, but they're only after Reddy."

"Reddy Toms?" the little boy exclaimed. "Why, whatever did he do? "

Now Reddy Toms was a boy in his own class, and you could always tell him a long way off because his head was covered with red hair as thick as a thatched roof, and his face was spotted all over, like a snake's, with freckles.

However, the Toyman said it was all a mistake.

"No, not that tad," he explained, "it's Reddy Fox they're after."

"What!" exclaimed Marmaduke. "Does it take all those big men to hunt one little fox?"

"It seems so, son," the Toyman returned, "but that's the way of the world."

"Well, I think it's mean," insisted Marmaduke. "Those men are nothing' but—but—dumbbells !"

The Toyman threw back his head and laughed. That was a new expression to him, but it

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was a perfectly good one. You see, the big boys in school used it when they thought anyone was particularly stupid or mean. But the Toyman must have understood it anyway, for he went on,—

“That’s my sentiments exactly. I don’t suppose they mean to be cruel, but they don’t give little Reddy half a chance—and he’s so small! Now if it was lions or tigers, as you suggest, why, that would be different.”

“You bet it would!” Marmaduke replied. “I just wish it was.” Now, of course, he should have said “were,” as the teacher in the Red Schoolhouse was forever telling him, but a little boy can’t always remember correct English when a hunt is coming so close.

“Just set tight, boy, and you’ll see their red coats soon.”

And, waving his clippers, the Toyman went on his way to the North Pasture.

But Marmaduke didn’t need any advice. He had spotted those red coats already. They were much nearer now, for they rode very fast. Already the horses were leaping the fence of the Miller Farm, and the dogs were crisscrossing over the field, making lots of letter W’s as they ran—hundreds of them, Marmaduke was sure. And they followed something—something so small he could hardly see what it was. But he guessed it must be Reddy.

So many fences they leaped, and so many stone walls! Now they were near the Brook, and yes, he could see the red coats, very bright and plain now.

And then he spied Reddy. His coat wasn’t as gay as those the men wore. Theirs were bright like cherries, and his was the color of chestnuts. It seemed such a shame to want his poor little coat when the men had such nice ones themselves.

“Cracky!” he exclaimed. One of the “ole hunters” had fallen in the Brook. And Marmaduke hoped that red coat would get soaked and soaked and run like the stockings Mother had bought from the pedlar. And he hoped that “ole hunter” would get wet to the skin, and shiver and shiver, and have to call in the doctor who’d prescribe the very worst medicine there was in the world. It would serve that “ole hunter” right if he’d almost die. But Marmaduke hoped the poor horse wouldn’t break his leg. It wasn’t the horses’ fault they were chasing Reddy.

Now the hunters were lost in Jake Miller’s Woods. All he could see were patches of red, here and there, in the bushes, but he heard the deep voices of the dogs, all the time, calling and calling.

Then all-of-a-sudden something happened. And Marmaduke liked all-of-a-sudden things to happen—they were so exciting.

A little streak of fur, with tail flying behind like a long pretty hat brush, galloped across the Apgar field, then the very field where Marmaduke sat, perched on the fence.

The dogs were right after Reddy, running hard, too, but they were two fields farther back. Reddy, you see, had fooled them in that wood, and he had gotten a good headstart.

My, how Reddy was running!

Marmaduke stood up on the fence and shouted:

“Hooray, go it Reddy!”

He shouted so hard, and waved his hands so excitedly that he tumbled off his perch,

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and lay still for a second. He was frightened, too, but he forgot all about the bump on his forehead, and picked himself up, and ran after Reddy across the field towards the barnyard, which, fortunately, was just on the other side.

“Ooooooohhhhh!”—a very deep “Ooooooohhhhh!” came from behind him from the throats of the dogs. They were only one field away now, and it sounded as if they were pretty mad.

But Reddy had reached the corner of the field where the blackberry bushes lined the fence. Now usually Reddy would have looked all around those bushes until he found an opening; then he would have stepped daintily through it. But he didn't do that today, oh no! You see his family has a great reputation for wisdom, and Reddy must have been just as wise as the man in Mother Goose, for he neither stopped nor stayed, but jumped right in those brambles and managed somehow to get through the rails of the fence to the other side. He left part of his pretty red coat in the briars. However, that was better than leaving it all to those dogs who were howling not far behind.

And now the Little Fox found himself near the barn and flew towards it so fast that his legs fairly twinkled as he ran.

The Foolish White Geese were taking their morning waddle, and Reddy ran plump into them. Now there was nothing that he liked better to eat than nice fat goose. Still, he didn't wait, but left them beating their wings and stretching their long necks to hiss, hiss, hiss, as they scattered in all directions. I guess Reddy wished his legs were as long as their necks.

Now in the old days when rich folks lived in castles and robber knights quarreled and fought every day of the week, there were always places of sanctuary, where any man could be safe from harm. That is just what Reddy saw in front of him, a place of sanctuary for himself.

It was funny, but it had been prepared by little Wienerwurst. And Wienerwurst was really Reddy's enemy, for all dogs like to chase foxes whenever they get the chance. It was a little hole, just the right size for Wienerwurst, just the right size for Reddy. The little yellow doggie wasn't there now. He had dug it that morning to catch the big rat hiding somewhere below the floor of the barn. He had started to build a tunnel under the wall, and had been a long time working at it when Mother Green came from the house. She carried a fine large bone, with lots of meat left on it, too. And, of course, when the little dog smelled that bone and meat, much as he liked rats, he just had to leave his work at the tunnel and run straight for the bone, leaving the hole waiting for Reddy.

Straight into it Reddy ran, just as Marmaduke and the big dogs reached the fence and the blackberry bushes, all at the same time. Now Marmaduke could have cried because the hunter dogs would reach the hole before he could get there and cover it up, and they would reach down into that hole and drag Reddy out by his pretty red coat and eat him all up.

But when he stuck his head through the rail he saw help coming. Jehosophat was there and he had heard those bad dogs and seen them, too, coming on with their big mouths open and their tongues hanging out as if they wanted to swallow Reddy down in one gulp. And Jehosophat could see the redcoats on the horses not far away. They had reached the big oak

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in the field and were coming on very fast.

He looked around. There was the very thing. A nice, broad cover of an egg-crate. It would fit exactly. So, quick as a wink, Jehosophat picked it up and clapped it over the hole. Then he looked around again. It wasn't quite safe yet. But there was the big rock which they used for "Duck-on-the-rock." The very thing! It was almost more than he could manage, that rock, but he pulled and he tugged, and he tugged and he pulled, 'til he had it safe on the crate-cover over the hole—and Reddy was saved!

It was just in time, too, for the dogs had come barking and yelping and bellowing, and now all they could do was to sniff, sniff, sniff around that hole.

Then over the fence into the barnyard jumped the horses; and Marmaduke came running up; and the Toyman rushed over from the field; and Father came out of the barn; and Mother flew out of the house; and Rover and Brownie and Wienerwurst raced from the pond, each one to see what all the hullabaloo was about.

What they did see was the two boys standing guard in front of the hole to protect little Reddy, and the big hunter dogs jumping up on them with their paws and growling most terribly. It was a wonder that the boys weren't frightened enough to run away, but they didn't. They just stood their ground. Still, they were glad enough to see Father and the Toyman close by.

And now one of the men in redcoats had dismounted from his horse, and Marmaduke called to him,—

"You shan't touch Reddy, you shan't!"

He was half crying, too, not for himself, but for Reddy.

The man was taking off his cap. He was very polite, and he bowed to Mother.

"We'll pay for all damages, Madam, but let us have the brush."

The boys thought that was funny, calling their mother "madam," when everybody in the neighborhood called her "Mis' Green." And what did he want a brush for? To brush his fine cap and red coat or his shiny boots? Or to wipe up Reddy out of his hole? However, the Toyman was whispering:

"He means Reddy's tail. That's what hunters call the brush."

When Marmaduke heard that, he grabbed tight hold of the Toyman's hand on one side and of his father's on the other, and shouted:

"Don't let them get Reddy!"

But Father was talking to the man. He called him "Mr. Seymour-Frelinghuysen," and both the boys wondered if all people with fine horses and shiny boots and red coats had to have long, funny-sounding names like that.

"It's all right about the damages, Mr. Seymour-Frelinghuysen," Father was saying, "but I guess we won't give up the fox today."

And Father smiled down at Marmaduke, and oh, wasn't that little boy relieved and happy, and his brother, too! As for the Toyman, he had a funny twinkle in his eyes.

Of course, there was a lot of grumbling on the part of the redcoats, and a lot of barking and growling from the big hunter dogs, but the men had to get on their horses and call off

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their dogs and ride away.

“I guess they knew they were in the wrong,” said Jehosophat, after they had tied up Rover and Brownie and Wienerwurst, and taken the stone and board away from Reddy’s hole.

Then they looked in the hole-but no Reddy!

Meanwhile the Toyman had gone into the barn.

“Come here!” he shouted.

So they ran in, and there, in the corner, hidden under the hay was Reddy, all muddy from the brook and torn from the briars. His eyes looked very bright, but they looked pitiful too.

The Toyman put out his hand and stroked his fur. At first Reddy showed his teeth and snapped at the Toyman just like a baby wolf. But that hand came towards him so quietly, and the voice sounded so gentle, that Reddy lay still. You see, the Toyman somehow understood how to treat foxes and all kinds of animals just as well as he did boys, little or big.

“What doesn’t that man know?” Mother had said once, and right she was, too.

It took some time to train Reddy, for, although he was very small, he was very wild. However, the Toyman managed to tame him. Perhaps it was because the Little Lost Fox was wounded and sore and hurt all over. Anyway, he seemed to appreciate what the Toyman did for him, for all he was a little wild child of the fields and the forests.

They built him a house, all for himself, and a fence of wire. It was great fun to see him poking his sharp nose through the holes and stepping around so daintily on his pretty little feet.

He always had such a wise look. In fact, he was too wise altogether, for one day he was gone, through some little hole he had dug under his fence.—And they never saw him again—at least, they haven’t to this day.

At first the three children felt very sad about this, but when the Toyman explained it, they saw how everything was all right.

“You see,” the Toyman said, “he’s happier in the woods and fields than being cooped up here.”

Marmaduke thought about that for a moment.

“Anyway,” he began, “anyway,——”

“Yes?” said Mother, trying to help him out.

“Anyway, I’m glad we saved him from the ole redcoats,” he finished.

And maybe Reddy will visit them again some day. Stranger things than that have happened. So, who knows!