



Chapter 15

 *The Little Foxes*

“So, when they got to the top of the hill, Bruno opened the hamper: and he took out the Bread, and the Apples and the Milk: and they ate, and they drank. And when they’d finished the Milk, and eaten half the Bread and half the Apples, the Lamb said ‘Oh, my paws is so sticky! I want to wash my paws!’ And the Lion said ‘Well, go down the hill, and wash them in the brook, yonder. We’ll wait for you!’ “

“It never comed back!” Bruno solemnly whispered to me.

But Sylvie overheard him. “You’re not to whisper, Bruno! It spoils the story! And when the Lamb had been gone a long time, the Lion said to Bruno ‘Do go and see after that silly little Lamb! It must have lost its way.’ And Bruno went down the hill. And when he got to the brook, he saw the Lamb sitting on the bank. and who should be sitting by it but an old Fox!”

“Don’t know who should be sitting by it,” Bruno said thoughtfully to himself. “A old Fox were sitting by it.”

“And the old Fox were saying,” Sylvie went on, for once conceding the grammatical point. “‘Yes, my dear, you’ll be ever so happy with us, if you’ll only come and I’ve got three little Foxes there, and we do love lambs so dearly!’ And the Lamb said ‘But you never eat them, do you, Sir?’ And the Fox said ‘Oh, no! eat a Lamb? We never dream of doing such a thing!’ So the Lamb said ‘Then I’ll come with you. And off the y went, hand in hand.’”

“That Fox were welly extremely wicked, weren’t it?” said Bruno.

“No, no!” said Sylvie, rather shocked at such violent language. “It wasn’t quite so bad as that!”

“Well, I mean, it wasn’t nice,” the little fellow corrected himself.

“And so Bruno went back to the Lion. ‘Oh, come quick!’ he said. ‘The Fox has taken the Lamb to his house with him! I’m sure he means to eat it!’ And the Lion said ‘I’ll come as quick as ever I can!’ And they trotted down the hill.”

*CHAPTER 15 -- THE LITTLE FOXES*

---

“Do oo think he caught the Fox, Mister Sir?” said Bruno. I shook my head, not liking to speak: and Sylvie went on.

“And when they got to the house, Bruno looked in at the window. And there he saw the three little Foxes sitting round the table, with their clean pinafores on, and spoons in their hands--”

“Spoons in their hands!” Bruno repeated in an ecstasy of delight.

“And the Fox had got a great big knife--all ready to kill the poor little Lamb--” (“Oo needn’t be frightened, Mister Sir!” Bruno put in, in a hasty whisper.)

“And just as he was going to do it, Bruno heard a great ROAR “ (The real Bruno put his hand into mine, and held tight), “and the Lion came bang through the door, and the next moment it had bitten off the old Fox’s head! And Bruno jumped in at the window, and went leaping round the room, and crying out ‘Hooray! Hooray! The old Fox is dead! The old Fox is dead!’ “

Bruno got up in some excitement. “May I do it now?” he enquired.

Sylvie was quite decided on this point. “Wait till afterwards,” she said. “The speeches come next, don’t you know? You always love the speeches, don’t you?”

“Yes, I doos,” said Bruno: and sat down again.

“The Lion’s speech. ‘Now, you silly little Lamb, go home to your mother, and never listen to old Foxes again. And be very good and obedient.’ “

“The Lamb’s speech. ‘Oh, indeed, Sir, I will, Sir!’ and the Lamb went away. “ (“But oo needn’t go away!” Bruno explained. “It’s quite the nicest part--what’s coming now!” Sylvie smiled. She liked having an appreciative audience.)

“The Lion’s speech to Bruno. ‘Now, Bruno, take those little Foxes home with you, and teach them to be good obedient little Foxes! Not like that wicked old thing there, that’s got no head!’ “ (“That hasn’t got no head,” Bruno repeated.)

*CHAPTER 15 -- THE LITTLE FOXES*

---

“Bruno’s speech to the Lion. ‘Oh, indeed, Sir, I will Sir!’ And the Lion went away.” (“It gets betterer and betterer, now,” Bruno whispered to me, “right away to the end!”)

“Bruno’s speech to the little Foxes. ‘Now, little Foxes, you’re going to have your first lesson in being good--I’m going to put you into the hamper, along with the Apples and the Bread: and you’re not to eat the Apples: and you’re not to eat the Bread: and you’re not to eat anything--till we get to my house: and then you’ll have your supper.’ “

“The little Foxes’ speech to Bruno. The little Foxes said nothing.

“So Bruno put the Apples into the hamper--and the little Foxes--and the Bread--” (“They had picnicked all the Milk,” Bruno explained in a whisper) “--and he set off to go to his house.” (“We’re getting near the end now, said Bruno.)

“And, when he had got a little way, he thought would look into the hamper, and see how the little Foxes were getting on.”

“So he opened the door “ said Bruno.

“Oh, Bruno!” Sylvie exclaimed, “you’re not telling the story! So he opened the door, and behold, there were no Apples! So Bruno said ‘Eldest little Fox, have you been eating the Apples?’ And the eldest little Fox said No no no,’ “ (It is impossible to give the tone in which Sylvie repeated this rapid little ‘No no no!’ The nearest I can come to it is to say that it was much as if a young and excited duck had tried to quack the words. It was too quick for a quack, and yet too harsh to be anything else.) “Then he said ‘Second little Fox, have you been eating the Apples?’ And the second little Fox said ‘No no no!’ Then he said ‘Youngest little Fox, have you been eating the Apples?’ And the youngest little Fox tried to say ‘No no no!’ but its mouth was so full, it couldn’t, and it only said ‘Wauch! Wauch! Wauch!’ And Bruno looked into its mouth. And its mouth was full of Apples. And Bruno shook his head, and he said ‘Oh dear, oh dear! What bad creatures these Foxes are!’ “

Bruno was listening intently: and, when Sylvie paused to take breath, he could only just gasp out the words “About the Bread?”

“Yes,” said Sylvie, “the Bread comes next. So he shut the door again; and he went a little further; and then he thought he’d just peep in once more. And behold, there was no Bread!” “What do ‘behold’ mean?” said Bruno. “Hush!” said Sylvie.) “And he said Eldest little Fox, have you been eating the Bread?’ And the eldest little Fox said ‘No no no!’ ‘Second

*CHAPTER 15 -- THE LITTLE FOXES*

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little Fox, have you been eating the Bread?’ And the second little Fox only said ‘Wauch! Wauch! Wauch!’ And Bruno looked into its mouth, and its mouth was full of Bread!’ ( It might have chokeded it,” said Bruno.) “So he said ‘Oh dear, oh dear! What shall I do with these Foxes?’ And he went a little further “ (“Now comes the most interesting part,” Bruno whispered.)

“And when Bruno opened the hamper again, what do you think he saw?” (“Only two Foxes!” Bruno cried in a great hurry.) “You shouldn’t tell it so quick. However he did see only two Foxes. And he said ‘Eldest little Fox have you been eating the youngest little Fox?’ And the eldest little Fox said ‘No no no!’ ‘Second little Fox, have you been eating the youngest little Fox?’ And the second little Fox did its very best to say ‘No no no!’ but it could only say ‘Weuchk! Weuchk! Weuchk!’ And when Bruno looked into its mouth, it was half full of Bread, and half full of Fox!’ (Bruno said nothing in the pause this time. He was beginning to pant a little, as he knew the crisis was coming. )

“And when he’d got nearly home, he looked once more into the hamper, and he saw--”

“Only--” Bruno began, but a generous thought struck him, and he looked at me. “Oo may say it, this time, Mister Sir!” he whispered. It was a noble offer, but I wouldn’t rob him of the treat. “Go on, Bruno,” I said, “you say it much the best.” “Only--but--one--Fox!” Bruno said with great solemnity.

“‘Eldest little Fox,’ “ Sylvie said, dropping the narrative-form in her eagerness, “‘you’ve been so good that I can hardly believe you’ve been disobedient: but I’m afraid you’ve been eating your little sister?’ And the eldest little Fox said ‘Whihuauch! Whihuauch!’ and then it choked. And Bruno looked into its mouth, and it was full! (Sylvie paused to take breath, and Bruno lay back among the daisies, and looked at me triumphantly. “Isn’t it grand, Mister Sir?” said he. I tried hard to assume a critical tone. “It’s grand,” I said: “but it frightens one so! Oo may sit a little closer to me, if oo like,” said Bruno.)

“And so Bruno went home: and took the hamper into the kitchen, and opened it. And he saw--” Sylvie looked at me, this time, as if she thought I had been rather neglected and ought to be allowed one guess, at any rate.

“He ca’n’t guess!” Bruno cried eagerly. “I ‘fraid I must tell him! There weren’t nuffin in the hamper!” I shivered in terror, and Bruno clapped his hands with delight. ‘He is frightened, Sylvie! Tell the rest!”

*CHAPTER 15 -- THE LITTLE FOXES*

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“So Bruno said ‘Eldest little Fox, have you been eating yourself, you wicked little Fox?’ And the eldest little fox said ‘Whihuauch!’ And then Bruno saw there was only its mouth in the hamper! So he took the mouth, and he opened it, and shook, and shook! And at last he shook the little Fox out of its own mouth! And then he said ‘Open your mouth again, you wicked little thing!’ And he shook, and shook! And he shook out the second little Fox! And he said ‘Now open your mouth!’ And he shook, and shook! And he shook out the youngest little Fox, and all the Apples, and all the Bread!

“And then Bruno stood the little Foxes up against the wall: and he made them a little speech. ‘Now, little Foxes, you’ve begun very wickedly--and you’ll have to be punished. First you’ll go up to the nursery, and wash your faces, and put on clean pinafores. Then you’ll hear the bell ring for supper. Then you’ll come down: and you wo’n’t have any supper: but you’ll have a good whipping! Then you’ll go to bed. Then in the morning you’ll hear the bell ring for breakfast. But you wo’n’t have any breakfast! You’ll have a good whipping! Then you’ll have your lessons. And, perhaps, if you’re very good, when dinner-time comes, you’ll have a little dinner, and no more whipping!’” (“How very kind he was!” I whispered to Bruno. “Middling kind,” Bruno corrected me gravely.)

“So the little Foxes ran up to the nursery. And soon Bruno went into the hall, and rang the big bell. ‘Tingle, tingle, tingle! Supper, supper, supper!’ Down came the little Foxes, in such a hurry for their supper! Clean pinafores! Spoons in their hands! And, when they got into the dining-room, there was ever such a white table-cloth on the table! But there was nothing on it but a big whip. And they had such a whipping!” (I put my handkerchief to my eyes, and Bruno hastily climbed upon my knee and stroked my face. “Only one more whipping, Mister Sir!” he whispered. “Don’t cry more than oo ca’n’t help!”)

“And the next morning early, Bruno rang the big bell again. ‘Tingle, tingle, tingle! Breakfast, breakfast, breakfast!’ Down came the little Foxes! Clean pinafores! Spoons in their hands! No breakfast! Only the big whip! Then came lessons,” Sylvie hurried on, for I still had my handkerchief to my eyes. “And the little Foxes were ever so good! And they learned their lessons backwards, and forwards, and upside-down. And at last Bruno rang the big bell again. ‘Tingle, tingle, tingle! Dinner, dinner, dinner! And when the little Foxes came down--’” (“Had they clean pinafores on?” Bruno enquired. “Of course!” said Sylvie. “And spoons?” “Why, you know they had!” “Couldn’t be certain,” said Bruno.) “--they came as slow as slow! And they said ‘Oh! There’ll be no dinner! There’ll only be the big whip!’ But, when they got into the room, they saw the most lovely dinner!” (“Buns?” cried Bruno, clapping his hands.) “Buns, and cake, and--” (“--and jam?” said Bruno.) “Yes, jam--and soup--and--” (“--and sugar plums!” Bruno put in once more; and Sylvie seemed satisfied.)

*CHAPTER 15 -- THE LITTLE FOXES*

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“And ever after that, they were such good little Foxes! They did their lessons as good as gold--and they never did what Bruno told them not to--and they never ate each other any more and they never ate themselves!”

The story came to an end so suddenly, it almost took my breath away; however I did my best to make a pretty speech of thanks. “I’m sure it’s very--very--very much so, I’m sure!” I seemed to hear myself say.