



Ririro

READ ANYWHERE, ANYTIME

Mr. Fox and the Stoat Family

Abbie Phillips Walker

It was winter time in the wood, and the Four-Footed Club sat around the fire talking over their affairs, for they had cooked the last turkey, and the last of the wood was now burning.

"In all my long experience," said Mr. Fox, "I have never known food to be so scarce, and what there is of it is so poor. I doubt sometimes if Mr. Man can be feeding his fowl as he should."

"I think Mr. Dog gets more than his share," said Mr. Raccoon. "For he seems strong enough. He can run just as far as ever, as far as I can see."

"I should not be surprised if he were to blame," said Mr. Possum, "for our hard luck. Maybe he eats up everything that Mr. Man gives to the poultry. He is so strong and big; very likely he takes it away from those poor things."

"No, it isn't Mr. Dog who is to blame, if I am any guesser," said Mr. Fox, settling back in his chair and taking from his mouth his corn-cob pipe. "But I think I can tell you who is to blame for our not having anything in our pantry."

Mr. Fox dearly loved to spring a surprise on his four-footed friends, so he did not say any more but replaced his pipe and took a long, deep draw and let the smoke come out of his mouth in rings, while Mr. Raccoon and Mr. Possum sat right up straight in their chairs and waited for him to tell who was taking their food from them.

But Mr. Fox wished to be asked and did not stop smoking until Mr. Raccoon could stand it no longer and asked, "Who is taking our food? Tell us, if you know!"

"Well, perhaps I should not say he is taking it right away from us, but certainly, if he and his family were not around, we would have no trouble in getting plenty to eat."

"But WHO is it?" asked Mr. Possum, sitting on the very edge of his chair, with impatience. "Who is it, Mr. Fox? Tell us that!"

Mr. Fox cleared his throat and knocked the ashes from his pipe on the side of the fireplace before he replied, while Mr. Raccoon and Mr. Possum leaned over from their chairs until they almost tipped out of them. When Mr. Fox had begun to refill his pipe, he said, "It is Mr. Stoat and family. Yes, that whole stuck-up family

is to blame, and when I think of that miserable, sneaking lot, I feel I should do something desperate!"

"But I do not see how they take away our supply," said Mr. Raccoon. "I have never seen them around here."

"No, of course not," said Mr. Fox. "But don't you know that the whole Stoat family has new white coats, and that they can get around in the snow without being seen much easier than I can, or either of you fellows?"

Mr. Raccoon, who was always falling asleep, began to nod as soon as he heard who it was that Mr. Fox thought was to blame. But Mr. Fox gave him a poke in the side and said, "Wake up, Mr. Raccoon, wake up! I have an idea, and we may be able to get rid of the Stoats or their white coats, anyway, of which they are so proud."



Mr. Raccoon opened his eyes and sat up, for when Mr. Fox had an idea, it was usually worth hearing.

"I hope it will not take you so long to tell your idea, Mr. Fox, as it did to tell us who is to blame for our lack of food," said Mr. Possum, wishing to avoid the long wait they had in finding out about the Stoat family.

But Mr. Fox was not to be hurried, now that he had Mr. Raccoon wide awake and Mr. Possum so interested he could not do a thing but listen. Mr. Fox was in no hurry to tell his idea.

"That Stoat family, when I was a youngster, used to be called the Weasel family, and when they are not dressed in those fine white coats of theirs, they wear a very homely brown one and are a very common-looking family. So they need not put on airs with me."

"Are you going to catch them?" asked Mr. Raccoon. "If you are, you need not ask me to help, for I want nothing to do with that family."

"Nor I," said Mr. Possum. "If you go chasing those fellows, you go alone!"

"Oh! I am not going to chase them," said Mr. Fox, "though I should like to take a little of their conceit out of them. They are so proud, and they think their tails are as handsome as mine. Think of that!"

"Well, that black tip that some of them wear certainly does show off well on their long white tails," said Mr. Possum, "though I do not admire any part of one of

those fellows!"

"I should hope not!" said Mr. Fox. "They are far from handsome in the summertime, and what is the use of looking fine in the winter when there are so few running about to see you? That is what I should like to know."

"Yes, you are right," said Mr. Raccoon. "But what about that idea of yours? You have not told that to us yet."

"I thought of a plan to drive away that Stoat family," said Mr. Fox, "but I must have some help, and there is no chasing in it, so you two need not get uneasy."

"I want you to go with me up to Mr. Man's barn. There are plenty of rats in there, and there is also a big pail of black paint, and that is where we put it over Mr. Stoat and family."

"What! The paint?" asked Mr. Raccoon. "I shall not touch one of those creatures if you expect to paint them."

"Now wait, and hear all I have to say," replied Mr. Fox. "Yes, I do mean to paint them, but we will let them do the painting. All I want you two to do is to go with me and help spill the paint."

"I'll tip it over, but someone must watch, for Mr. Dog is to be reckoned with and also traps, and such things!" Mr. Raccoon and Mr. Possum said they were perfectly willing to help in a case like that. So up to Mr. Man's they went when it was dark and still and made a nice opening under a loose board back of the barn.

Mr. Raccoon and Mr. Possum watched outside, while in went Mr. Fox and found the paint pots there — two pretty good-sized ones — and he tipped them both over near the hole.

When he came out, instead of coming out where he went in, he climbed to the hayloft and leaped out of a window, landing on the ground so near Mr. Raccoon that he jumped and ran for a tree, where he stayed until Mr. Fox, when he could stop laughing, said, "Got you treed, haven't I, Mr. Raccoon? But, you know, I could not come out through the hole with all that paint running over the floor."

Mr. Raccoon did not feel very pleasant, but he came down and joined Mr. Fox and Mr. Possum, and soon forgot his upset as they hid behind a big rock near a tree to watch for the Stoat family.

"There they are!" whispered Mr. Possum, who was watching in the tree.

They stopped right by the hole in the barn, and in went Father Stoat, followed by Mother and all the little Stoats. Just what happened inside, Mr. Fox and his friends never knew. But when the Stoat family came out, they could be plainly

seen against the white snow, for every one of that Stoat family was black.

Whether the farmer tracked them by the paint or whether they felt so disgraced by having their fine white coats spoiled, Mr. Fox and his friends never knew. But they disappeared from around those parts, and the farmyard was not so carefully guarded after that.

"That certainly was a fine idea you had, Mr. Fox," said Mr. Possum one night soon after, in the Four-Footed Club, as they sat at dinner. "I never ate a finer bird!"

"Your ideas are all right," said Mr. Raccoon, "but I get all fussed up waiting to hear them."

"A good story with an idea at the end is worth waiting to hear," said the Fox, as he helped himself to another piece of turkey.

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