

FORTESCUE

JOHN WILLIAM

THE STORY OF A RED
DEER

John Fortescue

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Fortescue J.

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Sir J. W. Fortescue
The Story of a Red Deer
THE EPISTLE DEDICATORY

To

MR. HUGH FORTESCUE,

Honoured Sir,

When in the spring of this present year you asked of me that I should write you a book, I was at the first not a little troubled; for of making of many books there is no end, and of making of good books but small beginning; and albeit there be many heroes of our noble county of Devon, whose lives, if worthily written, might exceed in value all other books (saving always those that are beyond price) that might be placed in the hands of the youth thereof for instruction and example, yet for such a task I deemed myself all too poorly fitted; for if men would write books to be read of the young, they must write them, not after particular study, but from the fulness and the overflowing of their knowledge of such things as they have dwelt withal and felt and loved beyond all others.

So at the last I bethought me that there was no book that I could more profitably write for you than the life of one of our own red deer, which, as they be of the most beautiful of all creatures to the eye, so be also the most worthy of study by the mind for their subtlety, their nobility and their wisdom. For though I would have you love the stories of great men and take delight in the reading of good books, yet I would have you take no less delight in the birds and the beasts that share with you your home, and in the observance of their goings out and their comings in, of their friends and of their enemies, of their prosperities and of their perils; whereby you will gain not only that which the great Mr. Milton (in his tract of Education) hath called the helpful experiences of hunters, fowlers and fishermen, but such a love of God's creatures as will make the world the fuller of joys for you because the fuller of friends; and this not in one wise only, for I have ever noticed that they which be fondest of dumb creatures are given to be tenderest to their fellow-men.

So here you have the life of a wild red deer, set down with such poor skill as I possess, even as the deer have told it to me in many a long ride and many a stirring chase, and as they have told it to all others that would listen, to such great hunters of old as the noble Count Gaston de Foix and the worthy Sieur Jacques du Fouilloux, and to many friends, of whom some indeed are passed away, but many yet remain, striving ever to hear more of the same story. And if my tale be short, yet blame me not, for it is for yourself by your own learning of the deer to enlarge and to enrich it; so that when your nine years are waxed to threescore and nine, you may take down this small volume and write it anew, out of the treasures of a fuller knowledge than mine own, for the generations that shall come after you in this our ancient and well-beloved home.

*And so not doubting of your kindly acceptance hereof, I bid you heartily farewell, being always
Your very loving kinsman and faithful friend to serve you,*

J. W. F.

Castle Hill.

This 26th of September, 1897.

CHAPTER I

Once upon a time there was a little Red-Deer Calf. You know what a Red-Deer is, for you of all boys have been brought up to know, though it may be that you have never seen a calf very close to you. A very pretty little fellow he was, downy-haired and white-spotted, though as yet his legs were rather long and his ears were rather large, for he was still only a very few weeks old. But he did not think himself a baby by any means, for he was an early calf and had been born in the second week in May; and a birthday in the second week in May is the greatest event that can occur in a Red-Deer's family.

The first thing that he remembered was that he found himself lying very snug and warm in a patch of fern, with the most beautiful pair of brown eyes that ever were seen gazing straight down upon him. And soon he was aware that they were the eyes of the Hind his mother, that they followed him wherever he went, and watched over him whatever he did, and that, whatever he might want, she was there to provide it for him. She always had a cosy bed ready for him in grass or fern; she washed him clean and brushed his little coat with her tongue every morning; and she taught him but two lessons – to lie as still as a mouse, and to do just as he was bid. For every morning before dawn she had to go afield to feed herself, farther than the little Calf could travel with her; and as she had no nurse to leave in charge of him, she just tucked him up as closely as she could, and told him to lie still till she came back. And like a good little fellow he obeyed her; which was well for him, for if he had taken it into his head to jump up and look about him, some evil man or beast might have seen him and made away with him; and then this story would never have been written.

Always just before the sun rose she came back, and every day she seemed to love him better, and every day he felt that she was more than the whole world to him. And morning after morning up rose the blessed sun, and drove the mist away, and sent a little ray forward through the fern to kiss him and bid him good-morrow. And the mist left a drop on every blade and blossom, and said, "Good-bye, my little fellow; I shall come back again this evening;" and the drops nodded and sparkled and twinkled, and kept whispering, "Yes, coming back this evening," over and over again, till the sun said that he could stand it no longer and was obliged to dry them all up. Then rose a hum of many wings as the flies woke up, and went out for their day's work; but the breeze moved like a sentry over the bed of the little Calf and said to them, "Move on, move on; this little Calf must not be disturbed;" and they dared not disobey, for they knew that, if they did, he was certain sooner or later to send for his big brother, the Westerly Gale, who would blow them away with a vengeance. And all through the day the breeze kept singing through the graceful, yielding grass and the stubborn wiry heather; while mingled with it came snatches of a little song from the brown peat-stream in the combe below him. He could not make out much of it except these words, which came over and over again:

Mother and child come here, come here,
I am the friend of the Wild Red-Deer

For some time they moved but little distant from the place where he was born, for his legs could not yet carry him very far; but as he grew stronger they wandered farther, till at last one day he found himself on high ground, and saw the world that he was to live in, his heritage of Exmoor. You know it, for you have seen it, fold upon fold of grass and heather, slashed by deep combes and merry babbling streams, and bounded on the one hand by the blue sky and on the other by the blue sea. It was all his own, for he was a wild Red-Deer. And he looked upon it with his great round eyes, and pricked his ears and tossed his little head; for the sun was shining warm above him, and the soft west wind blew fresh and untainted over the sea and flew across the moor, catching up all that was sweetest on its way from grass and gorse and heather, and bearing it straight to his nostrils. And he

threw his little nose into the air and snuffed up the full, rich breeze; for no creature has a finer scent than a deer; and he felt that this was life indeed.

Then they went down, leaving the song of the wind ever fainter behind them; and in its stead rose the song of the peat-stream bidding them come down to it. So they went; and there it was trickling down as clear as crystal, though as yellow as amber. There was but little water in it that fine midsummer, but it hastened on none the less over the stones in a desperate hurry, as are all Exmoor streams, to get to the sea. And it whispered its song as it went, but so low that they heard no words. They passed by a little shallow, and there the Calf saw dozens of little fry, scurrying about from stone to stone; and just below the shallow they came to a little brown, oily pool in a basin of rock. The Calf looked into it, and there he saw his own little form, and behind it his mother's sweet eyes watching over him. And then for the first time he noticed that his own coat was spotted while his mother's was red. But while he was staring at the water a fly suddenly came, and began to dance a reel over it to show what a fine fellow he was, when all of a sudden a neat little body, all brown and gold and red spots, leaped up out of the water, seized the fly in his mouth and fell back with a splash which broke the pretty picture all to pieces.

He shrank back, for he was rather startled, but his mother soon comforted him. "It was only a little Trout, my dear," she said, "only a greedy little Trout."

"But he was such a pretty little fellow," he said, for he had quite got over his fright; "I wish he would jump again."

But the Hind looked grave. "We are never unkind to the Trout," she said, "for they belong to the peat-stream, but you must never become familiar with them. Fallow-Deer, I believe, treat them as equals," and here she looked very proud, "but we do not. They are a lazy lot of fellows whose forefathers would not take the trouble to go down to the sea, whereby they might have grown into noble fish, with a coat as bright as the moon on the water. But they would not, and so they have remained small and ugly, and they never lose their spots. You must never be rude to them, for that would be unworthy of a Red-Deer, but you must never make great friends with them. You may talk to little Salmon when we see them, for they lose their spots, but not to the Trout." For the Hind was a great lady, with much pride of race, which though it made her civil to every one, taught her to be shy of idlers and low company.

"But, mother," said the poor little Calf, "I've got a spotted coat."

"But you will lose it, my darling," she said tenderly. "No, no, my child will be a true Red-Deer."

So they left the water, and presently stopped while his mother plucked at a tuft of sweet grass among the heather; when to his astonishment a little grey ball of fur came bounding out of a hole in the ground, and another at his heels, and three more after them. And they ran round and round and played like mad things. And presently another, far bigger than they, came up slowly out of another hole, sat up on her hind-legs, pricked her ears, and began to look about her. Then catching sight of the Calf she crouched down, and began in a very shrill voice: "Why, my dear tender heart" (for she was not only a Rabbit, but a Devonshire Rabbit, and of course spoke broad Devon), "if it isn't my little maister, and her ladyship too, begging your pardon, my lady. And sweetly pretty he is, my lady; and butiful you'm looking too, in your summer coat, so glossy as a chestnut, sure enough. And dear heart alive, how he groweth. Why, 'twas but a few days ago that my Bucky saith to me – I don't rightly remember how many days ago, but I mind 'twas the very day when the old Greyhen up to Badgworthy came to ask me if I had seen her poult – for she's lost a poult, my lady, hath the poor soul, as your ladyship knoweth. Well, my Bucky saith to me, 'Bunny,' saith he, 'you may depend that young maister will grow to be so fine a stag as ever was seen on Exmoor.'" Then without pausing an instant she called out at the top of her voice to one of the little rabbits: "Flossy-a! Come back, little bittlehead, come back, or the fox will catch 'ee!"

The Hind listened very graciously to this long speech, for she loved to hear good words of her Calf, and she was just a *little* pleased to hear of her own good looks. But she could not help looking

beautiful, and she looked all the more so because she very seldom thought about it. So she returned the compliment by asking after Bunny and her family.

"Oh! thank you, my lady," answered Bunny, "I reckon we'm well. There han't been no man this way this long time, thanks be; and there's plenty of meat, and not too much rain. And the family's well, my lady; look to mun playing all around, so gay; and my third family this spring, my lady – that I should say so! No, I reckon I can't complain; but oh, my lady! they foxes, and they weasels! They do tell me that the old vixen from Cornham Brake hath five cubs; and I can't abide a vixen – never could. And they weasels – they'm small, but they'm worse than foxes. Now there's my Bucky. He can't bide home, he saith, these fine days, but must go and lie out. I says to mun, 'Bucky,' I says, 'tis very well for the likes of her ladyship to lie out every day, but *you* should bide home to bury.' But no, he would go. 'Well then, Bucky,' I says, 'I reckon that you'll grow a pair of horns like his lordship, brow, bay, and trey, Bucky,' I says, 'and turn to bay when the weasel's after 'ee.' And with that he layeth back his ears and away he goeth – Flossy-a, come back, will 'ee, or I'll give you what vor! Now there's that Flossy, my lady, so like to her father as my two ears. She won't bide close to bury; and they do tell me that the vixen to Cornham has moved this way. It won't do, my lady, it won't do. Oh dear, dear, dear!" And she stopped for want of breath.

"Well, good evening, Bunny," said the Hind very kindly, "I must take my little son home. I shall see you again very soon."

"And good evening to your ladyship," answered Bunny, "and good evening to you, my pretty dear. Ah! you'm his lordship's son sure enough. I mind the time – "

But the Hind had moved on out of hearing, for when once an old Doe-Rabbit begins to talk she never stops. Then presently the Calf said: "Mother, who is his lordship?" And she answered: "He is your father, my darling. For the Red-Deer are lords of this forest, and he is the lord of them all. And brow, bay, trey is the coronet that every good Stag wears, and which you too shall wear in due time, when you grow up." And he said no more, for to his mind there was nothing on earth half so beautiful as she was, and he asked no better than to grow up to be such another.

CHAPTER II

Now the very next day the Hind led her Calf away from the combe where they lay; and after travelling some little way, they met the most beautiful bird that the Calf had ever seen. His plumage was all of glossy black, which shone blue and green and purple in the sun, while to set it off he had a patch of pure white on each wing, and a spot of red above each eye; his tail was forked and bent outwards in two graceful curves, and his legs were feathered to the very heel. He flew towards them some little way, with an easy noiseless flight, and lighted just in front of them, as handsome a fellow as you will see in a summer's day.

"Well, good Master Blackcock," said the Hind, "has my lord not moved?"

"Not a step, my lady," said the bird; "he lieth so quiet as my wife when she's sitting, though the flies do worrit mun terrible."

"Then come along, son," she said. And she led him on and presently stopped and whispered, "Look." And there he saw such a sight as he had never dreamed of; a great Stag nearly twice the size of his mother, with horns half grown and the velvet black with flies, lying down motionless but for constant twitching of his head. The Calf could not see how big he was, till presently he rose on to his feet, and stretched himself, throwing his horns right back, with a mighty yawn. Then he stood for a minute or two blinking rather sleepily, but always shaking his head and wincing under the torment of the flies. His back was as broad as a bullock's and his coat shone with good living; and the little Calf, looked with all his eyes, for he had made up his mind then and there to stand just like that and to stretch himself just like that, when he had grown to be such a fine stag as that.

But presently the Hind led him away and asked the Blackcock, "And where is my sister?" And the Blackcock led them on, and after a time, to the Calf's delight, they came in sight of two more Hinds and another little Calf. And all three caught the wind of them and came forward to meet them. One of the Hinds was very big and grey, and she had no Calf, but the other was smaller and bright red, and had at her foot as sweet a little Calf as ever you saw; and it was the smaller of the two Hinds that came to them first. Then both of the mothers laid their Calves down, and began to talk, but they had hardly exchanged a word, when the old grey Hind broke in.

"So it's you, Tawny, is it?" she said; "and you have brought a Calf with you, I see. I suppose I must ask, is it a stag or a hind?"

"A stag, Aunt Yeld," said the Lady Tawny (for that was the name of our Calf's mother); "do look at him for a minute. He does look so sweet in his bed."

"A stag, is it?" said Aunt Yeld with a little sniff. "Well, I suppose if people must have calves they had better have stags. Ruddy's here is a hind, but I never could see the attraction of any calf myself." For Aunt Yeld, like some old maids (but by no means like all) that have no children of their own, thought it the right thing to look down on Calves; and indeed she was rather a formidable old lady. She had two very big tushes in her upper jaw, which she was constantly showing, and she made a great point (when she was not flurried) of closing the claws of her hoofs very tight, and letting her hind-feet fall exactly where her fore-feet had fallen, which she knew to be the way of a stag.

"And now that you have brought your calves here," continued Aunt Yeld, "I may as well tell you that the sooner you take them away the better, for there is a Greyhen here with a brood, who never ceases to pester me with enquiries about a poult which she has lost. It's not my business to look after people's poults; if they can't take care of them themselves, they had better not have them, I say. The bird's an idiot, I think. I questioned her pretty closely, and she really seemed not very clear whether she had really lost a poult or not."

But the two Mother-Hinds looked at their calves and said:

"Poor thing;" and Ruddy's Calf which was feeling perhaps a little lonely, uttered a plaintive little bleat.

"Ruddy," said Aunt Yeld severely, "if your child is going to make that noise, I really must request you to – bless my heart, there's that Greyhen again. No, bird, I have *not* seen your poult."

And there sure enough was the poor old Greyhen, looking sadly dowdy when compared with her mate, the Blackcock, with half a dozen fluffy little poults round her. She was evidently anxious, for she turned her head so quickly this way and that to keep them all in sight that it nearly made the Calves giddy.

"Oh, I beg your pardon, my lady," she said very humbly, and turned round. But the Lady Tawny walked after her, and asked what was the matter.

"Oh, my lady," said the Greyhen, "I didn't mean no harm, but do 'ee tell me, have 'ee seen my little poult? My lady Yeld axed me so many questions that I got fairly mazed, and I've counted my poults times and times till I hardly know how many they be. For I'm not so young as I was, my lady, and I've brought up many families. My first mate he was shot, if you mind, my lady; butiful bird he was too. And a pigeon passed just now and I axed him to count, but they never have but two eggs in their nestes, he saith, so he can't count more than two. And the old Bucky was nigh here, and I axed he. 'Bless your life, neighbour,' he saith, 'my Bunny has so many children that I've a given up counting.' But it's not for me to stand talking with your ladyship; though there's one poult missing, I'm sure of that."

"Poor soul," said the Hind very gently, "I am afraid that I have not seen your poult. I am so sorry."

"Ah! bless your ladyship's kind heart," said the Greyhen. "You was always – mercy on us, there 'a is. Stand over them, my lady, for mercy's sake, stand over them?" And she crouched close to the ground with abject terror in her eyes, while the poults, frightened to death, hid themselves all round her.

For far above them against the glorious blue sky hung a little speck, with quick, nervous wings that fluttered and paused, and fluttered and paused. And it slanted down to right, and slanted back to left, as though it had been swung by a cord from the heavens; then it fluttered its wings and paused once more. But the Hind stood over the Greyhen and poults, so that they should not be seen; and all the time the Greyhen kept gasping out little broken words.

"Oh, they blue Hawks! Oh, they blue Hawks! Oh, the roog! 'Twas he that did it – sure enough – Oh, the blue roog!"

Then the little speck made a great lunge forward, fluttered for a moment, and passed away out of sight; and the Hind stepped back very gently, and said: "Quite safe now. Good-day, mistress. Take care of the poults."

"Bless your kind heart, and good-day to your ladyship," answered the Greyhen. "I have six poults yet, I'm sure 'tis six now, and that's a many to wash and tend and feed; but when they'm grown you may depend they shall always help your ladyship, if I can teach them. Good-day, my lady, and thank you, and may you have good luck with your blessed little son."

Now all this time you may be sure that the Hind had kept a constant eye towards the spot where her Calf was lying, the more so since she could see Aunt Yeld peering through the grass at him. So she went straight back to kiss him as soon as the Greyhen was gone, lest Aunt Yeld's grey face might have frightened him; but he wasn't frightened at her in the least. And Aunt Yeld for two whole steps quite forgot to walk like a stag, and said, "I must do you the justice to observe, Tawny, that he is a very handsome little fellow." Then she turned away, blowing out her lips to show her tushes and putting on the stag's gait as nearly as she could, and made a vicious bite at a little blade of grass, as she had seen Stags bite at a turnip; which did not become her pretty neck (for Hinds are always pretty, however old) half as much as the graceful nibble which was natural to her. But it was all make-believe, and if she had spoken her heart she would have said: "I think that your Calf is the greatest darling I ever saw, and oh, how I wish I were you!"

Then Aunt Yeld turned round and said: "Now you two mustn't think of going. You are not fit to take care of yourselves, so you must stay with me, and I'll take care of you." You see she had quite forgotten what she said at first, for she had really a kind heart, though nothing could keep her from patronising every one.

So for many days they lived together, and Aunt Yeld always posted herself up wind of them to keep watch over them; and if our soldiers in their red coats were sentries half as good as she, they would be the best in the world. Now and again, though very seldom, the great Stag would join them and lie by them all day, chewing the cud and shaking his great head, which grew bigger every day. But he never uttered a word, unless it was to say, "Very good that growing wheat was this morning, to be sure," to which the Hind would answer, "I am so glad, dearest;" or it would be, "The turnips on Yarner farm are not coming on well in this dry weather, I am told; it's very annoying, for I was looking forward to my turnips," and then the Hind would say, "I am so sorry, dearest. How I hope it will rain soon!" For old stags are perhaps rather too fond of their dinners.

Once only he showed himself quite different, and that was when one day the Blackcock flew up to say that all the hills were coming down. Now the way the Blackcock got the idea into his head was this. He had been taking a bath in the dust at the foot of a great sheet of screes, the loose, flat stones on the hill-side which you have often seen on the moor, and had enjoyed it greatly, fluffing out his feathers and flapping his great wings. But while he was in the middle of it a Jackdaw came flying overhead, and seeing this great ball of feathers rolling about, pitched down upon the screes to see what strange thing it might be. And as he came hopping down to look at it closer, he displaced one little stone, which displaced another little stone, and that another, until quite a number of stones were set moving, and came rushing down for twenty feet like a tiny cataract, close to the Blackcock's ear. Whereupon the Jackdaw flapped off cawing with fright, and the Blackcock flew away screaming to tell the deer that all the hills were coming down.

But when he came the old Stag stood up at once and said: "Lady Yeld, take the lead; Ruddy and Tawny, follow her. Steadily now, no hurrying!" Then they moved on a little way and stopped, the Stag always remaining behind them; for they could see that the hills were not coming down before them, and therefore they must have begun to fall behind them, if the Blackcock spoke truth. And that was why the Stag remained behind, to be nearest to the danger, as a gentleman should be. And some day, if you go into the army, you will learn that in a retreat the rearguard is the post of greatest danger; and you must read the story of the retreat of Sir John Moore's army to Corunna and Vigo, and see what great things Uncle Charlie's regiment did there.

The Deer stopped for a time, and at last the Stag said: "I can see nothing, hear nothing, and wind nothing. Are you *quite* sure the hills are all coming down, Blackcock? I think that you must have made some mistake." For the old Stag was a great gentleman, and always very civil and courteous. But Aunt Yeld, who was quick of temper, stamped on the ground, and said almost out loud: "Bah! I believe the bird's as great an idiot as his wife."

The Blackcock looked very foolish, and was so much confused that he did not know what to answer; but the Lady Tawny said kindly: "Thank you, Blackcock, for coming. You mustn't let us keep you from your dinner." And though it was not his dinnertime, he was so glad of the excuse that he flew straight away to his wife, and told her all about it. But all she said was: "So you went and told his lordship, did 'ee; and what about me and my poults if the world cometh to an end? It's like 'ee, it is, to go disturbing her blessed ladyship and her sweet little son with your stories. But never a word for me, oh dear me no, who slave for the poults morning, noon, and night; oh dear, oh dear," and so on for half an hour, till the Blackcock almost made up his mind never to have a dust-bath again. For the poults had been rather troublesome that morning, and the Greyhen's temper was a little upset in consequence. Thus you see that the Blackcock had an unpleasant time of it; and perhaps it served him right.

But except on this one occasion the Stag never bestirred himself; behaving very lazily, as I have told you, and never opening his mouth except to munch his food or talk of it. He never spoke a word to the Calf, for old stags are not very fond of calves; and you may be sure that the Calf never said a word to him, for he was terribly afraid of him; nor was he far wrong, for an old stag, while his head is growing, is almost as irritable as an old gentleman with a gouty toe. The only difference between the two is this, that the stag can eat and drink as much as he pleases, and do nothing but good to his head, while the more a gouty old gentleman eats and drinks, the worse for his toe. And it is just because they cannot eat and drink as much as they please that gouty old gentlemen are more irritable than stags; and I for one don't pity them, for a man is made to think of better things than his food and drink.

But if he could not talk to the Stag, he made great friends with Ruddy's Calf, who was the sweetest, gentlest little thing that you can imagine. And though she was a little smaller than he was, she could do nearly everything that he could. They ran races, and they tried which could jump the higher and which could spring the farther, and she was as fast and as active as he was. But one day he must needs make her try which could butt the other the harder. So they butted each other gently two or three times, and he liked it so much that he took a great run and butted her hard, and hurt her, though he had not meant it. Then she cried, "Maa-a-a! You're very rude and rough. It's a shame to treat a little hind so; I shan't play any more." Of course they soon made it up again, but his mother told him to remember that she was only a little hind. And he remembered it, but he could not help thinking that it was far better to be a little stag.

CHAPTER III

One day they were lying out in the grass as usual, and our little Calf was having a great game of romps with the little Hind. The Stag was not with them, but Aunt Yeld was standing sentry, when all of a sudden she came back in a great fluster, not at all like a stag, as she was always trying to be.

"Quick, quick, quick!" she said. "I can wind them and I can see them. Call your Calves and let us go. Quick, quick!"

Then the two mothers rose up in a terrible fright. "Quick," said Aunt Yeld again. "Run away as fast as you can!"

"But our Calves can't keep up if we go fast," pleaded the two mothers.

"Bless the Calves, I never thought of that," said Aunt Yeld. "Wait a minute; look!"

Then they looked down across the rolling waves of grass flecked by the shadows of the flying clouds, and a mile and a half away they saw a moving white mass, with a dark figure before it and another dark figure behind it. The mass stood in deep shadow, for a cloud hung over it; but the cloud passed away and then the sun flashed down upon it, and what the Deer saw (for they have far better eyes than you or I) was this. Twenty-five couples of great solemn hounds trotting soberly over the heather with a horseman in a white coat at their heads and another at their sterns, and the coats of hounds and horses shining as glossy as their own. A fresh puff of wind bore a wave of strange scent to the nostrils of the Deer, and our little Calf snuffed it and thought it the most unpleasant that he had ever tasted. "Remember it, my son," whispered his mother to him, "nasty though it be, and beware of it."

But Aunt Yeld stood always a little in advance, talking to herself. "I passed just in front of the place where they are now on my way back from breakfast this morning," she murmured. "I trust that scent has failed by this time. Ah!"

And as she spoke some of the hounds swung suddenly with one impulse towards them, but the horseman behind them galloped forward quick as thought, and turned them back; and there came on the wind the sound of a shrill yelp, which made all three of the Hinds to quiver again. Then the mass began to move faster than before, and the Deer watched it go further and further away from them till at last it settled down to its first pace and vanished out of sight.

"Well, that is a mercy," said Aunt Yeld with a deep sigh. "I thought it was full early yet for those detestable creatures to begin their horrible work again. I think that we are safe now, but I'll just make sure in case of accidents."

And with that she began to trot about in the strangest fashion. For she made a great circle to the track by which she had come back from feeding in the early morning, and ran back along it for some way, and then she turned off it, and after a time made another circle which brought her to a little stream. Then she ran up the water and made another circle which brought her back again.

"There," she said, "if they do follow us, that will puzzle them." But the Lady Tawny had been looking at her Calf all the time, and now she spoke: "I am afraid to stay here any longer, Aunt Yeld. I will take my Calf far away to a quiet spot that I know of, and do you stop with sister and look after her."

So they parted, and very sad they were at parting. She led her Calf away slowly, that he might not tire, but they had not gone very far when there ran past them a great Buck-Rabbit. He neither saw nor heard them, for his eyes were starting out of his head with fright; and he went on only for a little way and then lay down and squealed most miserably. Then they heard a faint sound rather like the yelp that they had heard from the hound, but much smaller; and presently there came five little bits of brown bodies, long, and lithe and slender, racing along on their tiny short legs far faster than you would have thought possible. They were following the line of the Rabbit, and the old mother Weasel led the way, speaking to the scent as loud as she could (and that was not very loud), "Forward, children,

forward, forward," and the four little Weasels joined in chorus, "Forward, forward, forward"; then she cried, "Blood, children, blood," and they answered at the top of their pipes, "Blood, blood, blood, blood." And their fierce little eyes flashed, and their sharp little teeth gleamed as they dashed away through the grass; and I am afraid that the Buck-Rabbit had but a poor chance with them, though he was nearly as big as the whole five of them put together. For I suppose that, for its size, there is no creature on earth so fierce and bloodthirsty as a weasel; but remember, too, that he is also the pluckiest little beast that there is, and would fight you and me if we drove him too far.

The Calf was very much puzzled. "Why doesn't the Rabbit run on, mother, if he is afraid of the Weasels?" he said. "I should have run on as far as I could. Will they leave him alone because he lies down and squeals?"

But she answered sadly, "No, no! and, my son, if ever it should befall you that you must run for your life, as I fear may be only too likely, then keep up a brave heart and run on till you can run no more."

And he answered, "Yes, mother," and thought to himself that he would fight to the end too; for he hoped one day to grow into a good stag and have horns to fight with; and besides he was a brave little fellow. And, for my part, I think that the Calf was right; and if (as I hope may never be) after you are grown up, disappointment should lie in wait for you at every turn, and fate and your own fault should hunt you to despair, then run on bravely, and when you can run no more, face them and dare them to do their worst; but never, never, never lie down and squeal.

So they journeyed on for three whole days, often stopping that the Calf might rest. And on the third day as they were passing along one side of a combe, they saw another strange sight. For on the other side the rock came through the soil, and there at the foot of the rock stood a ruddy-coloured creature with a white throat, and prick ears, and a sharp nose, and a bushy tail that tapered to a point and ended in a white tag. She carried a rabbit in her mouth, and round her stood five little Cubs, jumping and scrambling and playing, and crying out, "Rabbit for dinner, rabbit for dinner!" For a time she looked at them with the rabbit still in her mouth while they danced around her, till presently one ran up behind one of his brothers and rolled him over, and the other lay on his back kicking and struggling while the first pretended to kill him; and then a third came up and caught one of them by the scruff of the neck and made him open his mouth so wide that you would have thought he could never have shut it again. And then the old Vixen laid the rabbit on the ground, and said, "Worry, worry, worry!" and the Cubs dashed at it and began biting at it and tearing, and pulling, and scratching, till they rent it all to pieces. Then one little fellow got hold of a whole hind-leg and ran away to eat it by himself, and the rest cried out, "Greedy, greedy!" and ran after him to take it from him; and they scuffled and worried and snarled till you would have thought that they meant to eat each other up as well as the rabbit. But it was only play, though rough play, for Foxes are rough fellows; and all the time the old Vixen sat on her haunches smiling and saying, "That's my little Cubs! that's my little Cubs!"

Then the Hind and Calf passed on, and she led him into a great deep wood of oak-coppice, where there was hardly a tree that was not oak, except now and again a mountain-ash. And they passed through the bright silver stems of the young trees and under the heavy foliage of the old ones; till they saw a mountain-ash shake its golden berries over their heads, and came to a hollow where a tiny stream came trickling down, almost hidden among hart's-tongues. There she laid him down; and this wood was their new home.

Soon after, the dry weather came to an end, and the South-West wind came laden with rain from the sea. But the Hind and Calf lay sheltered in the wood, and heard the wind singing above them, and saw the scud drifting slowly in great columns down the valley. They roamed far through the wood, for it seemed to cover the valley's side for miles, and he watched her as she looked about for ivy, which was her favourite food, and envied her when she reared up to pluck some tempting

morsel hanging from the oak trees. Nor would he let her have all the good things to herself, for he would nuzzle at the green leaves between her lips and pretend to enjoy them greatly.

A very happy peaceful life it was, for they were never disturbed, though occasionally they saw company. They had not been there but very few days, when very early in the morning they saw the old Vixen come stealing into the wood with a Cub in her mouth. She looked so weary and footsore, that though deer do not like rough, unmannerly creatures such as foxes, which feed on flesh, the Hind could not help saying, "Why, Mrs. Vicky, you look dreadfully tired."

But the Vixen hardly turned her head, and then only to answer very roughly, "No, I am not tired, I am not tired," though after a time she added "thank you" in rather a surly tone; for in Devon nobody is altogether uncivil. And she went plodding on.

"Have they been disturbing your earth?" asked the Hind. "I hope the Cubs are all well." Then the Vixen could not help stopping to say: "Yes, they'm well. This is the last of mun. Twenty mile and more have I gone back and 'vor with mun this blessed night. They was rather a late litter, you see, and I was obliged to carry mun. But I'm not tired, oh no, I am not tired – my lady." And she went on again doggedly with her Cub, though they could see that she was so tired that she could hardly move. And let me tell you that it was a great stretch of civility for the Vixen to call the Hind "my lady," for Foxes are very independent, and like a great many other people think that they must show their independence by being uncivil; whereby they only prevent others from seeing what brave, patient creatures they really are.

The very next morning they saw a new visitor come in, a grey old person as big as the Vixen, with a long sharp nose, and a deal of white about his face, a very little short tail, and four short clumsy legs. He was waddling along slowly, and grumbling to himself: "'Tisn't often that I spake, but spake I will. 'Tis mortal hard that he should come and take my house. 'Tis my house, I made mun, and I digged mun. 'Tisn't right; 't isn't rasonable."

"What is it, old Grey?" said the Hind.

The Badger looked up and stared. Then he said very slowly "Aw!" drawing out the word till he could collect his wits. "Well, look 'ee, 'tis like this. Two days agone, – I think 'twas two days – the old Dog-Fox – you know mun, he that hath so much white to his brush – well, he cometh to me, and saith he, 'Brocky,' he saith – that's a name he calleth me, Brocky, friendly like, though he warn't no friend o' mine that I know of – Well, he saith, 'Brocky, I know of so pretty a nest of Rabbits as a Badger could wish to see. I can't dig mun out,' he saith, 'but you can. Oh! what I would give to be able to dig like you, Brocky!' he saith. 'Come 'long wi' me, and I'll show 'ee.' Well, now I'll tell 'ee which way we went."

"No, never mind that," said the Hind, "we musn't keep you, you know."

"Aw!" said the Badger, "well, we come to the bury, and wonderful sweet they rabbits did smell, sure enough. 'Now,' he saith, 'I'll leave 'ee.' And I digged the rabbits out; I forget how many there was – eight or nine I think – I ate mun all up, I know, and very sweet they was, I won't deny that. And them I went 'oom, but bless your life, when I got there I couldn't go into mun. Oh! 'twas terrible sure enough; 'twas more than my poor nose could stand. And the old Fox he looketh out and saith, 'Tis wonderful kind of you, Brocky,' he saith, 'to give me your house. Mrs. Vicky liketh it wonderful, she doth. Ah! I wish I could dig like you, Brocky,' he saith. And he's taken my house, and here I be. 'Tisn't right; 't isn't rasonable."

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