

Chapter 7 'We'll Never Let Him Go'

At six o'clock in the evening, Bean switched off the motor of his tractor and climbed down from the driver's seat. Bunce did the same. Both men had had enough. They were tired and stiff from driving the tractors all day. They were also hungry. Slowly they walked over to the small fox's hole in the bottom of the huge crater. Bean's face was purple with rage. Bunce was cursing the fox with dirty words that cannot be printed. Boggis came waddling up. 'Dang and blast that filthy stinking fox!' he said. 'What the heck do we do now?'

'I'll tell you what *wedon't* do,' Bean said. 'We don't let him go!'

'We'll never let him go!' Bunce declared.

'Never never never!' cried Boggis.

'Did you hear that, Mr Fox!' yelled Bean, bending low and shouting down the hole. 'It's not over yet, Mr Fox! We're not going home till we've strung you up dead as a dingbat!' Whereupon the three men all shook hands with one another and swore a solemn oath that they would not go back to their farms until the fox was caught.

'What's the next move?' asked Bunce, the pot-bellied dwarf.

'We're sending you down the hole to fetch him up,' said Bean. 'Down you go, you miserable midget!'

'Not me!' screamed Bunce, running away.

Bean made a sickly smile. When he smiled you saw his scarlet gums. You saw more gums than teeth. 'Then there's only one thing to do,' he said. 'We starve him out. We camp here day and night watching the hole. He'll come out in the end. He'll have to.'

So Boggis and Bunce and Bean sent messages down to their farms asking for tents, sleeping-bags and supper.

8 The Foxes Begin to Starve

That evening three tents were put up in the crater on the hill – one for Boggis, one for Bunce and one for Bean. The tents surrounded Mr Fox's hole. And the three farmers sat outside their tents eating their supper. Boggis had three boiled chickens smothered in dumplings, Bunce had six doughnuts filled with disgusting goose-liver paste, and Bean had two gallons of cider. All three of them kept their guns beside them.

Boggis picked up a steaming chicken and held it close to the fox's hole. 'Can you smell this, Mr Fox?' he shouted. 'Lovely tender chicken! Why don't you come up and get it?'

The rich scent of chicken wafted down the tunnel to where the foxes were crouching.

'Oh, Dad,' said one of the Small Foxes, 'couldn't we just sneak up and snatch it out of his hand?'

'Don't you dare!' said Mrs Fox. 'That's just what they want you to do.'

'But we're so *hungry*!' they cried. 'How long will it be till we get something to eat?'

Their mother didn't answer them. Nor did their father. There was no answer to give.

As darkness fell, Bunce and Bean switched on the powerful headlamps of the two tractors and shone them on to the hole. 'Now,' said Bean, 'we'll take it in turn to keep watch. One watches while two sleep, and so on all through the night.'

Boggis said, 'What if the fox digs a hole right through the hill and comes out on the other side? You didn't think of that one, did you?'

'Of course I did,' said Bean, pretending he had.

'Go on, then, tell us the answer,' said Boggis.

Bean picked something small and black out of his ear and flicked it away. 'How many men have you got working on your farm?' he asked.

'Thirty-five,' Boggis said.

'I've got thirty-six,' Bunce said.

'And I've got thirty-seven,' Bean said. 'That makes one hundred and eight men altogether. We must order them to surround the hill. Each man will have a gun and a flashlight. There will be no escape then for Mr Fox.'

So the order went down to the farms, and that night one hundred and eight men formed a tight ring around the bottom of the hill. They were armed with sticks and guns and hatchets and pistols and all sorts of other horrible weapons. This made it quite impossible for a fox or indeed for any other animal to escape from the hill.

The next day, the watching and waiting went on. Boggis and Bunce and Bean sat upon small stools, staring at the fox's hole. They didn't talk much. They just sat there with their guns on their laps.

Every so often, Mr Fox would creep a little closer towards the mouth of the tunnel and take a sniff. Then he would creep back again and say, 'They're still there.'

'Are you quite sure?' Mrs Fox would ask.

'Positive,' said Mr Fox. 'I can smell that man Bean a mile away. He stinks.'