



The Fox and the Puzzle Hall

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Animals, Retold Fairy Tales, Romance

Atop a heath in the bleak north country there was a patch of woodland, and sheltered within this wood there was a grand, old hall. The hall had belonged to the same family for centuries, and they had watched the clutch of farmhouses far in the valley below grow into a village, and then a busy market town – and as they owned the land at the bottom of the valley, and the sloping hills around it, and everything that could be seen from the edge of the woods, they grew wealthy. They built onto their hall, new storeys, new wings; a narrow turret with a library when the lord of the manor was a secretive, scholarly man; a block of stables each grander than some townspeople's houses, when the lady of the manor had a love of horses. By the time that our story begins, the hall was a beautiful, rambling edifice, and even those who lived within its walls were often taken by surprise by its twisting complexities.

The lord and lady had a daughter, and they lavished upon her all the gifts they could bring her from the town below and the lands beyond, and the little girl was clad in silks and had pearls hung from her ears, and was allowed to toddle about the great house and do whatever she pleased. When she was still very young, however, her father became very ill, and then her mother, and they died before she was old enough to understand where they had gone. The house was hers, now, and though her father's steward oversaw her care and the management of all of the money and property that her family had hoarded over the years, he was still her servant, and the servants were hers, too.

Some felt sorry for the child, and wished to fill the emptiness in the little girl's heart with all of the indulgence they could possibly allow her, never denying her anything. Others thought only of the time when the girl would become a woman, and take over her parent's estate, and wished to ingratiate themselves in the hope that, once

she had the power, she would reward them handsomely for their years of obsequious service. Whether it came from those with the purest motivations or the most self-serving, the effect was the same – the girl was given everything she desired, and her behaviour was never checked.

As she grew into a spoilt and petty young woman, the only virtue that remained to her was her cleverness. She had been a bright child, and loved to learn, and so the best scholars had been brought to the house to become her tutors. But while they blessed her with their wisdom and knowledge, she only used her intelligence to hurt those around her. She would set up elaborate traps for her servants, tricking them into breaking any one of her rules – never touch mistress's notebooks, never interrupt mistress, never enter mistress's chamber without knocking three times and receiving express permission – and then dismiss them from her household with immediate effect. They left confused and hurt, but she felt nothing but amusement. She had many friends – rich merchants from town, and other lords and ladies who would travel from miles around to stay with her – but if they remained long in her company, they were as cruel as she, for she used her cunning to examine people's characters and decide what it was they felt the most shame over, and then mocked them for it. Only those who laughed the loudest to see her tormenting a visitor could stay, and enjoy her parties, her beautiful and strange house, the fabulous feasts provided every night, and the hunts.

The girl loved to hunt. Sometimes it was deer, or boar, charging after them with spears, the lady and her friends on the back of their beautiful, powerful purebred horses. She would present these trophies to the kitchen, to be skinned and prepared for that night's feast. But her favourite by far was the fox hunt.

A fox cannot be hunted with a spear. They are too quick, too small, too cunning. To hunt a fox you need dogs – a pack of them. When they catch the fox, they will set upon it – and if you reach the pack in time, you can call them off before they have shredded the wild creature, and you can kill it yourself before it dies by being pulled limb from limb, and then you can make beautiful items from its fur. If you do not reach them in time, you have scraps, barely enough to cover the back of a glove. But you can almost always salvage the tail. The young lady loved the tail of the fox – she had them sewn to hang from the backs of hats, sewn together to make capes and coats of red marked with the white, triangular patches of the tips, and wound around the tops of boots. She never attempted to break up the dogs when they caught the fox.

One day a new guest presented himself at the manor, a handsome young gentleman with a great head of thick, red hair. He told the young lady of the house that he was a nobleman from a distant region, and had heard of her hospitality and the entertainments that she offered to her friends, and wished to number himself among

them. Any insult that she may have felt at his impertinence was immediately soothed by his gorgeously ornate clothing and his smooth, ingratiating manners, not to mention the gifts he brought with him, of exotic fruits and wines for her table, skeins of silk, and tapestries to hang at the walls and keep out the cold.

She allowed him into her circle, and quickly singled him out as the person she would like to join her life and wealth to. She enjoyed looking at him, liked to see him lounging about her beautiful home, the way his red hair looked against the golden oak panelling, the way his exotic clothing gave the whole place a more luxurious air. More than this, she liked to talk to him. She had never met any person of her own rank who could match her intelligence, and so they bantered and discoursed and played games of strategy, and though she did not like to lose either a game of chess or an argument, when she won her triumph was headier, knowing that they were matched.

One day the gentleman told the lady of the manor that it was time for him to go home. She was devastated by the very idea that he may want to leave her, and ordered him that he must stay. He told her that he had important business to attend to on his own estate, and could not delay, however much he may wish to continue to enjoy her hospitality. She wept, and told him that he could not leave her, for she loved him. He told her that he had family who he dearly wished to see, who he missed. She flew into a rage, and could not fathom how any of his family could be better company than she had been to him. He was weary of her objections, and so his final recourse was to abandon tact, and simply tell her that he wished, very much, in his heart, to be gone. At this, she ordered her servants to bar the doors, and told him that she would not allow him to desert her.

The handsome young gentleman looked at her sadly, and sighed, and finally said, "There really is no hope for you, is there?" and he revealed himself to be who he truly was. He was the king of the foxes, and immediately he placed a curse upon the house and its inhabitants. The guests, he expelled, and they would forget as soon as they crossed the treeline onto the heath that there ever was a house here, and ever was a young lady who lived there. The servants did not receive a similar pardon. For their mistake of shaping the girl into such a monster by their indulgence, he turned them into mice. The lady, he turned into a fox. These forms, he told them, would be theirs until the young woman had learned what it was to love another person, and be loved in return. His final punishment was to enchant the old hall, so that it became an ever-shifting puzzle – easy to stray into, but impossible to leave for any but those with the keenest wits, who could study and understand its patterns to find the exits. This would be easy for the lady who was now a fox, but she would not be able to pass, however carefully she studied the house's rhythms, however many passageways opened up to her. She would have an

opportunity to escape only when the hunters sent the foxes over the hillside. She would hear their horn blasting across the heath and know that there was a window of time within which to make her escape – but not without running the risk of being torn to bloody, tufted shreds by dogs.

The woodland reclaimed the house. As seasons passed, windows shattered and allowed ivy to crawl through, shrubs grew over doorsteps and leaned their branches against doors, and a tree grew out of the great fireplace in the grand dining hall, spreading its leaves all over the cracked marble tiles and rotting ornate rugs. At first, the lady who had become a fox fed herself on the mice who had once been her servants. The more clever of the mice learned how to feed her without sacrificing herself. They set up traps to lure in rabbits and weasels for her to catch, cultivated bird's nests in the branches that strayed within the walls of the house and then poached eggs from the nests, to present to their mistress. Some were cunning enough to escape – they recognised the window that allowed passage for a few seconds when a moon on its second night of waning lit upon it at three minutes past the eleventh hour, or the tunnel from the cellar that only appeared behind a cabinet when the escapee filled that cabinet's shelves with bones on a Tuesday, but only if they were taken out for every other day of the week. The ones that were left out of these schemes grew twisted with suspicion and fear. Soon, there were so few of them remaining that any of them that were suspected of attempting to escape were captured as traitors, and presented to their mistress as food – she ate her old servants willingly, too absorbed with grief at her own predicament to have a thought for theirs. It was safest to pretend to be a real mouse, to forget how to speak, and use one's human capacity for reason to hide in ways that ensured that one could live a lifetime within the shifting geography of the house and never come across another animal that used to be human. One winter a woman strayed in through the rotted front door. She was a healer from the town below, a skilled and knowledgeable person, and had been staying for a time at a patient's house some miles away. On her way home, however, a blizzard had whipped across the hilltops, and she had become disorientated by the thick flurry of snow and lost her way. She had wandered into the woods in search of shelter, and, to her surprise, had found a huge and impressive house, abandoned and crumbling with neglect. She had lived in the town her whole life and did not remember ever hearing about such a place in the surrounding hills. She was too cold and tired to be disturbed by her discovery, though, and stole inside, to go to sleep under the great oak table in the dining hall, upon a drift of old leaves from the tree that grew over the hearth.

Upon discovering the intruder at dawn, the fox was furious. She had hoped for a human to cross the threshold of the hall one day, it was true, but she had been picturing a travelling nobleman taking shelter with his

servants from the storm, or a curious adventuring merchant, or even a strapping hunter – someone, in short, that she could love, and convince to love her, so that she could break the spell. This, however, was an ugly old woman in a rough-woven cloak. She wanted her gone. She snuck up to the old woman and bit her on the hand, and the woman sat bolt upright as she woke and banged her head upon the underside of the great, heavy table. The woman did not run away, however, but stayed where she was and began murmuring to the fox in a gentle, consoling voice as she felt in the heavy pack upon her back, then pulled out bandages and ointment and began, calmly, to dress her wound. This irritated the fox.

“You made a mistake, coming here,” said the fox. “Leave this place.”

The woman, who knew a little about the world and what powers reside within it, heard a woman’s voice come from the mouth of the fox and thought that she must have strayed into the lair of the fox queen.

The woman begged that the fox queen would let her leave safely. She said that she would never tell a soul that she had found her lair. She said that she had a son who needed her.

The fox was impatient with the woman’s pleas – all she wanted, in any case, was to have her out of the way – but her ear was caught at the mention of a child. She asked the woman about her son, and the woman seemed to colour, perhaps with regret that she had mentioned her child, or perhaps with shame. Her son was not a child, she explained – for there was no use lying to the queen of the foxes. Her son was almost a grown man, and he was healthy, and good, so very good. But he was foolish, naïve, completely without guile, and she had lessons still to teach him before she felt that she could see him go into the world and make his own way, and have peace in her heart about it.

The fox asked her if she thought that her son would come to find her if she did not return home when she had told him to expect her. “Certainly,” she said, “But whether he finds me...”

The mother found her doubt in her son to be unnecessary, though on this occasion, she wished very much that he had been less capable than he proved himself to be. The very next day the lad arrived, dressed warmly and carrying all of his equipment for hunting, with provisions of food and water. He had set out that morning in the direction of the village where his mother had been staying, and seen the tracks in the snow where her path had diverged into the woods, and followed them here. The fox watched from within the branches of the hearth-tree as he ran to his mother and embraced her. The young man was handsome – something pure about him that she would have once read as weakness, and mocked, but now she saw as full of potential.

The woman whispered to her son that they were in the home of the queen of the foxes, and must do as she

asked. This was when the fox emerged, and told the two of them that the old woman was free to leave, but that the lad must stay. She left the dining hall as they said tearful goodbyes, then led the weeping woman to a little door in the scullery, and the fox bit her own paw and placed three prints of blood upon it, as all other doors shorter than five feet high required to open in the hour between three and four. The door opened, the old woman fled through it, and the fox watched her go. Tentatively, she went to place her bloodied paw upon the threshold – and the door swung violently upon its hinges, and the fox snatched her paw out of the way just in time before it slammed closed.

The fox and the young man passed a week without seeing each other, until one morning she was disturbed in the library in the turret. She liked to sit upon the windowsill amongst the damp and rotting books and look out – on a clear day she could see the hilltops of the other side of the valley over the tops of the trees. The lad apologised for disturbing her, and asked if he might be allowed to go out into the woods and hunt something to eat – he had lit a fire under the old stove in the kitchen, and though he had filled the room with smoke and had to put through a window to let it out, he thought that he might be able to cook something.

“I promise that I won’t try to go home,” he said.

“I should think that you won’t,” said the fox. “If you take one step over the threshold of the woods onto the heath, your mother will die.”

And so it came to be that the young man became a hunter for the fox, sharing his food with her, and soon she told him that she was a prisoner there, herself. The lad felt very sorry for the fox, and they sat many nights together in front of the kitchen fire, and he let her curl up under his cloak, and she had not realised how cold this house had become until she felt that warmth. She did not tell him how she had come to be trapped there. She did not tell him how she could become a young woman again. He worked out for himself that she had once been a person. The fox came to realise that, though he lacked common sense, always setting accidental fires or toppling furniture upon himself in his attempts to make the old hall more habitable, his goodness created a form of intelligence – he perceived emotions that she herself had not acknowledged that she was feeling, soothed moods in her that she herself had not begun to understand.

The mouse-servants were disposed to dislike him, but as the seasons passed it came to be that there was not a one of them that he had not helped in some way, or provided some kindness to, and as their mistress had commanded them to be kind to him, eventually none of them saw any harm in being his friend.

Friends, food, warmth, a purpose – and yet, still, he was sad. She would come across him accidentally, some

days, and find him staring out of windows with his hand against the glass. When she sprung an entry-way – never letting him know how she did it – to allow him to hunt, he often would not return for days. She thought that he must camp in the woods, but she wondered how much of that time he spent standing at the treeline, staring down the heath into the valley bottom at the rooftops and steeples of his old home. She found herself tempted to tell him ways of leaving the house, so that he could steal out without her, and perhaps feel more able to leave for good – but he thought that his mother would die if he stepped onto the heath. She found herself buying into her lie, wanting to weep with him when they sat up by the fire and he told her stories about his mother, and how much he missed her and hoped that she was happy. But foxes do not weep. If she told him that she had lied to him, she knew that he would never love her.

The fox began to lose hope that this lad was the one to save her. After all, she loved him, now, missed him when he was out in the woods, wanted to trot by his side at all times like a puppy when he was home, asked him questions about himself and found herself genuinely curious as to the answers, felt leaping joy when she made him smile and desolate when she caught him lonely and sad. He seemed to feel the same, and had told her many times that he would love to see her as a human, wished for nothing so dearly. But there was no change. The lad seemed to have less and less to say to her. He was a man now, his shoulders at their full breadth, and the patches in his beard had filled out. The fox thought of the years passing, of the day when she would see the first grey hairs in his beard, of his growing old trapped here, and could not bear it.

The time of year approached when the fox knew that the hunt would come – she had heard their horns many times, but had found no hope of freedom greater than the risk of death. This time, though, she was going to run. There would be more people out in the world, she thought to herself, and if this was not the love that would transform her, perhaps she could find another. She resolved that she would tell the young man that, once she had been free from the house for a day, the spell was broken, and so he could leave and return to his mother. Whether it was from the purest of intentions or the most self-serving, she decided that she must allow him to go.

When she told him her plan to secure his freedom and hers, he told her that he would walk to the edge of the woods with her.

“I don’t need your help to tell me when the coast is clear,” she told him. “My senses are sharper than yours, and I can smell a dog from a mile away.”

“Yes,” he said, “But I would like to see you running away across the heath until I can no longer see you, and

know that you are free.”

The day that the hunt's horn rang out across the hillside, the two of them left by the kitchen door that only opened every thousandth second. She had recorded her calculations for years. There was a gale bending the trees back towards the house, and they battled through it, the two of them, the wind whipping back the fur of the fox and the hair and beard of the man. They could feel the thundering of the horse's hooves through their feet, but by the time they reached the edge of the woods, there was nothing but battered turf where they had galloped through, and the dogs were long gone.

The fox sniffed the air. The cold wind stung her eyes. “Goodbye, then,” she said, and before he could stroke her head or scoop her up and embrace her, she ran out from between the trees, a streak of red across the yellow grass.

The wind had prevented her from smelling the young, inexperienced dog that had peeled off from the pack and run to the woodland's edge when the hunt had passed through, and now that the fox was downwind of her, this dog darted across the heath after her. The young man shouted to warn her, but his words were taken by the wind, and when she heard his voice she stopped and turned – and was driven to the ground by the hound that ran into her, jaws open, strings of saliva trailing from her fangs.

With barely a thought for what he was doing, the man sprinted out from between the trees and towards the two of them rolling and snarling, took out his knife, and, screaming, threw himself into the fray. The dog detached herself, bright red fur caught between her teeth, and when he brandished his knife at her she ran away across the heath with her tail between her legs.

The fox was badly hurt, a deep rip in her side, a bone poking through her leg where the hound's jaws had clamped down upon it. The man knelt beside her, took off his cloak and wrapped her in it, and wept, for he knew that his mother would have been able to save the fox, but his mother was dead now, and had been the moment he put a foot across the boundary. “Stupid,” he muttered to himself, and the word caught in his throat. He had not even thought for a second, when he saw the dog come running. He had thought of nothing but what was in front of him, and his legs had carried him over the threshold without interference from his mind. Stupid, he thought to himself. His tears fell upon the fox's face, and she blinked away the ones that were stinging in her own eyes. Foxes do not cry. She knew what she must do.

“It wasn't true,” she told him. “You have not just killed your mother, it was a lie. She may still be alive...” His eyes clouded with tears, he did not see how her yellow eyes darkened to deep brown, how her paws began to

lengthen into hands. "Leave me," she told him. "Go home."

But he picked her up, wrapped in his cloak, and carried her down the hill, and by the time he reached the cottage sheltered under the town walls where he had lived with his mother, the figure wrapped in the bloodstained cloak was that of a small woman with a pointed face, the bloodied fingers of her hands ending in sharp little claws instead of nails, a glorious tufted tail hanging limply over his arm.

The lad's mother was there, a little older, but no less wise, no less skilled. She asked no questions – there would be time for hugs and stories later. She worked quickly, and soon the young woman lay sleeping under warm covers, her wounds cleaned and bound, and only then did mother and son greet each other, and embrace and fill in the hole that each other's absence had left with stories of what they had done with their time apart.

The lady who was, in some ways, still a fox, spent weeks in the healer's cottage, and when she had regained a little of her strength she began to speak to them, and this is when she told the young man all that she had kept from him – everything that she had been, everything that she had plotted and doubted with him in mind, all of the lies. He listened to it all, and forgave it all.

By the time she was well again, her face was no longer pointed, her nails were pink and white and oval, but she still had a fox's tail. "I will wear long skirts," she said, trying to hide her sadness that after all, the young man must not love her quite as well as she loved him.

He was surprised when he caught her packing for a long journey, and she told him that she must leave them, and make her own way in the world. He told her that he loved her, and begged to know why she could not stay with him. The healer joined her son's pleas, for she had grown to love the lady like a daughter, and could not understand why she would want to go out into the world alone.

The lady wept, for she felt herself torn in two, but she told the two of them her reason, and it was the truth. She felt that she could not stay, though she had never been happier here. She had caused the two of them too much suffering, and though they wanted her to live with them, she felt that she could not stay to be a reminder to them of the pain that had, after all, been her doing.

When she had said this, she turned to go, but she had taken only a few steps down the road out of town when the man ran after her, holding out the luxuriant red tail that had dropped to the floor as she crossed the threshold.

They lived a simple life, in that cottage at the edge of town, he as a hunter, and she as a schoolmistress, passing along the education that her long-suffering tutors had instilled in her. Her servants were long gone, and did

not breathe a word of their experience. The three of them in that cottage, wife and husband and mother, never explained themselves to anyone, and so people wondered all her life where this smart woman had come from, who had arrived injured at the healer's cottage one day and then lived there for ever after. All the townspeople could safely conclude, in their gossip and speculation, was that she had been born into riches. After all, she had clearly received an excellent education, and she carried herself so well. She had a certain flair in her manner of dressing, too – even with her most simple gowns, she wore a smart red scarf fashioned from a fox's tail.

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