



CLASSIC LIVING BOOK

RED FOX

Charles G. D. Roberts

COMPLETE AND UNABRIDGED



RED FOX

*The Story of His Adventurous Career in the Ringwaak Wilds
and of His Final Triumph over the Enemies of His Kind*

Told by

Charles G. D. Roberts

*Author of "The Kindred of the Wild," "The Watchers of the Trails,"
"The Heart of the Ancient Wood," "Barbara Ladd," "Poems," etc.*

With Many Illustrations by

Charles Livingston Bull





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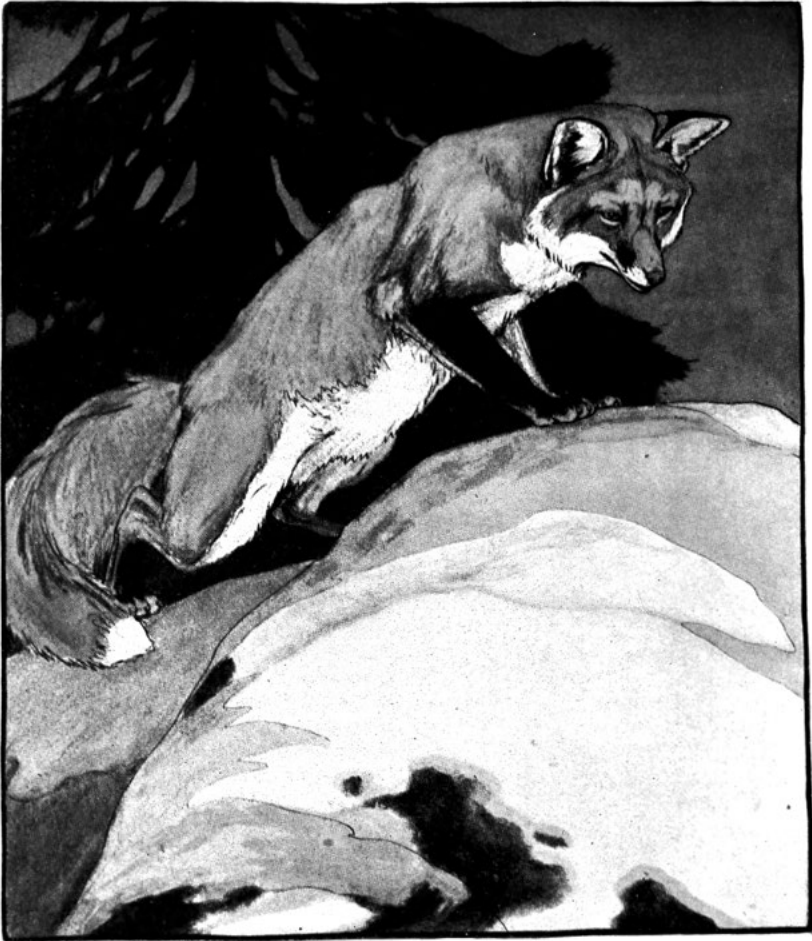


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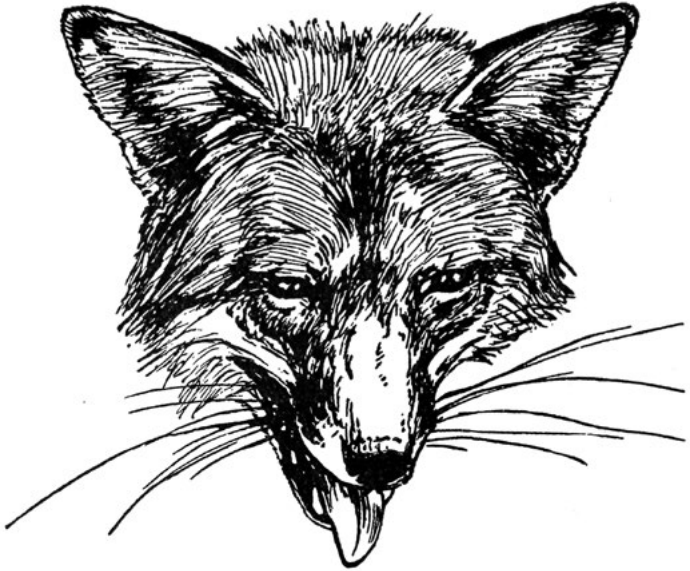


To
Henry Braithwaite
Master of Woodcraft

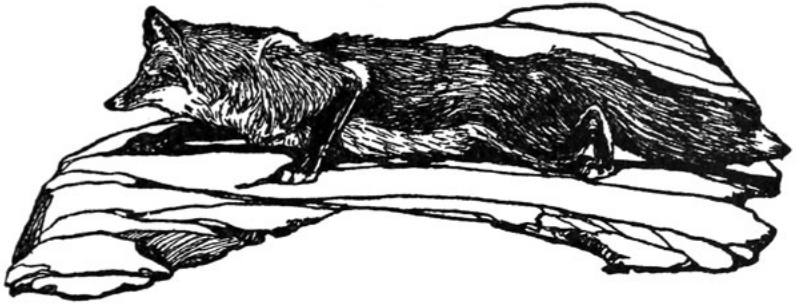




RED FOX, MEANWHILE, HAD BEEN WATCHING THE WHOLE
SCENE FROM THAT SAFE LITTLE LEDGE OF ROCK







Prefatory Note

IN the following story I have tried to trace the career of a fox of the backwoods districts of Eastern Canada. The hero of the story, Red Fox, may be taken as fairly typical, both in his characteristics and in the experiences that befall him, in spite of the fact that he is stronger and cleverer than the average run of foxes. This fact does not detract from his authenticity as a type of his kind. He simply represents the best, in physical and mental development, of which the tribe of the foxes has shown itself capable. In a litter of young foxes there is usually one that is larger and stronger, and of more finely coloured fur, than his fellows. There is not infrequently, also, one that proves to be much more sagacious and adaptable than his fellows. Once in awhile such exceptional strength and such exceptional intelligence may be combined in one individual. This combination is apt to result in just such a fox as I have made the hero of my story.

The incidents in the career of this particular fox are not only consistent with the known characteristics and capacities of the fox family, but there is authentic record of them all in the accounts of careful observers. Every one of these experiences has befallen some red fox in the past, and may befall other red foxes in the future. There is no instance of intelligence, adaptability, or foresight given here that is not abundantly attested by the observations of persons

who know how to observe accurately. In regard to such points, I have been careful to keep well within the boundaries of fact. As for any emotions which Red Fox may once in a great while seem to display, these may safely be accepted by the most cautious as fox emotions, not as human emotions. In so far as man is himself an animal, he is subject to and impelled by many emotions which he must share with not a few other members of the animal kingdom. Any full presentation of an individual animal of one of the more highly developed species must depict certain emotions not altogether unlike those which a human being might experience under like conditions. To do this is not by any means, as some hasty critics would have it, to ascribe human emotions to the lower animals.

C. G. D. R.

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CHAPTER I.

“THE PRICE OF HIS LIFE”



WO voices, a mellow, bell-like baying and an excited yelping, came in chorus upon the air of the April dawn. The musical and irregularly blended cadence, now swelling, now diminishing, seemed a fit accompaniment to the tender, thin-washed colouring of the landscape which lay spread out under the gray and lilac lights of approaching sunrise. The level country, of mixed woodland and backwoods farm, still showed a few white patches here and there where the snow lingered in the deep hollows; but all over the long, wide southward-facing slope of the uplands, with their rough woods broken by occasional half-cleared, hilly pastures, the spring was more advanced. Faint green films were beginning to show on the birch and poplar thickets, and over the pasture hillocks; and every maple hung forth a rosy veil that seemed to imitate the flush of morning.

The music of the dogs' voices, melodious though it was, held something sinister in its sweetness,—a sort of menacing and implacable joy. As the first notes of it came floating up from the misty lowlands, an old red fox started up from his sleep under a squat juniper-bush on the top of a sunny bank. Wide-awake on the instant, he stood listening critically to the sound. Then he came a few paces down the bank, which was open, dotted with two or

three bushes and boulders, and its turf already green through the warmth of its sandy soil. He paused beside the mouth of a burrow which was partly screened by the evergreen branches of a juniper. The next moment another and somewhat smaller fox appeared, emerging briskly from the burrow, and stood beside him, intently listening.

The thrilling clamour grew louder, grew nearer, muffled now and then for a few moments as the trail which the dogs were following led through some dense thicket of spruce or fir. Soon an uneasy look came over the shrewd, grayish-yellow face of the old fox, as he realized that the trail in question was the one which he had himself made but two hours earlier, on his return from a survey of a neighbouring farmer's hen-roost. He had taken many precautions with that homeward trail, tangling and breaking it several times; but he knew that ultimately, for all its deviations and subtleties, it might lead the dogs to this little warm den on the hillside, wherein his mate had but yesterday given birth to five blind, helpless, whimpering puppies. As the slim red mother realized the same fact, her fangs bared themselves in a silent snarl, and, backing up against the mouth of the burrow, she stood there an image of savage resolution, a dangerous adversary for any beast less powerful than bear or panther.

To her mate, however, it was obvious that something more than valour was needed to avert the approaching peril. He knew both the dogs whose chiming voices came up to him so unwelcomely on the sweet spring air. He knew that both were formidable fighters, strong and woodswise. For the sake of those five helpless, sprawling ones at the bottom of the den, the mother must not be allowed to fight. Her death, or even her serious injury, would mean their death. With his sharp ears cocked very straight, one paw lifted alertly, and an expression of confident readiness in his whole attitude, he waited a moment longer, seeking to weigh the exact nearness of the menacing cries. At length a wandering puff of air drawing up from the valley brought the sound startlingly near

and clear. Like a flash the fox slipped down the bank and darted into the underbrush, speeding to intercept the enemy.

A couple of hundred yards away from the den in the bank a rivulet, now swollen and noisy with spring rains, ran down the hillside. For a little distance the fox followed its channel, now on one side, now on the other, now springing from rock to rock amid the foamy darting of the waters, now making brief, swift excursions among the border thickets. In this way he made his trail obscure and difficult. Then, at what he held a fitting distance from home, he intersected the line of his old trail, and halted upon it ostentatiously, that the new scent might unmistakably overpower the old.

The baying and yelping chorus was now very close at hand. The fox ran on slowly, up an open vista between the trees, looking over his shoulder to see what the dogs would do on reaching the fresh trail. He had not more than half a minute to wait. Out from a greening poplar thicket burst the dogs, running with noses to the ground. The one in the lead, baying conscientiously, was a heavy-shouldered, flop-eared, much dewlapped dog of a tawny yellow colour, a half-bred foxhound whose cur mother had not obliterated the instincts bequeathed him by his pedigreed and well-trained sire. His companion, who followed at his heels and paid less scrupulous heed to the trail, looking around excitedly every other minute and yelping to relieve his exuberance, was a big black and white mongrel, whose long jaw and wavy coat seemed to indicate a strain of collie blood in his much mixed ancestry.

Arriving at the point where the trail was crossed by the hot, fresh scent, the leader stopped so abruptly that his follower fairly fell over him. For several seconds the noise of their voices was redoubled, as they sniffed wildly at the pungent turf. Then they wheeled, and took up the new trail. The next moment they saw the fox, standing at the edge of a ribbon of spruce woods and looking back at them superciliously. With a new and wilder note in their cries, they dashed forward frantically to seize him. But his white-



FOR A LITTLE DISTANCE THE FOX FOLLOWED ITS CHANNEL.

tipped, feathery brush flickered before their eyes for a fraction of a second, and vanished into the gloom of the spruce wood.

The chase was now full on, the quarry near, and the old trail forgotten. In a savage intoxication, reflected in the wildness of their cries, the dogs tore ahead through brush and thicket, ever farther and farther from that precious den on the hillside. Confident in his strength as well as his craft, the old fox led them for a couple of miles straight away, choosing the roughest ground, the most difficult gullies, the most tangled bits of underbrush for his course. Fleeter of foot and lighter than his foes, he had no difficulty in keeping ahead of them. But it was not his purpose to distance them or run any risk of discouraging them, lest they should give up and go back to their first venture. He wanted to utterly wear them out, and leave them at last so far from home that, by the time they should be once more ready to go hunting, his old trail leading to the den should be no longer decipherable by eye or nose.

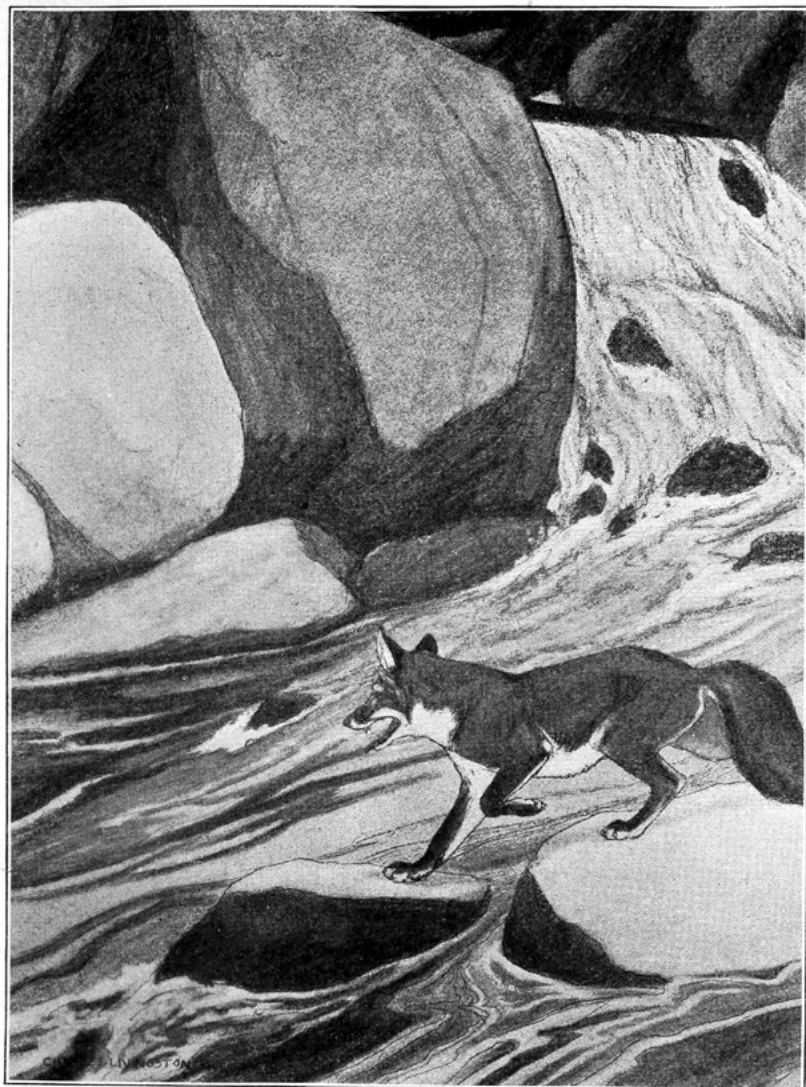
By this time the rim of the sun was above the horizon, mounting into a rose-fringed curtain of tender April clouds, and shooting long beams of rose across the level country. These beams seemed to find vistas ready everywhere, open lines of roadway, or cleared fields, or straight groves, or gleaming river reaches all appearing to converge toward the far-off fount of radiance. Down one of these lanes of pink glory the fox ran in plain sight, looking strangely large and dark in the mystic glow. Very close behind him came the two pursuers, fantastic, leaping, ominous shapes. For several minutes the chase fled on into the eye of the morning, then vanished down an unseen cross-corridor of the woods.

And now it seemed to the brave and crafty old fox, a very Odysseus of his kind for valour and guile, that he had led the enemy almost far enough from home. It was time to play with them a little. Lengthening out his stride till he had secured a safer lead, he described two or three short circles, and then ran on more slowly. His pursuers were quite out of sight, hidden by the trees and bushes; but he knew very well by his hearing just when they

ran into those confusing loops in the trail. As the sudden, excited confusion in their cries reached him, he paused and looked back, with his grayish-ruddy head cocked to one side; and, if laughter had been one of the many vulpine accomplishments, he certainly would have laughed at that moment. But presently the voices showed him that their owners had successfully straightened out the little snarl and were once more after him. So once more he ran on, devising further shifts.

Coming now to a rocky brook of some width, the fox stepped out upon the stones, then leaped back upon his own trail, ran a few steps along it, and finally jumped aside as far as he could, alighting upon a log in the heart of a patch of blueberry scrub. Slipping down from the log, he raced back a little way parallel with his tracks and lay down on the top of a dry hillock to rest. A drooping screen of hemlock branches here gave him effective hiding, while his sharp eyes commanded the brook-side and perhaps a hundred yards of the back trail.

In a moment or two the dogs rushed by, their tongues hanging far out, but their voices still eager and fierce. Not thirty paces away the old fox watched them cynically, wrinkling his narrow nose with aversion as the light breeze brought him their scent. As he watched, the pupils of his eyes contracted to narrow, upright slits of liquid black, then rounded out again as anger yielded to interest. It filled him with interest, indeed, to watch the frantic bewilderment and haste of his pursuers when the broken trail at the edge of the brook baffled them. First they went splashing across to the other bank, and rushed up and down, sniffing savagely for the scent. Next they returned to the near bank and repeated the same tactics. Then they seemed to conclude that the fugitive had attempted to cover his tracks by travelling in the water, so they traced the water's edge exactly, on both sides, for about fifty yards up and down. Finally they returned to the point where the trail was broken, and silently began to work around it in widening circles. At last the yellow half-breed gave voice. He had recaptured the scent on the log in the blueberry



THE FOX STEPPED OUT UPON THE STONES.

patch. As the noisy chorus rose again upon the morning air, the old fox got up, stretched himself somewhat contemptuously, and stood out in plain view with a shrill bark of defiance. Joyously the dogs accepted the challenge and hurled themselves forward; but in the same instant the fox vanished, leaving behind him a streak of pungent, musky scent that clung in the bushes and on the air.

And now for an hour the eager dogs found themselves continually overrunning or losing the trail. More than half their time and energy were spent in solving the riddles which their quarry kept propounding to them. Once they lost fully ten minutes racing up and down and round and round a hillocky sheep-pasture, utterly baffled, while the fox, hidden in the cleft of a rock on the other side of the fence, lay comfortably eying their performances. The sheep, huddling in a frightened mass in one corner of the pasture, scared by the noise, had given him just the chance he wanted. Leaping lightly upon the nearest, he had run over the thick-fleeced backs of the whole flock, and gained the top of the rail fence, from which he had sprung easily to the cleft in the rock. To the dogs it was as if their quarry had suddenly grown wings and soared into the air. The chase would have ended there but for the mischance of the shifting of the wind. The light breeze which had been drawing up from the southwest all at once, without warning, veered over to the east; and with it came a musky whiff which told the puzzled dogs the whole story. As they raced joyously and clamorously toward the fence, the fox slipped down the other side of the rock and fled away.

A fox's wits are full of resource, and he seldom cares to practise all his accomplishments in one run. But this was a unique occasion; and this fox was determined to make his work complete and thoroughly dishearten his pursuers. He now conceived a stratagem which might, possibly, prove discouraging. Minutely familiar with every inch of his range, he remembered a certain deep deadwater on the brook, bridged by a fallen sapling. The sapling was now old and partly rotted away. He had crossed it often, using it as a bridge for his convenience; and he had noticed just a day or two

ago that it was growing very insecure. He would see if it was yet sufficiently insecure to serve his purpose.

Without any more circlings and twistings, he led the way straight to the deadwater, leaving a clear trail. The tree was still there. It seemed to yield, almost imperceptibly, as he leaped upon it. His shrewd and practised perceptions told him that its strength would just suffice to carry him across, but no more. Lightly and swiftly, and not without some apprehension (for he loathed a wetting), he ran over, and halted behind a bush to see what would happen.

Arrived at the fallen tree, the dogs did not hesitate. The trail crossed. They would go where it went. But the tree had something to say in the matter. As the double weight sprang up it, it sagged ominously, but the excited hunters were in no mood to heed the warning. The next moment it broke in the middle with a punky, crumbling sound; and the dogs plunged, splashing and yelping, into the middle of the icy stream.

If the fox, however, had imagined that this unexpected bath would be cold enough to chill the ardour of his pursuers, he was speedily disillusioned. Neither dog seemed to have his attention for one single moment distracted by the incident. Both swam hurriedly to land, scrambled up the bank, and at once resumed the trail. The fox was already well away through the underbrush.

By this time he was tired of playing tricks. He made up his mind to lead the enemy straight, distance them completely, and lose them in the rocky wilderness on the other side of the hill, where their feet would soon get sore on the sharp stones. Then he could rest awhile in safety, and later in the day return by a devious route to the den in the bank and his slim red mate. The plan was a good one, and in all ways feasible. But the capricious fate of the woodfolk chose to intervene.

It chanced that, as the fox passed down an old, mossy wood-road, running easily and with the whole game well in hand, a young farmer carrying a gun was approaching along a highway which intersected the wood-road. Being on the way to a chain of

shallow ponds along the foot of the uplands, he had his gun loaded with duck shot, and was unprepared for larger game. The voices of the dogs—now much subdued by weariness and reduced to an occasional burst of staccato clamour—gave him warning of what was afoot. His eyes sparkled with interest, and he reached for his pocket to get a cartridge of heavier shot. But just as he did so the fox appeared.

There was no time to change cartridges. The range was long for B B, but the young farmer was a good shot and had confidence in his weapon. Like a flash he lifted his gun and fired. As the heavy report went banging and flapping among the hills, and the smoke blew aside, he saw the fox dart lightly into the bushes on the other side of the way, apparently untouched. With a curse, devoted impartially to his weapon and his marksmanship, he ran forward and carefully examined the tracks. There was no smallest sign of blood. "Clean miss, by gum!" he ejaculated; and strode on without further delay. He knew the dogs could never overtake that seasoned old fox. They might waste their time, if they cared to. He would not. They crossed the road just as he disappeared around the next turning.

But the fox, though he had vanished from view so nonchalantly and swiftly, had not escaped unscathed. With the report, he had felt a sudden burning anguish, as of a white-hot needle-thrust, go through his loins. One stray shot had found its mark; and now, as he ran, fierce pains racked him, and every breath seemed to cut. Slower and slower he went, his hind legs reluctant to stretch out in the stride, and utterly refusing to propel him with their old springy force. Nearer and nearer came the cries of the dogs, till presently he realized that he could run no farther. At the foot of a big granite rock he stopped, and turned, and waited, with bare, dangerous fangs gleaming from his narrow jaws.

The dogs were within a dozen yards of him before they saw him, so still he stood. This was what they had come to seek; yet now, so menacing were his looks and attitude, they stopped short.

It was one thing to catch a fugitive in flight. It was quite another to grapple with a desperate and cunning foe at bay. The old fox knew that fate had come upon him at last. But there was no coward nerve in his lithe body, and the uncomprehended anguish that gripped his vitals added rage to his courage. The dogs rightly held him dangerous, though his weight and stature were scarcely half what either one of them could boast.

Their hesitation, however, was but momentary. Together they flung themselves upon him, to get lightning slashes, almost simultaneously, on neck and jaw. Both yelped angrily, and bit wildly, but found it impossible to hold down their twisting foe, who fought in silence and seemed to have the strength and irrepressibility of steel springs in his slender body. Presently his teeth met through the joint of the hound's fore paw, and the hound, with a shrill *ki yi*, jumped backward from the fight. But the black and white mongrel was of better grit. Though one eye was filled with blood, and one ear slit to the base, he had no thought of shirking the punishment. Just as the yelping hound withdrew from the mix-up, his long, powerful jaws secured a fair grip on the fox's throat, just back of the jawbone. There was a moment of breathless, muffled, savage growling, of vehement and vindictive shaking. Then the valorous red body straightened itself out at the foot of the rock, and made no more resistance as the victors mauled and tore it. At a price, the little family in the burrow had been saved.



SLOWER AND SLOWER HE WENT.