

Reynard the Fox

by

H. A. Guerber

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REYNARD THE FOX

[35] Among primitive races, as with children, animal stories are much enjoyed, and form one of the first stages in literature. The oldest of these tales current in the middle ages is the epic of Reineke Fuchs, or Reynard the Fox. This poem was carried by the ancient Franks across the Rhine, became fully acclimated in France, and then returned to Germany by way of Flanders, where it was localized.

After circulating from mouth to mouth almost all over Europe, during many centuries, it was first committed to writing in the Netherlands, where the earliest manuscript, dating from the eleventh or twelfth century, gives a Latin version of the tale.

“The root of this saga lies in the harmless natural simplicity of a primeval people. We see described the delight which the rude child of nature takes in all animals,—in their slim forms, their gleaming eyes, their fierceness, their nimbleness and cunning. Such sagas would naturally have their origin in an age when the ideas of shepherd and hunter occupied a great portion of the intellectual horizon of the people; when the herdman saw in the ravenous bear one who was his equal, and more than his equal, in force and adroitness, the champion of the woods and wilds; when the hunter, in his lonely ramble through the depths of the forest, beheld in the hoary wolf and red fox, as they stole along,—hunters like himself,—mates, so to say, and companions, and whom he therefore addressed as such. . . . So that originally this kind of poetry was [36] the exponent of a peculiar sort of feeling prevailing among the people, and had nothing whatever to do with the didactic or satiric, although at a later period satiric allusions began to be interwoven with it.”

The story has been rewritten by many poets and prose writers. It has been translated into almost every European language, and was remodeled from one of the old mediaeval poems by Goethe, who has given it the form in which it will doubtless henceforth be known. His poem “Reineke Fuchs” has been commented upon by Carlyle and translated by Rogers, from whose version all the following quotations have been extracted.

As was the custom among the Franks under their old Merovingian rulers, the animals all assembled at Whitsuntide around their king, Nobel the lion, who ruled over all the forest. This assembly, like the Champ de Mars, its prototype, was convened not only for the purpose of deciding upon the undertakings for the following year, but also as a special tribunal, where all accusations were made, all complaints heard, and justice meted out to all. The animals were all present, all except Reynard the fox, who, it soon became apparent, was accused of many a dark deed. Every beast present testified to some crime committed by him, and all accused him loudly except his nephew, Grimbart the badger.

“And yet there was one who was absent,
Reineke Fox, the rascal! who, deeply given to mischief,
Held aloof from half the Court. As shuns a bad conscience

Light and day, so the fox fought shy of the nobles assembled.
One and all had complaints to make, he had all of them injured;
Grimbart the badger, his brother's son, alone was excepted."

The complaint was voiced by Isegrim the wolf, who told with much feeling how cruelly Reynard had blinded three of his beloved children, and how shamefully he had insulted his wife, the fair lady Gieremund. This accusation had no sooner been formulated than Wackerlos the dog came [37] forward, and, speaking French, pathetically described the finding of a little sausage in a thicket, and its purloining by Reynard, who seemed to have no regard whatever for his famished condition.

The tomcat Hintze, who at the mere mention of a sausage had listened more attentively, now angrily cried out that the sausage which Wackerlos had lost belonged by right to him, as he had concealed it in the thicket after stealing it from the miller's wife. He added that he too had had much to suffer from Reynard, and was supported by the panther, who described how he had once found the miscreant cruelly beating poor Lampe the hare.

"Lampe he held by the collar,
Yes, and had certainly taken his life, if I by good fortune
Had not happened to pass by the road. There standing you see him.
Look and see the wounds of the gentle creature, whom no one
Ever would think of ill treating."

The king, Nobel, was beginning to look very stern as one after another rose to accuse the absent Reynard, when Grimbart the badger courageously began to defend him, and artfully turned the tables upon the accusers. Taking up their complaints one by one, he described how Reynard, his uncle, once entered into partnership with Isegrim. To obtain some fish which a carter was conveying to market, the fox had lain as if dead in the middle of the road. He had been picked up by the man for the sake of his fur, and tossed up on top of the load of fish. But no sooner had the carter's back been turned than the fox sprang up, threw all the fish down into the road to the expectant wolf, and only sprang down himself when the cart was empty. The wolf, ravenous as ever, devoured the fish as fast as they were thrown down, and when the fox claimed his share of the booty he had secured, Isegrim gave him only the bones.¹

Not content with cheating his ally once, the wolf had induced the fox to steal a suckling pig from the larder of a sleeping peasant. With much exertion the cunning Reynard had thrown the [38] prize out of the window to the waiting wolf; but when he asked for a portion of the meat as reward, he was dismissed with nothing but the piece of wood upon which it had been hung.

The badger further proceeded to relate that Reynard had wooed Gieremund seven years before, when she was still unmated, and that if Isegrim chose to consider that an insult, it was only on a par with the rest of his accusations, for the king could readily see that Reynard was sorely injured instead of being guilty.

¹ For Russian version see Guerber's *Contes et Légendes*, vol. i., p. 93.

Then, encouraged by the favorable impression he had produced, Grimbart airily disposed of the cases of Wackerlos and Hintze by proving that they had both stolen the disputed sausage, after which he went on to say that Reynard had undertaken to instruct Lampe the hare in psalmody, and that the ill treatment which the panther had described was only a little wholesome castigation inflicted by the teacher upon a lazy and refractory pupil.

“Should not the master his pupil
Sometimes chastise when he will not observe, and is stubborn in evil?
If boys were never punished, were thoughtlessness always passed over,
Were bad behavior allowed, how would our juveniles grow up?”

These plausible explanations were not without their effect, and when Grimbart went on to declare that, ever since Nobel proclaimed a general truce and amnesty among all the animals of the forest, Reynard had turned hermit and spent all his time in fasting, almsgiving, and prayer, the complaint was about to be dismissed.

Suddenly, however, Henning the cock appeared, followed by his two sons, Kryant and Kantart, bearing the mangled remains of a hen upon a bier. In broken accents the bereaved father related how happily he had dwelt in a convent henyard, with the ten sons and fourteen daughters which his excellent consort had hatched and brought up in a single summer. His only anxiety had been caused by the constant prowling of Reynard, who, however, had been successfully [39] kept at a distance by the watchdogs. But when the general truce had been proclaimed, the dogs were dismissed. Reynard, in the garb of a monk, had made his way into the henyard to show Henning the royal proclamation with the attached seal, and to assure him of his altered mode of living.

Thus reassured, Henning had led his family out into the forest, where, alas! Reynard was lurking, and where he killed all but five of Henning's promising brood. They had not only been killed, but devoured, with the exception of Scratch-foot, whose mangled remains were laid at the monarch's feet in proof of the crime, as was customary in the mediaeval courts of justice.

The king, angry that his truce should thus have been broken, and sorry for the evident grief of the father, ordered a sumptuous funeral for the deceased, and commanded that a stone should be placed upon her grave, bearing the epitaph

““Scratch-foot, daughter of Henning, the cock, the best of the hen tribe.
Many an egg did she lay in her nest, and was skillful in scratching.
Here she lies, lost, alas! to her friends, by Reineke murdered.
All the world should know of his false and cruel behavior,
As for the dead they lament.’ Thus ran the words that were written.”

Then the king, having taken advice with his council, solemnly bade Brown the bear proceed immediately to Malepartus, Reynard's home, and summon him to appear at court forthwith, to answer the grave charges which had been

made against him. But he warned his messenger to behave circumspectly and to beware of the wiles of the crafty fox. The bear rather resented these well-meant recommendations, and, confidently asserting his ability to take care of himself, set out for Reynard's abode.

On his way to the mountains he was obliged to pass through an arid, sandy waste, and reached Malepartus weary and overheated. Standing before the fortress, which rejoiced in many [40] labyrinthine passages, he loudly made known his errand; and when Reynard, peeping cautiously out, had ascertained that Brown was alone, he hastened out to welcome him.

With great volubility the fox commiserated his long journey, and excused the delay in admitting him under plea of an indisposition caused by eating too much honey, a diet which he abhorred.

At the mere mention of honey the bear forgot all his fatigue, and when his host lamented the fact that he had nothing else to offer him, he joyfully declared no food could suit him better, and that he could never get enough of it.

“‘If that is so,’ continued the Red one, ‘I really can serve you,
For the peasant Rüsteviel lives at the foot of the mountain.
Honey he has, indeed, such that you and all of your kindred
Never so much together have seen.’”

Oblivious of everything else at the thought of such a treat, Brown the bear immediately set out in Reynard's company, and they soon came to the peasant's yard, where a half-split tree trunk lay in full view. Reynard then bade his companion thrust his nose well down into the hollow and eat his fill of honey. As soon as he saw that the bear had thrust not only his nose, but both fore paws, into the crack, Reynard cleverly removed the wedges, the tree clapped together, and he left the bear a prisoner and howling with pain.

These sounds soon attracted the peasant's attention, and he and his companions all fell upon the captive bear with every imaginable weapon, and proceeded to give him a sound beating. Frantic with pain and terror, the unfortunate bear finally succeeded in wrenching himself free, at the cost of the skin on his nose and fore paws, and, after tumbling the fat cook into the water, swam down the stream and landed in a thicket to bewail his misfortunes. Here he was found by the fox, who added insult to injury by making fun of him, and reproved him for his gluttony, until the bear again plunged into the stream and swam away. [41] Then, painfully making his way back to Nobel, Brown presented himself at court all bleeding and travel-stained, and poured forth a doleful account of his mission.

The king, after consulting with his principal courtiers, declared it the right of any man to be thrice summoned, and, conceding that the bear's manners were not of a conciliatory nature, selected Hintze the cat to bear his message to Malepartus. The cat, disheartened by unfavorable omens, was nevertheless compelled to go on this unwelcome journey.



Brown the Bear caught in the log. — Wagner

Reynard welcomed him cordially, promised to accompany him to Court on the morrow, and then asked what kind of refreshment he could offer. When Hintze had confessed his preference for mice, the fox replied that it was very fortunate, as there were plenty of them in the parson's barn. Hintze immediately asked to be led thither, that he might eat his fill.

“‘Pray do me the kindness
Hence to lead and show me the mice, for far above wild game
Give me a mouse for delicate flavor.’”

Reynard then conducted Hintze to the parson's barn, and pointed out a little opening through which he had passed to steal chickens, and where he knew that Martin, the parson's son, had laid a trap to catch any intruder. Hintze at first demurred, but, urged by Reynard, crept in and found himself caught in a noose. Reynard, pretending to take the cat's moans for cries of joy, banteringly inquired whether that was the way they sang at court, as the caterwauling grew louder.

These sounds finally reached the ears of little Martin, who, accompanied by his father, came into the barn to catch the intruder. Poor Hintze, frightened at the sight of the bludgeon the parson carried, flew at his legs, scratching and biting him, until the saintly man fainted. Then, taking advantage of the confusion, Hintze managed to slip out of the noose and effect his escape. He returned to court minus one eye, and there poured out the story of his wrongs. [42]

The wrath of the king was now terrible to behold, and assembling his council, he bade them decide how he should punish the wretch who had twice ill treated his messengers. Grimbart the badger, seeing that public opinion was decidedly against his relative, now begged that a third summons should be sent, and offered to carry the message himself. He furthermore declared that, even according to their own showing, the cat and bear had come to grief through their greediness; and then he promptly departed.

Grimbart found Reynard in the bosom of his family, delivered his message, and frankly advised the fox to obey the king's summons and appear at court, where, perchance, he might yet manage to save himself; while if he remained at home the king would besiege his fortress and slay him and all his family. Reynard listened favorably to this advice, and, after bidding his wife a tender farewell, and committing his beloved children to her care, he set out with Grimbart to go to court.

On the way the recollection of his many transgressions began to lie very heavily upon his heart. The fear of death quickened his conscience, and, longing to make his peace with Heaven, he expressed a great wish to confess his sins and receive absolution. As no priest was near at hand, he begged Grimbart the badger to listen to him, and penitently confessed all the misdeeds we have already recounted. He also added that he once bound Isegrim to the rope of the convent bell at Elkinar, where his frantic tugging rang the bell, until the monks, crowding around him, cudgled him severely. Reynard related, too, how he once induced Isegrim to enter the priests' house through a window and crawl along some beams in search of ham and bacon. As the wolf

was carefully feeling his way, however, the mischievous fox pushed him and made him fall on the sleeping people below, who, awakening with a start, fell upon him and beat him. These and sundry other sins having duly been confessed, the badger bade the fox chastise himself with a switch plucked from the hedge, lay it down in the road, jump over it thrice, and then meekly kiss [43] that rod in token of obedience. Then he pronounced Reynard absolved from his former sins, and admonished him to lead an altered life in future.

““My uncle, take care that your future amendment
In good works be visible. Psalms you should read, and should visit
Churches with diligence; fast at the seasons duly appointed;
Him who asks you point out the way to; give to the needy
Willingly; swear to forsake all evil habits of living,
All kinds of theft and robbing, deceit and evil behavior.
Thus can you make quite sure that you will attain unto mercy!””

The fox solemnly promised amendment, and with sanctimonious mien continued his journey. But as he and the badger passed a convent, and some plump hens crossed their path, Reynard forgot all his promises and began to chase the chickens. Sharply recalled to a sense of duty by Grimbart, Reynard reluctantly gave up the chase, and the two proceeded without further drawback to the court, where Reynard’s arrival created a great sensation.

“When at the Court it was known that Reineke really was coming,
Ev’ry one thronged out of doors to see him, the great and the little.
Few with friendly intent; for almost all were complaining.
This, however, in Reincke’s mind was of little importance;
Thus he pretended, at least, as he with Grimbart the badger,
Boldly enough and with elegant mien now walked up the high street.
Jauntily swung he along at his ease, as if he were truly
Son of the king, and free and quit of ev’ry transgression.
Thus he came before Nobel the king, and stood in the palace
In the midst of the lords; he knew how to pose as unruffled.”

With consummate skill and unparalleled eloquence and impudence, Reynard addressed the king, lauding himself as a faithful servant, and commiserating the fact that so many envious and backbiting people were ready to accuse him. Nobel the king, in whose mind the recollection of the treatment inflicted upon Brown the bear and Hintze the cat was still very vivid, answered him sternly, and told him that it would be [44] difficult for him to acquit himself of those two charges, to say nothing of the many others brought against him. Reynard, still undismayed, demanded with well-feigned indignation whether he was to be held responsible for the sins of those messengers whose misfortunes were attributable to their gluttonous and thievish propensities only.

But in spite of this specious pleading, all the other animals came crowding around with so many grievous charges that matters began to look very dark

indeed for the fox. In spite of all Reynard's eloquence, and of the fluent excuses ever on his tongue, the council pronounced him guilty, and condemned him to die an ignominious death. Reynard's enemies rejoiced at this sentence, and dragged him off with cheerful alacrity to the gallows, where all the animals assembled to witness his execution.

On the way to the place of punishment Reynard tried to think of some plan by means of which he could save himself even at the eleventh hour; and knowing that some scheme would occur to him if he could only gain a little time, he humbly implored permission to make a public confession of his manifold sins ere he paid the penalty of his crimes. Anxious to hear all he might have to say, the king granted him permission to speak; and the fox began to relate at length the story of his early and innocent childhood, his meeting and alliance with Isegrim the wolf, and his gradual induction by him into crooked paths and evil ways. He told, too, how the cruel wolf, presuming on his strength, had ever made use of it to deprive him, the fox, of his rightful share of plunder; and concluded by saying that he would often have suffered from hunger had it not been for the possession of a great treasure of gold, which had sufficed for all his wants.

““Thanks be to God, however, I never suffered from hunger;
Secretly have I fed well by means of that excellent treasure,
All of silver and gold in a secret place that securely
Hidden I keep; with this I've enough. And, I say it in earnest,
Not a wagon could carry it off, though sevenfold loaded.”” [45]

At the word “treasure” Nobel pricked up his ears and bade Reynard relate how this hoard was obtained and where it was concealed. The artful fox, seeing the king's evident interest, rapidly prepared more lies, and, speaking to the king and queen, declared that ere he died it would be better for him to reveal the carefully guarded secret of a conspiracy which would have resulted in the king's death had it not been for his devotion.

The queen, shuddering at the mere thought of the danger her royal consort had run, now begged that Reynard might step down from the scaffold and speak privately to her and to Nobel. In this interview Reynard, still pretending to prepare for immediate death, told how he discovered a conspiracy formed by his father, Isegrim the wolf, Brown the bear, and many others, to slay the king and seize the scepter. He described the various secret conferences, the measures taken, and his father's promise to defray all the expenses of the enterprise and to subsidize mercenary troops by means of the hoard of King Ermenrich, which he had discovered and concealed for his own use.

Reynard then continued to describe his loyal fears for his beloved sovereign, his resolve to outwit the conspirators, and his efforts to deprive them of the sinews of war by discovering and abstracting the treasure. Thanks to his ceaseless vigilance, he saw his father steal forth one night, uncover his hoard, gloat over the gold, and then efface the traces of his search with the utmost skill.

““Nor could one,
Not having seen, have possibly known. And ere he went onwards
Well he understood at the place where his feet had been planted,
Cleverly backwards and forwards to draw his tail, and to smooth it,
And to efface the trace with the aid of his mouth.””

Reynard then told the king how diligently he and his wife, Ermelyn, labored to remove the gold and conceal it elsewhere, and how the conspiracy came to naught when no gold was found to pay the troops. He mournfully added that his loyalty further deprived him of a loving father, for the latter had hung himself in despair [46] when he found his treasure gone and all his plans frustrated. With hypocritical tears he then bewailed his own fate, saying that, although ready to risk all for another, there was no one near him to speak a good word for him in his time of bitterest need.

The queen's soft heart was so touched by this display of feeling that she soon pleaded for and obtained Reynard's pardon from Nobel, who freely granted it when the fox promised to give him his treasure. Most accurately now he described its place of concealment, but said that he could not remain at court, as his presence there was an insult to royalty, seeing that he was under the Pope's ban and must make a pilgrimage ere it could be removed.

The king, after imprisoning Isegrim, Brown, and Hintze (the chief conspirators according to Reynard's tale), and ascertaining that the place the fox so accurately described really existed, bade Reynard depart, and at his request procured for him a fragment of Brown's hide to make a wallet, and a pair of socks from Isegrim and his wife, who were very loath to part with their foot covering. The king, queen, and court then accompanied Reynard a short way on the first stage of his journey, and turned back, leaving Bellyn the ram and Lampe the hare to escort him a little farther. These innocent companions accompanied Reynard to Malepartus, and while Bellyn waited patiently without, Lampe entered the house with Reynard. Lady Ermelyn and her two young sons greeted Reynard with joy, listened breathlessly to the account of his adventures, and then helped him to slay and eat Lampe, who, he declared, had brought all these evils upon him.

Reynard and his family feasted upon the body of poor Lampe the hare, whose head was then securely fastened in the wallet made of Brown's skin. This the fox carefully carried out and placed upon Bellyn's back, assuring him volubly the while that it contained important dispatches, and that in order to insure him a suitable reward for his good offices he had told Nobel the king that the ram had given him valuable assistance in preparing the contents of the wallet. [47]

““Yet, as soon as you see the king, and to still better favor
Wish to attain with him, 'twere well to bring to his notice
That you have sagely given advice in composing the letters,
Yea, and the writer have help'd.””

Thus instructed, and reassured concerning the absence of Lampe, whom

Reynard described as enjoying a chat with Ermelyn, Bellyn bounded off to court, where he did not fail to vaunt that he had helped Reynard prepare the contents of the wallet. Nobel publicly opened it, and when he drew out Lampe's bleeding head his anger knew no bounds. Following the advice of his courtiers, Bellyn, in spite of all his protestations, was given in atonement to the bear and the wolf, who the king now feared had been unjustly treated. They were then released from imprisonment and reinstated to royal favor, and twelve days of festivity ensued.

In the midst of the dance and revelry a bloody rabbit appeared to accuse Reynard of tearing off one of his ears, while the garrulous crow, Merkinau, related how the same unscrupulous wretch had pretended death merely to befool Sharfenebbe, his wife, and induce her to come near enough for him to bite off her head. Nobel the king, upon hearing these complaints, immediately swore that within six days he would besiege Reynard in his castle, would take him prisoner, and would make him suffer the penalty of his crimes.

Isegrim the wolf and Brown the bear rejoiced at these tidings, while Grimbart the badger, seeing the peril his uncle had incurred, hastened off secretly to Malepartus to warn him of his danger and support him by his advice. He found Reynard sitting complacently in front of his house, contemplating two young doves which he had just secured as they were making their first attempt to fly. Grimbart breathlessly related the arrival of Bellyn, the royal indignation at the sight of Lampe's head, and the plan for surrounding and capturing Reynard in his safe retreat.

In spite of this disquieting news Reynard's composure did not desert him; but after vowing that he could easily acquit himself of these crimes if he could only win the king's ear for a moment, he [48] invited his kinsman to share his meal and taste the delicate morsels he had secured. Grimbart the badger, seeing that the fox was not inclined to flee, now advised him not to await the king's coming and expose his wife and children to the horrors of a siege, but boldly to return to court.

““Go with assurance before the lords, and put the best face on
Your affairs. They will give you a hearing. Lupardus was also
Willing you should not be punish'd before you had fully
Made your defense, and the queen herself was not otherwise minded.
Mark this fact, and try to make use of it.””

Once more Reynard bade a tender farewell to his wife and sons, resisting all the former's entreaties to seek safety in flight, and, relying upon his cunning, set out with Grimbart to visit the court. On his way he again pretended repentance for his former sins, and resuming his confession at the point where he had broken off, he told how maliciously he had secured a piece of the bear's hide for a wallet, and socks from Isegrim and his wife. He then went on to relate just how he had murdered Lampe, charged the innocent Bellyn with the ambiguous message which had cost him his life, torn off one of the rabbit's ears, and eaten the crow's wife. Lastly, he confessed how he had gone out in

company with the wolf, who, being hungry and seeing a mare with a little foal, had bidden Reynard inquire at what price she would sell it. The mare retorted that the price was written on her hoof. The sly fox, understanding her meaning, yet longing to get his companion into trouble, pretended not to know how to read, and sent the wolf to ascertain the price. The result was, of course, disastrous, for the mare kicked so hard that the wolf lay almost dead for several hours after.

“So he went and asked the lady, ‘What price is the filly? Make it cheap.’ Whereupon she replied, ‘You’ve only to read it; There you will find the sum inscribed on one of my hind feet.’ ‘Let me look,’ continued the wolf; and she answered, ‘With pleasure.’ [49] “Then she lifted upwards her foot from the grass; it was studded With six nails. She struck straight out, and not by a hair’s breadth Missed she her mark. She struck on his head, and straightway he fell down, Lying as dumb as the dead.”

Waxing more and more eloquent as they drew nearer court and his fears increased, Reynard began to moralize. He excused himself for Lampe’s murder on the plea of the latter’s aggravating behavior, said that the king himself was nothing but a robber living by rapine, and proceeded to show how even the priests were guilty of manifold sins, which he enumerated with much gusto.

They had scarcely finished this edifying conversation when they came across Martin the ape, on his way to Rome; and Reynard hastened to implore him to secure his release from the Pope’s ban, through the intercession of the ape’s uncle, the cardinal, whose interest it was to serve him. Martin the ape not only promised his good offices at the papal court, but bade Reynard not hesitate to consult his wife should he find himself in any predicament at court.

Thus supported, Reynard again made his appearance at court, to the utter amazement and surprise of all; and although he was well aware that his situation was more dangerous than ever, his assurance did not seem at all impaired. Kneeling with pretended humility before the king, he artfully began his address by lamenting the fact that there were so many unscrupulous people ever ready to accuse the innocent; and when the king angrily interrupted him to accuse him of maiming the rabbit and devouring the crow, he began his defense.

First Reynard explained that since Martin the ape had undertaken to free him from his ban, his journey to Rome was of course unnecessary. Then he related how the rabbit, dining at his house, had insulted and quarreled with his children, from whose clutches he had had much trouble to save him. The crow’s death was caused by a fish bone she had swallowed. Bellyn, the traitor, had [50] slain Lampe himself, and evidently put his head in the wallet instead of some treasures which Reynard had intrusted to their care for the king and queen.

The king, who had listened impatiently to all this discourse, angrily retired, refusing to believe a word, while Reynard sought the ape’s wife, Frau Rückenau, and bade her intercede for him. She entered the royal tent, re-

minded the king of her former services, and seeing his mood somewhat softened, ventured to mention how cleverly Reynard once helped him to judge between the rival claims of a shepherd and a serpent. The latter, caught in a noose and about to die, had implored a passing shepherd to set it free. The peasant had done so after exacting a solemn oath from the serpent to do him no harm. But the serpent, once released, and suffering from the pangs of hunger, threatened to devour the peasant. The latter called the raven, wolf, and bear, whom he met by the way, to his aid; but as they all hoped to get a share of him, they all decided in favor of the serpent's claim to eat him.

The case by this time had become so intricate that it was laid before the king, who, unable to judge wisely, called Reynard to his aid. The fox declared that he could only settle so difficult a matter when plaintiff and defendant had assumed the relative positions which they occupied at the time of dispute. Then when the snake was safely in the noose once more, Reynard decided that, knowing the serpent's treachery, the peasant might again set him loose, but need not do so unless he chose.

“Here now is each of the parties
Once again in his former state, nor has either the contest
Won or lost. The right, I think, of itself is apparent.
For if it pleases the man, he again can deliver the serpent
Out of the noose; if not, he may let her remain and be hang'd there.
Free he may go on his way with honor and see to his business,
Since she has proved herself false, when she had accepted his kindness;
Fairly the man has the choice. This seems to me to be justice,
True to the spirit. Let him who understands better declare it.” [51]

The king, remembering this celebrated judgment, and skillfully reminded by Frau Rückenau of the bear's and the wolf's rapacity, consented at last to give Reynard a second hearing. The fox now minutely described the treasures he sent to court,—a magic ring for the king, and a comb and mirror for the queen. Not only was the fable of the judgment of Paris engraved on the latter, but also that of the jealous donkey, who, imitating his master's lapdog, and trying to climb into his lap, received nothing but blows. There was also the story of the cat and the fox, of the wolf and the crane, and, lastly, the account of the miraculous way in which his father, a noted leech, had saved Nobel's sire by making him eat the flesh of a wolf just seven years old.

The pleader then reminded the king of a noted hunting party, where Isegrim, having secured a boar, gave the king one quarter, the queen another, reserved a half for himself, and gave the fox nothing but the head. This division was of course very disloyal, and the fox showed that he thought so by dividing a calf more equitably; i.e., giving the queen one half, the king the other, the heart and liver to the princes, the head to the wolf, and reserving only the feet for himself.

Reynard prided himself upon these tokens of loyalty, and then, seeing that he had made a favorable impression, he volunteered, in spite of his small size, to meet the wolf in battle and leave the vindication of his claims to the

judgment of God. This magnanimous behavior filled the king with admiration, and the trial was appointed for the following day, the intervening hours being granted to both combatants for preparation. Reynard, still advised by Frau Rückenau, was shaved smooth, rubbed with butter until he was as slippery as could be, and instructed to feign fear and run fleetly in front of the wolf, kicking up as much sand as possible, and using his brush to dash it into his opponent's eyes and thus blind him.

The combat took place. The wolf, blinded by the sand in his eyes, was so infuriated that he finally pounced upon the fox, who, however, managed yet to get the upper hand and come off victor, [52] generously granting life to his foe, whom he had nearly torn and scratched to pieces. Reynard, having thus won the victory, enjoyed the plaudits of the crowd, while the wolf, being vanquished, was publicly derided, and borne off by his few remaining friends to be nursed back to health, if possible.

“Such is ever the way of the world. They say to the lucky,
‘Long may you live in good health,’ and friends he finds in abundance.
When, however, ill fortune befalls him, alone he must bear it.
Even so was it here; each one of them wish’d to the victor
Nearest to be, to show himself off.”

The king pronounced Reynard guiltless of all charges, and made him one of his privy councilors. But the fox, after thanking the king for his favors, humbly besought permission to return home, where his wife was awaiting him, and departed, escorted by a deputation of his friends.

According to some versions of the tale, Reynard contented himself with blinding the wolf and maiming him for life; according to others, he bided his time, and when the king was ill, told him that nothing could save him short of the heart of a wolf just seven years old. Of course no wolf of the exact age could be found but Isegrim, so he was sacrificed to save the king, who recovered. As for Reynard, he enjoyed great honor as long as he lived, and his adventures have long been the delight of the people, whom his tricks never failed to amuse.

“Highly honor’d is Reineke now! To wisdom let all men
Quickly apply them, and flee what is evil, and reverence virtue
This is the end and aim of the song, and in it the poet
Fable and truth hath mixed, whereby the good from the evil
Ye may discern, and wisdom esteem; and thereby the buyers
Of this book in the ways of the world may be daily instructed.
For it was so created of old, and will ever remain so.
Thus is our poem of Reineke’s deeds and character ended.
May God bring us all to eternal happiness. Amen!”



Reynard preparing for battle. — Kaulbach