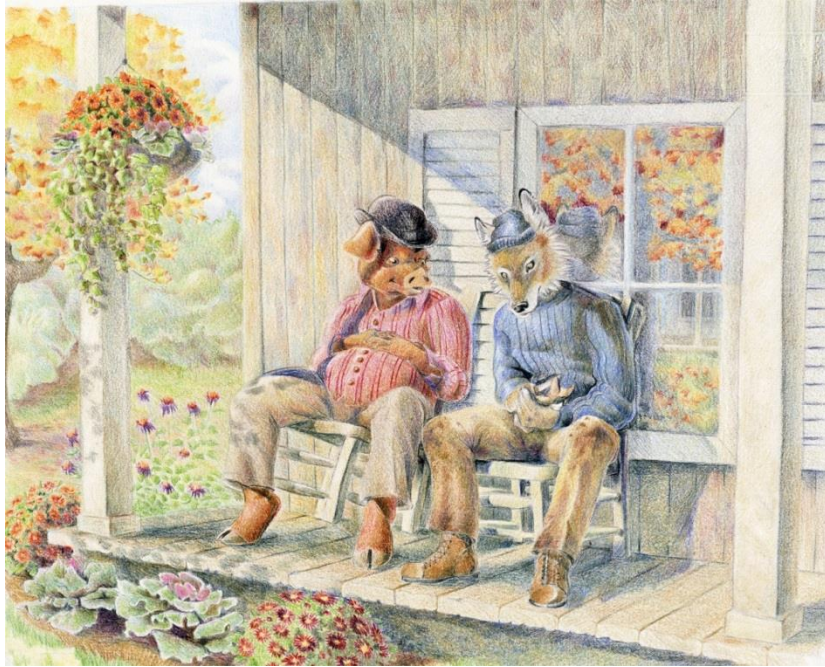


Four Foxes

by

Vixxy Fox



“Well, sir,” Wirewolf said softly, “I remember a time when I sailed for these four Foxes. You also know how I value the truth and the truth be told there was not a nice one among them. They thought they was sly beyond sly and the world was theirs for the taking.”

“You don’t say,” Duroc replied. He was aware the old sailor was beginning a story; much as he would have hauled up his sails to get underway. “With a ‘Hey haul’em up, and a Hey haul’em up,” the Pig sang softly as this thought occurred to him.

“I taught you that song?” the Wolf asked him.

“I made it up.”

“That’s remarkable then because we used to sing it when hauling up the sails. Certainly I must have mentioned that sometime or another.” He looked at his friend and told him, “You think cloth is light until you have to haul on the lines to get’em up. The main’sl’s the heaviest ‘o’ course and in the ice and snow the weight can be five times greater. Many a line has parted under the stress.”

“You mean the ropes?”

“No... I mean lines. Rope is unemployed cordage. That’s when it’s just lay’n there or in a coil and not assigned a job; that’s when it’s just a rope. On the other paw, when you prepare a rope for a specific task it’s called a line. The line is then labeled by the job it performs; for example, anchor line, dock line, fender line. In the case of the main’sl you haul it up with the main’sl halyard; and that’s only if’n it’s a triangular sail cuz it’ll attach to the tippy top of the sail.” He paused as he looked over the land that was his keep now, understanding he would never have to sail away again. It was a trade off. He did miss his days of traveling to new places, but he more enjoyed his new stability and a love he thought he would never see again. “Soon as you come aboard,” he said in a more faraway voice, “You’re expected to ‘learn the ropes’; meaning their names and what they do.”

“But you just told me,” Duroc replied with just a hint of annoyance, “They was rope if they wasn’t being used and line if they was... so shouldn’t it be ‘learning the lines’?”

The sailor’s mind came back to the present and he gave his friend a sour look. “You’re messing with me.”

“Maybe.” The Pig smiled and leaned back in his chair, fishing a cigar out of a breast pocket. “You mind if I smoke?”

“Help yourself.”

Striking a match on the wall of the gardener’s cottage he puffed away until there was a good sized blue cloud around his head. Blowing a smoke ring he said, “You were tell’n me about the four Foxes.”

“I was, wasn’t I?” the gardener replied. Sometimes he needed a good hand on the tiller to keep his stories moving along straight and true. “They was a consortium called Fox, Fox, Fox, and Dog.”

“Dog?”

“I think he was adopted.”

“But he was a Fox?”

“Most assuredly he was, the sneaky lubber.” The Wolf leaned back in his chair to match the Pig’s and took a small clay pipe out of his breast pocket. “Mind if I smoke?”

“Help yourself.”

When the pipe was well packed and lit in a similar fashion to his friend’s stogie he continued. “They was a band ‘o’ cutthroat bean counters. You couldn’t so much as spit on the deck and they’d be tell’n ya how much it cost them to clean up the mess. There was never even a decent meal on board because they felt it was cheaper for the cook to feed us mush day in and day out.”

“Didn’t the captain complain?”

“Sure he did,” the Wolf said, taking a moment to blow an equally large smoke ring to match that of his friend.

“And?”

“And what?”

“What did they tell the Captain?”

“They told him to catch some fish. I remember how the one Fox put it, *‘The ocean is full of fish and fish are free.’* I think it was Dog what said that and he said it in front of the crew. It is a true wonder he wasn’t made to walk the plank. Mind his swim would’a been right next to the pier but all the same I wish we’d a done it.”

“Wouldn’t that have been mutiny?”

“That only counts if you’re underway and then it never ever takes place because the Captain is just unfortunate enough to go ‘ore the side during a storm; if you catch my drift. I swear, if that bushy tailed scoundrel had’a bent over in front of me after say’n what he said he’d’a found a fid shoved into a very dark and stinky place.”

“You don’t say.”

“I do say. They had the entire crew poop’n yellow all the way across the sea and back from that mush. With their extra coin gained at our expense they was all dressed in silk and eating the best meals money could buy. That don’t go by the gunnel so well when you hear it with your own ears even if it is one of the owners speak’n. Of course they was all four of’em lubbers and not an understanding of the sea amongst them. It cost more money to catch fish than it does to stock the pantry and feed the crew proper.”

“And why would that be?”

“A ship underway is eat’n time and distance. Time is money. You don’t get your cargo to where it has to go in time it can spoil if’n it’s food goods. If you’re haul’n hard goods and your competition gets there before you then you don’t get top money.” He sucked in hard on the pipe and let out a large cloud of smoke and then furthered, “Get paid in copper instead of gold and it’s easy to see you’re losing money.”

“The captain didn’t explain that to them?”

“He did.”

Duroc waited a few seconds expecting the story to continue and when it didn’t he plunked down his chair and looked at his friend.

“What?” the sailor asked him with an innocent look.

“What did the Fox say?”

“You mean besides ‘*hackyhackyhackyo*’?”

Duroc took the cigar from his mouth and frowned. “That was not funny.”

The Wolf chuckled. “Well he did make that sound; but only after he got a fid up his backside?”

“I can’t believe you’re even telling me this with a straight face.”

“And why wouldn’t I have a straight face?”

“What did he say about the fish thing?”

“He told us again to catch fish after which we told him we couldn’t.”

“And why couldn’t you catch any fish?”

“Because we didn’t have any fishing line... all we had was rope.”

With that the Pig leaned down, gripped the leg of the Wolf’s chair and pulled. The gardener, who came down on his backside with a resounding thump, didn’t stop giggling for quite some time.