

. Gerald The Mangy Fox .

from **Tales Of The Wilderwood**



By **J.W. Hawkins**

Illustrated By **Matthew Burton**

Gerald The Mangy Fox

(Non-Illustrated Edition)

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From ‘Tales of the Wilderwood: Volume 1’

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1.

There once was a forest and in that forest creatures innumerate dwelt. There were mice, there were owls, badgers, rats and wolves and every other creature that could imaginably live within a forest. Yet no forest would be worthy of a story unless upon occasion the flash of bushy tail, bright and orange, could be seen amongst the undergrowth. The Wilderwood is one such forest.

The forest thrived; its sprawling trees and canopy left the forest floor dark and shadowy and full of the nooks and crannies that foxes love so dearly. So amongst the tangle of roots at the feet of the age old trees lay the mouths of one-hundred-and-one subterranean dens: the homes of the foxes.

There were foxes old and young, some were tough, some were sly, some would boldly bound while some would sneak. Though for all their differences the one thing that was common to them all was their silky orange fur that glimmered like copper under the light of the moon. Every fox and vixen alike would boast of the beauty and softness of their pelt, each claiming that no other pelt could ever compare; all but one.

One fox was no preening beauty, for he had nothing worth preening over. What remained of his fur was matt and lank, appearing in sporadic clumps like the tufts of onions sticking from the ground. The other foxes spurned him and mocked him for his fur and as he passed, they would always say “Look, there goes Gerald the mangy fox.”

Times were good and plentiful for the foxes of the Wilderwood; by day they would they sleep, snug and warm in their dens, and by night they would take to the open air, spry and awake with bristling tails and gleaming eyes. Hares and rabbits were abundant as they leapt and bounded, drunk with the joys of early spring. Yet despite every fox falling gently asleep at the crack of every dawn, lulled into sleep by bellies

full enough to burst, there were still some who wanted more.

“Rabbits, rabbits, rabbits: I am sick to the teeth of rabbits,” bellowed Uthor, the biggest, burliest and most rambunctious of the foxes.

“There are hares aplenty too, not to forget.” gently spoke a dapper and handsome fox, reclining on a bed of leaves.

“Then catch them if you can; they're too quick by half and once you've bust your gut catching them, you'll only find that their meat tastes no different to the rabbits.” The dapper fox made no move other than to tilt a leaf with his paw, so that the dew rolled gently into his awaiting mouth, seemingly oblivious to Uthor's bluff retort. The vixen Clarabella looked on with a stare that beckoned caution, though little was it heeded.

“It wouldn't be so bad if they didn't all try and run away, making us chase them through the woods and across the fields, and then make us dig their burrows until our paws are sore. All I'm saying is that a few more hours' beauty sleep would not go amiss.”

“Ah, a life made for eating and sleeping with nothing but play to while away the time between, what bliss that would be! But Alas! Not to pay Great Oak all that he is due seems terribly unwise, for the whispering leaves whose whispers spread throughout the Wilderwood are the eyes and ears of Great Oak,” said Dapper wistfully.

Then a fourth pair of eyes suddenly burst awake gleaming with yellow fire, two burning gems seemingly too big for the tiny head in which they were set. “Who is Great Oak? And why do we have to give her so much of what we hunt?” chimed the tiny cub.

The three elder foxes looked from one to the other until the silence was broken with a sigh and Dapper hoisted himself onto his haunches and leant towards the tiny cub.

“We foxes live in the Wilderwood. It is our home, our food. The Wilderwood feeds us when we're hungry, hides us when

we're hunted and shelters us when it rains. Everything we have we owe to the Wilderwood.

The Wilderwood is thick and vast with many trees old beyond the memory of foxes, yet among these trees there is one older yet. The eldest of the elder trees, the tallest of the taller trees, with branches twice as thick as the trunks of many a tree: Great Oak is the guardian of this forest.

Every animal that lives within the Wilderwood must put back all that they take from the Wilderwood and repay their debt to Great Oak: the worms turn the earth and make it fertile, the birds spread the seeds from the berries they eat, to make new plants grow, and they eat the worms to stop them becoming too many. As although we animals rely on the Wilderwood, so does the Wilderwood rely upon us. The soil from which sprouts new trees and nourishes the old is all made by the creatures that walk beneath the forest's canopy. For once we breathe our last breath, we shall lie down and slowly become soil once again, and from that very same soil life will spring anew. And so in some ways we never die, but grow into the Wilderwood to watch down on and protect our children and the children that they will then have, so Great Oak is us and we in turn are her. Does that answer your question?

Though there is only one animal that truly knows the mind of the forest. One animal made bigger and stronger than all the others by Great Oak so that they can know Great Oak's mind and put fear into any creature that strays from the way of the Wilderwood: the wolves.

The wolves move as quietly as the sound of a snowflake falling to the ground, listening to the comings and goings of the woods without a soul noticing their presence. The wolves are never tempted by the world of men; never will they stray into the mannish towns to forage and grow fat on the wastefulness of man. The wolves, like us and all the other creatures that dwell in these woods, need to eat, but they do not choose their

hunts randomly; they will not pounce on the first creature they see. The wolf watches and waits for the whispering leaves of Great Oak to whisper the names of those she wishes to return to the soil.

Every year when the first spring rains start to fall and the trees of the Wilderwood begin to bud, comes the count. Every animal must stand before Great Oak and list everything they have taken from the forest and everything they have given. It does not matter how much they give as long as they tell the truth about what they have taken, for sometimes the year has been hard and the Wilderwood could only provide a little for its sons and daughters and so only a little could be returned. Yet some years the summer is long and the spring bountiful, leaving the Wilderwood thriving, teeming with plants to be foraged and game to be hunted. In these years when everyone has taken much from the Wilderwood and lived well with full bellies and worry-free nights then more has to be given back to the Wilderwood, to thank her for all that she has given us. The truth is the key, for when you stand before Great Oak she can see into your soul and know anything that lies within your heart, good or bad, truth or lie.”

“So what happens if Great Oak sees that you've lied?” A hint of earnest worry had crept into the little cub's voice.

“Never you mind about that; it's nothing you need worry about, my sweetheart. Now run along to bed; it's already way past your bedtime,” said Clarabella with motherly concern.

Without a word of complaint the little fox snuggled himself warmly beneath Clarabella, unaware of the hard stare that she directed at the once again reclined Dapper.

2.

*Gerald, Gerald the mangy fox,
Who would touch those manky locks?,
Not I, nor he, nor them, nor she,
Bugs and ticks and many a flea,
Have you ever seen a sight so sad,
As a fox dressed in a mangy rag?
Run, Run, Here he comes,
Run, Run RUN!*

As the cubs danced and sung their cruel song, Gerald remained hidden amongst the undergrowth, listening intently. He remembered a time when he had also danced, sung and japed. Making fun of others, not realising how hurtful words could be. Now he knew exactly how deep words could cut. He looked jealously at the other foxes, noting the way their coats gleamed like copper in the sun and the way that they moved, deftly and gracefully; without needing to stop and scratch or being kept awake all night by the tormenting of their fleas and ticks. Sometimes he would scratch, bite and chew himself until he bled, while upon other occasions he would wash himself in the stream until he was shivering with cold, yet nothing seemed to make it any better. His fur continued to itch, and most worryingly of all, continued to fall out.

At first the other foxes would merely chide him about his mangy fur, though as it grew worse, the chiding became teasing and the teasing became mockery. Before long Gerald could not go within a hundred metres of another fox without bails of guffaws and roars of laughter exploding about his ears. Now Gerald slunk away at the mere sound of other foxes, cringing at the very idea of hearing their mocking voices. Yet although Gerald may not have had a beautiful gleaming coat as the other foxes did, he did have another thing that all foxes should have

in abundance: wits. And with this abundance of wits, that bounced around in his big brain, under his balding fur, Gerald made a plan.

Uthor sat staring at the rabbit carcass. A look of boredom marked his face, switching to that of annoyance as if what he was contemplating was somehow the poor rabbit's fault.

“Rabbits, rabbits, rabbits,” he grumbled belligerently. “I hunt all of the night, skulking, stalking and chasing and all I ever get for it is rabbits, rabbits, rabbits!”

“Surely having as many rabbits as you can eat is better than going hungry, isn't it?” hissed a softly spoken voice emanating from the nearby brush.

“Who is that? And why do you skulk in the shadows where you cannot be seen?” Uthor bellowed, jumping around in a full circle, his eyes searching, darting from place to place looking for the source of the voice.”

“Who am I? I am a fox. Why am I skulking? Well, isn't skulking what us foxes do best? And besides, now that I've answered your questions, surely it's only polite that you answer mine? Surely having rabbits is better than going hungry?”

Uthor relaxed slightly, hearing no threat in the stranger's voice, and remembering that the subject was one of his favourite bones of contention, one on which he thoroughly enjoyed to chew.

“Alas, being hungry would in some ways be a blessing. At least then when a rabbit were to come my way I could savour it, knowing that it was a rarity and a treat, not just another dull rabbit.”

“Some might say that that is somewhat ungrateful. I mean there are many other ways you could try and make your meals more interesting, for example, I cook my rabbits with onions, and for a real treat I might even help myself to a little beetroot on the side.”

“Bah! Onions and beets are to be eaten by rabbits, not with

rabbits! No fox worth a single hair of his shiny coat would ever stoop to eating onions and beets!”

From out of the shadows stepped a grim simulacrum of a fox. Lank matted hair hung in islands like tufts upon a sea of exposed and mottled skin. Uthor leapt back with irrepressible revulsion as Gerald showed himself.

“You! You disgusting wretch, little wonder you hide yourself amongst the bushes. You are a poor excuse for a fox with rotting fur and fleabites and ticks covering your body. I should tear your throat out this very instant; it would be a kindness to you.”

“Well I please hope that you won't,” retorted Gerald. “For if you could hold back your desire to bleed me dry, then perhaps I could tell you how to solve your lack of culinary variation?”

Uthor's eyes narrowed with interest and suspicion, as Gerald unveiled his plan.

The following night four foxes stood beyond the edge of the Wilderwood, on the border of the realms of men. They stood on a slither of a precipice overlooking a valley. Within the valley could be seen the smoke and lights of houses and the noise of cars and people. Yet directly beneath the precipice was a single large building surrounded by a mighty fence of barbed wire, and inside this compound stood coop after coop after coop of chickens.

“How can we carry all of the chickens back to the Wilderwood? It's far too steep; I could barely make it without carrying anything.” A hint of trepidation had crept into Clarabella's voice.

“Carry the chickens back? Why on earth would one wish to carry the chickens back when we can simply gorge ourselves here and then slink back to the cover of the woods with our bellies full?” said Dapper with an air of casual disbelief.

“Here, here!” Burst the bluff voice of Uthor. “If it weren't for the clouds overhead, I would probably just sleep here, ready for

a second helping when the morning comes.”

Clarabella had been slightly less enthusiastic about their proposed expedition than the two males. When Uthor had returned to the den with that grubby creature Gerald in tow, he had been full of bluster and bravado; applauding himself already for the great feats of daring he would undertake, while boasting of the stories that all would tell of their great courage and quick wits, and how it is no wonder that foxes are known for their cunning. Whereas Dapper had merely, stretched himself slowly and lazily, yawning as he did so, before remarking how having a belly full of chicken did seem like a rather splendid notion. Even to Clarabella the idea had seemed interesting and exciting, though as she stood on the edge of the precipice looking down upon the farm below, butterflies fluttered frantically inside her stomach.

“But what about Great Oak?” she whispered.

“What about Great Oak?” replied Dapper. “Are they Great Oak's chickens? Have they been fed and raised by Great Oak? Will Great Oak help us obtain the chickens? No, No and No. Everything we take from the Wilderwood must be returned to the Wilderwood, for that is the way of the Wilderwood. But this is not the Wilderwood, is it? This is the realm of men, and the chickens that we will feast upon are the chickens of men. So I really don't see how Great Oak could possibly have anything to do with this, do you?”

Cowed by Dapper's sharpness, Clarabella relented. Meanwhile, unseen by the other three, Gerald smiled to himself.

Swift and deadly, the four foxes descended upon the farm. Digging frantically with their paws, they dug beneath the wire fence and into the compound. Not a sound they made as they slunk towards the coops. After worrying the latch for a few anxious moments they entered into the nearest coop and amongst a cacophony of clucking and the frantic beating of

wings they snatched their prey and slunk once more into the night.

Beneath the shadow of the precipice, Clarabella, Dapper and Uthor feasted greedily on their juicy fowl. So elated by the thrill of their recent escapades and the tender meat that was their prize, not one of the three even noticed Gerald, who sat by quietly watching them stuff and gorge themselves, while he did not eat one single morsel.

The next day the foxes emerged from their dens, each still grinning with a mad glee from their exploits of the previous night.

When passing foxes asked why they all had such a twinkle in their eye they could contain themselves no more and boasted of another world, where the game did not run or hide and had no tiny burrows to scurry away to: a place where the meat was tender and juicy and so plentiful that if a fox were to eat twenty chickens a night for twenty years, there would still be a bountiful supply left-over.

Dapper went on to claim that it was his deftness and speed that had made the whole venture possible, while Uthor would blather on about how without his great strength all would have failed. Though every time they would boast Clarabella would remind everyone of how it was her stealth that allowed them their success. Yet not one of them mentioned Gerald.

“Come, come there is plenty for all!”

“Follow us to the land of abundance.”

The three foxes set forth once more for the farm beneath the precipice. All the other foxes of the Wilderwood marched behind them, licking their lips in anticipation for what they were sure was to be a most excellent meal that awaited them. Well of course, all but one.

Every night from then on the foxes would march out from the Wilderwood and down the hill to the farm of men, and every night they would come back with their bellies full of plump

and juicy fowl. After a few nights had passed they had heard the growl of dogs as they crept towards the farm. Despite some mutterings of concern, this was little problem for the daring plunderers, for what is a fox if not cunning?

Dapper had run to the far end of the fence, darting back and forth, whining loudly to get the attention of the dogs, which as expected had come bounding over, barrelling futilely into the fence, saliva drooling from their maws as they barked, growling and snarling as they tried desperately to get to the intruder and rip the soft orange and white fur from its throat. Yet Dapper merely fell back into his favourite reclined position. He lay on his back with an air of easy nonchalance, safe in the knowledge that no matter how much noise and drool the baying hounds made they would not break through the fence.

Meanwhile the other foxes snuck beneath the fence and into the furthestmost coop. Then, with a flurry of speed, they dashed inside seizing their prey amongst a burst of frenzied clucking and flapping. Although the dogs turned at the sound and started to bolt back to its source, the foxes were too quick and too clever, dashing away before the dogs could get near. Once again the foxes went to sleep, each with a stomach full of chicken.

Buoyed by their exploits and filled with arrogance and daring anew, the foxes congratulated themselves unabatedly.

“No dog could ever stop a fox,” said one.

“Their brains are as soft as the drool that dribbles from their mouths,” said another.

“While we foxes are as bright as our coats, dazzling you could say,” spoke a third.

So on and so forth they bleated all night, telling tales of their boldness and wits, singing songs of their strength and guile, each louder and more boisterous than the last: so loud in fact that they were heard throughout the Wilderwood, by every

beast, bird and leaf.

Soon the foxes had found more farms, each filled with as many as or more chickens than the last, and so they continued to spread forth, plundering through the realms of men. Not only did they find chickens, but geese, ducks, pheasants and even the occasional lamb. Never before had they feasted so well and on such a magnificent variety. Every night the foxes returned to their dens without a word of complaint. No longer would they moan about the boredom of eating rabbit every day, nor of how they had to pay their dues to the guardian of the Wilderwood. In fact it was almost as if they had entirely forgotten about Great Oak, though Great Oak had not forgotten about the foxes.

3.

As spring began to truly blossom, the trees and flowers of the Wilderwood bloomed, colours bursting forth like the kaleidoscopic exuberance of butterflies emerging from their chrysalises.

The fox cubs ventured above ground in greater numbers now, whereas before only the bravest, strongest and most intrepid of the cubs had dared to venture into the land beneath the sun. Now their siblings had joined them in all their numbers, and would frolic and play, brimming full with the joys of life and the knowledge that at least to them all things were new and interesting. The tiny foxes, still yet to be weaned from their mothers' milk, were unaware of their parents' night-time villainy for they did not want for more. They were content to enjoy a warm spring, play with the young of the other foxes, and marvel at all they saw; most importantly, young and innocent as they were, they had not yet forgotten to be grateful for what they had.

Gerald sat hidden away beneath the thick leaves of spring, watching the cubs. He was both sad and wistful; for Gerald had always wanted cubs of his own, little foxes of his own who would love him as no-one else had ever been able to. Yet Gerald had given up hope. When Gerald was a young fox and his fur was still just a little mangy, he had held high hopes of finding a mate. So when January came and the mating season began he would approach vixen after vixen bringing them gifts of rabbits and mice, and always they would take the gifts without a thought. Yet whenever Gerald tried to get close each and every one of the vixens would jump back with revulsion or merely laugh with ridicule at the very idea of letting such a creature as Gerald be the father of their cubs. Some vixens had even run off to find bigger, stronger males to chase Gerald away.

“Go away and never come back, you vile pest.”

“With mange like that how could anyone love something as disgusting as you!”

“The mice and the rabbits were very delicious, but a fox like you with a vixen like me? If you wanted to kill me, why not just tear out my throat, not try and split my sides with laughter.”

Every word of every taunt haunted Gerald, at first making him sad and then, as the years went by, the rejection and loneliness had grown ever greater, making him angry and bitter. He would make them sorry for every cruel word they ever said; he would make them pay for every time they had laughed and mocked him, called him mangy, chased him away or shunned him like a monster. For as Gerald watched, the cubs continued to play, blissfully unaware that Gerald's plan was starting to come together.

When night fell upon the woods, descending from the twilight haze of the waning sun into the smothering emptiness of darkness the foxes ventured forth once more. All of the other foxes were once again raiding the farms in the valley beneath the precipice on which the Wilderwood stood, Gerald, lit by the light of the moon, did as he had done so many times before: hunted for rabbit.

When morning breaks in the Wilderwood there is usually a chorus of birds singing their songs, accompanied by the bass of the frogs and the toads and the drone of insects. But not on this day; on this day everything had quietened to a hush, for the first rains of spring had finally come and the leaves were whispering.

They whispered the words of calling that all the animals of the Wilderwood knew. First came the squirrels skipping from branch to branch, and then came the badgers, otters, stoats, weasels, hedgehogs, rats, rabbits, hares, mice, voles and moles. Soon a vast procession marched through the forest, whilst another flooded the sky, all headed in the same direction, all to

the exact same place, each with the same goal of making their yearly pilgrimage; and at the back of them, as if they had not a care in the world, came the foxes. Great Oak awaited them.

The animals gathered in the very heart of the forest, rows and rows of beasts, great and small, encircled the massive oak tree that stood at the dead centre of the clearing. Great Oak's mighty limbs stretched out overhead, spanning the breadth of the clearing; her trunk was so wide that it would take eight men standing hand-in-hand to encircle its monstrous girth. Her bark was old and gnarled by the centuries of her life. Two great knots that sat above a scar-like slash in her trunk gave the appearance of a face, both old and noble.

One-by-one the animals stood before Great Oak and stared into the gnarled knots that made her eyes. And every time she would only utter one single guttural word.

“Tell.”

It seemed as if the ground itself was rumbling as the mighty tree spoke, slowly and deeply.

The squirrels told of all the acorns they had eaten, and also of every way that they had helped the Wilderwood and paid it for its shelter and protection. They spoke of how they had spread the seeds and berries of trees all across the forest, meaning that new trees would grow and give food and protection for all the generations to come. Every animal told a similar story: the worms of how they turn the earth; the small animals of how they spread seeds; and the larger animals of how they stopped the smaller animals and insects becoming too many. At the end of each animal's turn a single flower with petals as white as milk would unfurl between the sprawling of Great Oak's roots.

Soon came the turn of the wolves; twenty or so of the hulking brutes stood spread evenly in an arc before Great Oak.

“Tell,” croaked the mighty tree.

At the centre of the arc a pair of yellow slit-like eyes broke through the gloom beneath the forest canopy. Nineteen silver-

grey pelts stood surrounding the limbs of the venerable tree, supported by bulky muscle-clad frames that loomed above the other creatures of the Wilderwood, each sporting a crooked smile filled with razor-pointed teeth. The wolf in the centre of the arc, with the gleaming yellow eyes that appeared to shine from within the midst of a void of nothingness, towered above the other wolves and stood even further apart from them with his jet-black coat. Orcus, leader of the wolves, stepped forward.

“We hear your whispers, we obey the whispers, take those that need taking and watch those who need watching,” growled Orcus, and almost before his sentence had finished the whole pack had drifted silently once again into the undergrowth as if they had never been anywhere else; and all that moved was a solitary white flower.

Next came the turn of the foxes.

The rare shafts of light that had forced their way through the density of the forest canopy danced upon the coats of the foxes with an arrogant glee that could only be matched by the foxes themselves.

The foxes came forward with a nonchalant grace, and with a gait as relaxed as ever, Dapper spoke on their behalf. “We have returned the little we have taken from the Wilderwood, and we really have taken only very little.” The foxes began to turn away ready to leave the clearing, yet a horde of yellow slit-like eyes blocked their path.

“Look,” commanded Orcus. The foxes turned back towards the tree. A small flower had blossomed at its base, and protruding from its stem were six scarlet leaves, without a trace of white in sight.

The wolves circled the foxes menacingly.

“You have taken much, and given nothing!” The ancient tree erupted in a blaze of angered animation, its limbs crashed on the floor as if to emphasise every word.

“You have sheltered beneath the canopy of the Wilderwood, made dens beneath its trees, hidden from those that would do you harm in its midst, yet you say you have taken NOTHING!” The floor tremored with the barely contained rage that emanated from her final word.

Uthor mustered just enough courage to speak.

“We haven’t done anything wrong; we’ve done all that we do every year.”

“I have many eyes within the Wilderwood, all of the tiny creatures whisper to the leaves and the leaves in turn whisper to me. No one saw you eat, no one saw you hunt, no one saw you kill, and yet you do not look starved; in fact you all look rather plump.” The mottled knots of bark that served for Great Oak’s eyes bore into Uthor with unbridled suspicion.

“The food we took was not from the Wilderwood, therefore we owe nothing for it,” Uthor said sticking out his chest defiantly.

“Look at the trees around you; do they look well?” Uthor’s expression changed from defiant to puzzled as he looked around where he stood, taking in the trees that surrounded them. The trees did indeed not look at all well: along the base of their trunks the wood had been stripped bare of bark, as if something had been gnawing away at them.

“This is preposterous,” bellowed Uthor. “Foxes do not eat the bark from trees. It’s the chicken and lamb from the farms of men that have been filling our bellies, not the bark from trees! You accuse us wrongly!” yelled Uthor.

With a sudden gentleness appearing in her voice, Great Oak whispered, “You may come out now little ones.”

A pair of long ears sprung up from the ground, then another and another and another. Within moments the entire forest floor had been transformed into a sea of fluffy tails and twitching noses; hundreds, possibly thousands, of rabbits had filled the clearing.

“Another tree, an oak like myself and almost as large and old, fell to the ground recently, because their burrows went under his roots. They eat the bark off of the trees as there is not enough of their usual food like small plants, grass and nuts. Why are there too many rabbits, do you think?”

Great Oak’s question had rendered Uthor silent, so it was Clarabella who meekly replied, “Because we didn’t hunt them?”

“You have disobeyed the rules of the Wilderwood; your actions have caused it and all that live within great harm. You have not protected the way of the Wilderwood and so the Wilderwood shall not protect you.” A cold fury that billowed from the trunk of the monstrous tree filled the air around all those in the clearing; the foxes huddled together in fear.

Dark shadows with yellow eyes circled the foxes like a whirlpool their deathly dance gained momentum with a sickening fluidity, drawing them ever closer together. The occasional glint of pearl white teeth would appear, gnashing and snarling amongst the swirling ring of bodies, until the foxes could smell the stench of rotten meat on the wolves’ breath.

“But if you kill us who will hunt the rabbits?” pleaded Clarabella.

Orcus leered towards the cowering vixen.

“Your cubs are nearly grown enough to hunt. Without you to bring them food they will learn soon enough. They have broken no rule; their lives will be spared.”

Teeth tore at throats; blood sprayed across the forest floor, staining the fallen leaves with droplets of ochre. Anguished squeals that faded into final guttural gasps echoed throughout the wood; seemingly endless, the frenzy continued until at last silence fell upon the clearing.

The wolves stood aghast, stopped dead in their tracks with looks of utter bewilderment etched upon their usually

menacing faces. Equally bemused were the foxes. Along the edge of the clearing were the scattered bodies of countless rabbits, their throats mercilessly torn from their lifeless forms. In amongst this sea of devastation and coated from snout to tail in gore stood Gerald.

“What is the meaning of this?” Bellowed Great Oak, her fury causing her branches to tremble and shake with rage.

“This is an amnesty. When animals come to this clearing they are promised to remain free from harm unless judgement has been passed, yet you kill without mercy.”

Gerald cocked his head calmly to one side. “All I have done is righted a wrong. There should never have been this many rabbits. What I have done was a kindness to them. There is not enough food here for so many rabbits and they would have died a slow and painful death, harming the Wilderwood much more before they did so. Surely it is better this way?”

“So you think that doing this means that you will be spared? You have broken our rules.” Great Oak looked grim and the wolves encroached upon the blood-soaked Gerald.

“Have I?” The calmness in Gerald’s voice caused Great Oak to pause for thought. With a sudden cacophony of buzzing, humming and the fluttering of tiny wings, a great swarm of insects took to the air, blinding the animals that stood within the clearing, causing them to whine and mew with fright. As quickly as the eruption of insects appeared, the air cleared once more as the insects settled upon Great Oak’s mighty limbs, covering them with what seemed like one great seething, writhing mass. Then the insects began to whisper. Great Oak’s wizened face grew ever more thoughtful as the news from her tiny messengers filtered through.

“My many eyes say that you did not take food from the farms of men, and that you stayed here and hunted. Why did you not join your friends?”

“I am part of the Wilderwood and the Wilderwood is part of

me,” replied Gerald. “These other foxes are vain and greedy creatures, but killing them will not help the Wilderwood. The cubs are young and do not know how to hunt yet, plus many will not survive without the adults to protect them, and while they learn how to hunt the rabbits will continue to breed. Although I have killed many today their numbers are still too great.” Gerald stared fearlessly into the knots of Great Oak’s eyes.

“They have broken the rules of the Wilderwood; they have taken without giving. They must be punished.”

“I quite agree, and I have a rather interesting suggestion.” The corners of Gerald’s mouth curled into a cunning smirk.

“And what is it that you suggest, little fox?” asked Great Oak with a tone of genuine curiosity.

Gerald simply smiled and leant towards a leaf that hung from the nearest of Great Oak’s branches and whispered.

The ground began to shake and rumble as if the earth beneath them were ready to shatter and break apart. Animals tried to flee but wherever they ran the ground continued to tremble until they tripped and fell or tumbled into another of the many score of panicking creatures. One by one realisation dawned upon them; Great Oak was laughing.

When the rumbling eventually subsided into what must have been a chuckle, Great Oak’s leaves began to rustle and whisper. A tiny robin descended from somewhere amidst the canopy and landed gracefully upon Uthor’s nose. Uthor stared back at the creature quizzically, wondering why the bird would endanger itself in such a way. The bird simply cocked its head to one side and leant forward, plucking a single hair from Uthor’s snout causing him to yelp with pain. Then one by one more and more birds descended upon the stricken foxes, who were still penned in by the ring of wolves and had nowhere to run.

Within moments the foxes were engulfed: sparrows, magpies, swallows and martins; each and every bird that lived within the

forest came to rest upon the foxes, causing them to buckle under the weight. Not a patch of fox was now visible as tiny beaks dipped and plucked ceaselessly. The foxes yelped and whined as they rolled on the muddy forest floor, pleading for mercy; though their cries fell upon deaf ears. Birds would occasionally leave the flock that enveloped the forlorn foxes, each with tufts of coppery fur clasped within its beak. The birds would then take the fur and weave it together as if it were one of their nests. The foxes screamed while the birds plucked and weaved and then the foxes screamed some more.

No silence that has fallen in any place in any time has ever been quite like the one that fell upon that clearing at the moment that the great flock parted; for this silence was deafening.

The whole of the Wilderwood stood by watching; dumbstruck onlookers who knew neither what to do nor say. The foxes lay whimpering on the ground as the flock finally broke and once again became a plethora of seemingly harmless individuals. — As the birds fluttered and tweeted innocuously it was hard to imagine them as the great singular beast that had tormented the foxes only moments before.

4.

The Wilderwood is a forest, a very strange forest. As one would expect there are moles, badgers, mice and all the other creatures that would be expected to dwell in such a place; though if you had gone there in the spring in which our tale took place and had been hoping to catch a glance of the bright flash of a bushy orange tail, you may well have been disappointed. For although you may have upon a time had thought you had seen a fox, you will have found yourself mistaken, for indeed there were foxes in the Wilderwood that spring, but they were pitiful creatures: Never would you have seen the rays of the sun dance upon their coats with the thoughtless abandon and gaiety that the season brings to mind. Instead the foxes of the Wilderwood shunned the light hiding their shame. That is, all except one: one fox who had the most luxuriant of pelts that flowed across his back like the robe of a king, dappled with a thousand shades of copper as if from the setting of a thousand suns. On the night that followed the day in which our story unfurled this particular fox sat beneath the branches of a mighty tree.

For hours now Gerald had sat veiled within the shroud of his own thoughts. He knew now that the end of this day heralded a new dawn, how he felt about this new beginning he was still unsure.

With a twinkle in her eye like the radiance of the stars that lay hidden up above: Great Oak broke the silence.

“How do you feel now that you have what you desired, little fox?” asked Great Oak speculatively?

“And what was that? A beautiful pelt? Revenge? Now that I have what I wanted I am not entirely sure what it was that I wanted in the first place. When I looked upon the others with their scabs and bedraggled clumps of fur, do you know what I saw? I saw myself,” Gerald spoke softly, seemingly fixated on something that from the glaze of his eyes appeared neither near

nor far.

“You are not happy?” Although a question Great Oak’s reply came with an air of knowingness, both apparent yet subtle.

“I remember when I thought that I could never wish my life upon another soul, such was my misery; yet now not only did I wish my misfortune on others but I myself brought it down upon them. My victory feels somewhat hollow.” Gerald sighed audibly as he spoke, the beautiful lustre of his new coat seemingly at odds with the dejected figure that bore it.

“Some would argue that the other foxes made their own choices, that although you showed them temptation you did not force their actions upon them. Some might even say that in the end you saved them, but guilt is a strange thing. It can rarely be anticipated: for if we knew how badly we would feel as a result of our actions then perhaps our actions would have been different in the first place. Though there is one way in which you may relieve yourself of a little of the guilt you feel.” Gerald’s ears’ pricked alert as Great Oak’s words awoke him from his reverie.

“How?” was all that he asked.

“The other foxes were cruel to you, weren’t they?” Great Oak stared at Gerald now with an intensity that to Gerald seemed boundless: the hollows of her eyes were great pools of onyx with wisdom untold filling their endless depths. Gerald’s throat tightened as he returned her gaze, almost rendering him unable to speak.

“They were,” came the meekest of responses.

“They were cruel to you when you were as they are now: wretched. Teach them to be better, now that you stand before them with your most beautiful of coats: teach them humility, teach them pity and teach them to be kind.” Gerald was struck with the surge of enlightenment that was carried by Great Oak’s words. Gerald knew what had to be done.

The bountiful colours of spring blended seamlessly into a

halcyon summer of luscious greens and cloudless azure. As butterflies flitted haphazardly throughout; the foxes hid themselves away, scared to be seen as pitiful as they were in contrast to the gloriousness of all that bloomed around them. Yet there was one who would always utter kind words of how beauty was not the be all and end all of life. He taught them to enjoy the small pleasures, to forget appearances and to immerse oneself in the moment, reminding them that it is better to enjoy what one does have rather than pine for what one does not. Soon the foxes ceased to slink through the woods, but flitted as freely as the butterflies did, they chased rabbits with abundant enthusiasm and savoured the taste of their hard-earned prizes. So filled with the pleasures of life they became, that they barely noticed as the lushness of their pelts returned, growing with a richness like that of newly turned soil ready for the emergence of life anew. And so the one who sowed the seeds reaped the rewards; no longer was Gerald an outcast or pariah but one of many equals, both a peer and friend to all. Through autumn and winter and into spring once more the world turned and as it did there was Gerald. Lying warmly in his den watching with attentive pride as between him and a vixen snuggled a litter of newly born cubs, each with fur as beautiful as the spring into which they had been born.

Gerald The Mangy Fox

(Non-Illustrated Edition)

By J.W. Hawkins

Illustrated by Matthew Burton

From ‘Tales of the Wilderwood: Volume 1’

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