

The Painted Fox

One of the greatest Ukrainian writers was Ivan Franko, who translated folk tales from many languages. In Volume Four of his works he includes very old tales. One of these is called "The Painted Fox." Here it is.

Once upon a time there lived in a certain forest a very clever, wily fox called Mikita. Numerous times he had been pursued by hunters and harassed by dogs. Traps were set out for him and people threw poisoned meat to him but all to no avail: no one could get rid of him. Mikita Fox tricked everybody and managed to escape from all sorts of perils and even succeeded in informing his friends of dangers. And when he prepared to hunt in the chicken coop or granary there wasn't a braver or more expert or clever thief than he. In fact, he started to hunt even in daylight and always brought back some prize.

Uncommon good fortune and cunning made him very proud. It seemed to him that there was absolutely nothing he couldn't do. "Do you know what I plan to do tomorrow?" he bragged to his pals. "Instead of going to the villages, I'm going right into town in broad daylight and will steal a chicken from the marketplace."

"Stop bragging! Don't talk such rubbish!" his chums jeered.

"What do you mean by 'rubbish'? You just wait and see," said the fox smugly.

"Time will tell. In town the dogs run around in packs so unless you turn into a flea they'll certainly see you and will no doubt tear you into pieces," remarked his friends.

"Stuff and nonsense!" I won't turn into a flea and they won't tear me to pieces," replied the fox. And to prove it he resolved to run into town the next day and grab a chicken from the market.

But this time poor Mikita was mistaken. He crept up safely through the hemp and corn till he reached the suburbs then he flew through the kitchen gardens, leaping over the hedges and concealing himself amongst the vegetables till he finally reached the centre of town. Only here he met with bad luck. He would be forced for a few moments to jump out into the street in order to get to the market and then to return. In the street and in the market there were cries, shouts, tumult—wagons creaked, wheels squeaked, horses stamped their hooves, pigs squealed, merchants squabbled, peasants yelled—in a word there was so much noise that Mikita had never in his dreams or in a fever met up with anything like it before.

What was he to do? He decided that he had to finish what he had started. Having sat for two hours amongst some weeds near a hedge that was adjacent to the street, he became accustomed gradually to all the clamour. Overcoming his former fears and looking around a bit in order to decide the best way to reach his goals, Mikita Fox became bolder and started running, and with one breath jumped over the hedge and onto the street. Along it there walked and rode many people and besides, there was a great deal of dust so hardly anyone even noticed the fox. No one paid any attention to him.

“There’s a dog,” the people thought to themselves, and Mikita was thankful for their unconcern. He cowered and shrank back then, jumping over a gutter, suddenly darted into the marketplace where some women sat in long rows holding in sieves, baskets and boxes such things as eggs, butter, fresh mushrooms, linen seeds, chickens, ducks and other wonderful things.

But he had barely managed to dash into the next marketplace when a dog ran in front of him, then from the opposite side came a second, and a third. Of course Mikita could not fool the dogs. Soon they would sniff out who he was and start to growl and throw themselves at him. Gracious, how terrible! Our Mikita squirmed like a fly in hot water. What was he to do? Where was he to go? He

didn't ponder long. He darted into the nearest passage and from there into a courtyard. There he crouched and gazed around for somewhere to hide, meanwhile listening to hear if the dogs were running after him. Oho! He could hear them! They were close by. Glancing around, the fox saw some kind of barrel standing in a corner of the courtyard. Well, he didn't hesitate but jumped into it and hid himself.

Luck was with him. For no sooner had he disappeared into the barrel than the dogs ran up, a whole pack of them—barking, growling, sniffing.

“He was here! He was here! Find him!” cried the leaders. The whole crowd rushed into the tiny courtyard raking, smelling, scratching in every nook and cranny but there was no sign of the fox. Several times they came up to the barrel but an unpleasant smell that emerged from it repelled them. In the end, not having found anything, they dashed away. Mikita Fox was saved. Yes, but how!

The barrel, which had so suddenly saved him, was more than half full of a mixture of thick blue oil paint. You see, in that house there lived a painter who painted rooms, fences and garden benches. It happened that on the morrow he was supposed to paint a large area of fence and therefore he had mixed a barrel of paint and put it in a corner of the courtyard so it would be ready for the next day. Having dived into this solution Mikita Fox had immediately submerged in it over his head almost suffocating to death. Then having reached the bottom of the barrel with his hind legs, he stood so that his entire body was drowned in the paint and only his muzzle painted blue stuck out of it a little. And thus he waited until the terrible danger had passed. The poor creature's heart beat violently; hunger tore at his insides; the smell of the oil almost choked him—but what was he to do? Thank goodness he was still alive! But who knew what was going to happen next? Suppose the owner of the barrel came and discovered him there?

However, it couldn't be helped. Almost dying from fear, poor Mikita Fox was forced to remain quietly in the paint until evening, knowing very well that if he appeared in the street in his present state, not only the dogs but the people would go after him and not leave him alive. But when dusk began to fall, Mikita Fox jumped headlong from his unaccustomed bath, crossed the street and, not having met anyone, jumped into the garden and from there into the weeds, across some hedges, past some cabbages and corn, and from there he darted into the forest. For some time there dragged behind him a long blue trail until the paint rubbed off a little or dried up. It got quite dark when Mikita reached the forest and he was still not on the side where his home was but way off on the opposite side. He was hungry, tired and scarcely alive, and he still had to run about two miles. By this time he was all worn out. He regained some of his energy by eating a few eggs that he found in the nest of Mrs. Quail. He then leaped into the first empty burrow he came across, raked amongst some leaves into which he buried his head and fell fast asleep as though he had just had a bath. He rose the next day, whether late or early we don't know, but he got up from a sound sleep, yawned happily, spat three times in the direction where only yesterday he had had such an unpleasant experience and then gingerly like a fox usually does, he climbed out of his burrow. He tip-toed and sniffed. Everywhere it was quiet, peaceful and clean. His heart sang in his foxy breast. "It's a perfect time for hunting!" he said to himself. But just at that moment he happened to look at himself. "Goodness!" the poor thing cried aloud, "what's this?" He started to run away but how can you flee from yourself? He stopped and once more gazed at himself. "Is this really me? Is it really my fur, my tail, my feet?" No, he didn't recognize himself and didn't want to! He had changed into some kind of strange and awful beast—very blue, with a disgusting smell and covered with some sort of scale,

peculiar lumps or porcupine quills. His tail was no longer a tail but something huge and heavy like a log or a thorny cudgel.

Mikita Fox stopped and began to look at the wonder he had turned into. He sniffed and tried to give himself a shake but the stuff wouldn't come off. He tried to roll in the grass but the paint wouldn't disappear. He attempted to scratch the scales off with his sharp claws but that hurt and nothing came off. He tried to lick himself but nothing happened. He ran to a puddle of water, jumped in to wash off the paint—what a hope! Of course nothing happened! The paint was oil and overnight the heat had dried it hard and it wouldn't disappear. No matter what he did, poor Mikita couldn't get rid of it. At that very moment who should appear but Brother Wolf. Yesterday he was still a good friend to Mikita but now, seeing this strange blue animal all covered with spines and lumps and with a huge tail that looked as though it were cast in brass, he howled in fright and, recovering his senses, took to his heels, barely able to utter a word.

In the forest he met Mrs. Wolf, farther on the bear, then the boar and the fawn. They all asked him what was up, why he was running away, but he could only sob, staring goggle-eyed, and blubber, “Over there! Over there! Oh, it's terrible! Oh, it's horrible!”

“What is it? What are you talking about?” his friends asked.

“I don't know! I don't know! Oh, how horrible it is!”

What kind of monster was he talking about? Several animals gathered around and tried to quiet him and gave him some water to drink. Freyza Monkey pulled three handfuls of hair from between his eyes and threw them into the air so that the wind could waft away his fears, but it didn't help. Seeing that it was no use talking to the unfortunate wolf, the animals decided that they should all go in the direction he showed them and have a look at what was so terrible there. They arrived at the spot

where Mikita Fox was still running around. They took one quick look at the sight of him and scattered in all directions. Do you blame them? No one had ever seen or heard such an animal since the earth and the forest had come into existence. And who know what kind of strength it had, what sort of fangs and claws, what its disposition was like? No matter how disturbed Mikita fox was by his new image, all the same, he saw clearly what kind of impression it had made first of all on the wolf and now also on the other animals.

“Hey,” thought the sly fox to himself. “This is not at all such a bad thing that they are so scared of me. I can turn it to my advantage. Wait a moment and you can all take a good look at me.”

And raising high his tail, he puffed himself up proudly. He went into the deep forest where there was a clearing where all the creatures usually gathered. In the meantime, a rumour about the new strange and awful beast had spread all over the forest. All the animals that lived there were anxious to have a look at the newcomer—at least from afar, since no one dared to step too close.

But Mikita Fox pretended he didn't notice anything and walked in a dignified manner as though deep in thought and, arriving at the clearing in the forest, sat on the very stump on which the bear usually loved to sit. He sat and waited. Not half an hour went by when there gathered around the stump a multitude of animals and birds. All were curious to know what sort of apparition this was and all were afraid of it and no one dared to come any closer. They stood afar off, trembling and ready at any moment to turn tail.

Then the fox broke the silence, saying to them in a sweet voice, “My darlings, do not be afraid of me. Come a bit closer. I have something very important to say to you.”

But the animals stayed where they were. Only the bear, scarcely daring to breathe, asked, “What kind of animal are you, anyway?”

“Step a little closer. I shall tell you everything,” gently and sweetly replied the fox. The animals moved a bit closer to him but they made no attempt to come right up to him.

“Listen, my darlings,” said Mikita, “and rejoice! Today, this very morning, St. Nicholas modelled me out of heavenly clay—see how blue it is! He gave me the breath of life and said, “Sharp Wit, in the animal kingdom violence, injustice and confusion have triumphed. No one there is certain of his life or property. Go down to the earth and rule as king among the animals, establish order, rule by right and do not allow anyone to offend my creatures.””

Hearing this, the animals all clapped their paws. “O dear Lord! So then you have come to be our protector and king?”

“Yes, dear children,” said Mikita Fox respectfully.

Unheard of joy reigned in the animal kingdom. At once they began to put everything in order. Eagles and hawks caught chickens; wolves and bears killed sheep and calves and brought a big pile of carcasses for the new king. He took a piece himself and the remainder he doled out fairly among the hungry animals. Again happiness reigned, again there were expressions of wonderment and thanks.

“What a king! What a protector! What an all-wise Solomon! With such a king we’ll live like gods forever!”

Day after day sped by. Mikita Fox was a good king—righteous and kind-hearted, mainly because it was not necessary for him to go hunting, trapping and killing. All the food was ready for him to eat—cut up, even plucked and cleaned and brought to him by his obedient ministers. And the justice meted out was such as always prevails among animals: the one who was the strongest was first to be served and the one who was weakest never got justice.

And thus the animals lived under this new king, the same as they had before he came. Anyone who caught or found anything ate; those who couldn't, went hungry. The animals that the hunters shot had to perish; and those who escaped thanked God that they were alive. But in spite of this, all were happy that they had such a wise, mighty and gentle king—and besides that, one who bore no resemblance at all to the other animals.

And Mikita Fox, having become king, lived like a king. There was only one thing he feared and it was that the paint would disappear from his fur and the animals would recognize him for who he actually was. Because of this he never went out into the rain, never went through thickets, never scratched himself and slept only on a soft featherbed. And generally he took care never to disclose to his ministers the fact that he was a fox and not the animal Sharp Wit.

So one year fled by. The anniversary of the day he came to rule over his kingdom approached. The animals planned to celebrate the day solemnly and to hold a grand concert for the occasion. A chorus made up of foxes, wolves and bears arranged a wonderful cantata and in the evening after a great procession, dinner and speeches in honour of the king, the chorus stepped out and started to sing. Wonderful! The bears roared out the bass so that the very oak trees trembled. The wolves howled out a solo so drawn out that everyone's eyes almost popped out. But when the young foxes in national costume started to yelp in their thin tenor voices, the king could not stand it any longer. His heart was overflowing and his caution fled to the winds and, raising his muzzle, he too started to yelp like a fox!

Goodness, gracious! What happened? At once the singers became silent. All the ministers and servants of the king felt the scales fall from their eyes. "Why this is only a fox! And not only that, just and ordinary painted one And besides that, he is painted with smelly oil paint! Phew! And we

thought that he was goodness knows what! Oh, you liar! Oh, you swindler!” they shrieked. And no longer remembering his good deeds and his great wisdom, but feeling angry that he had fooled them for so long, they threw themselves upon the unlucky Mikita and tore him to pieces.

And from that time on there appeared a proverb. When a man trusts a false friend and allows himself to be deceived or when some kind of villain fools us, robs us or slanders us, and we become a little wiser after the incident, we say, “Oh, I knew that long ago. I recognized him for the painted fox that he was!”