

Ernest Thompson Seton
THE BIOGRAPHY OF A
SILVER-FOX
or, Domino Reynard of Goldur
Town

Part I
EARLY DAYS

I
HIS EARLY HOME

CHE sun had dropped behind the Goldur Range, the mellow light beloved of the highest earthborn kinds was on the big world of hill and view, and, like the hidden lights of the banquet-hall, its glow from the western cornice of the sky diffused a soft, shadowless radiance in the lesser vales. High on a hill that sloped to the Shawban from the west was a little piney glade. It was bright with the many flowers of this the Song-moon time; it was lovely and restful in the neither-sun-nor-shade, but its chief interest lay in this-it was the home of a family of Foxes.

The den door was hidden in the edge of the pine thicket, but the family was out now in the open, to romp and revel in the day's best hour.

The mother was there, the central figure of the group, the stillest, and yet the most tensely alive. The little ones, in the woolly stage, were romping and playing with the abandon of fresh young life that knows no higher power than mother, and knows that power is wholly in their service, that, therefore, all the world is love. Thus they romped and wrestled in spirit of unbounded glee, racing with one another, chasing flies and funny-bugs, making hazardous investigations of bumble-bees, laboring with frightful energy to catch the end of mother's tail or to rob a brother of some utterly worthless, ragged remnant of a long-past meal, playing the game for the game, not for the stake. Any excuse was good enough for the joy of working off the surplus vim.

The prize of all, the ball of the ball-game and the "tag" in the game of catch, was a dried duck-wing. It had been passed around and snatched a dozen times, but the sprightliest cub, a dark-looking little chap, with a black band across his eyes, seized it and, defying all, raced round and round until the rest gave up pursuit, losing interest in the game they could not win; only then did he drop the wing and at once achieved a new distinction by actually catching mother's tail. He tugged at it till she freed herself and upset him by a sudden jump.

In the midst of the big, little riot, the form of another Fox gliding into view gave the mother and, by

transmission, the cubs a slight start; but his familiar appearance reassured her: it was the father Fox. He carried food, so all the eager eyes and noses turned his way. He dropped his burden, a newly killed Muskrat, and mother ran to fetch it. Tradition says he never brings it to the door when the young are out, and tradition sometimes tells the truth. When mother threw the muskrat to the cubs, they fell on it like a pack of little wolves on a tiny deer, pulling, tugging, growling, rolling their eyes toward the brother they growled at, and twisting their heads most vigorously to rend out each his morsel of the prey.

Mother looked on with love and seeming admiration, but she divided her attention between the happy group about the meal and the near woods, which might contain a lurking foe; for men with guns, boys and dogs, eagles and owls, all are ready to make quarry of a baby fox. She never relaxes her vigilance, and is ably backed by her mate, who, though secondary in family matters and not allowed in the den while the young are blind sucklings, is nevertheless a faithful provider of food and a tireless sentinel.

Their merry feast was at its height when the far-away "*Yur-yur-yur yap* " of the father was heard, telling plainly of approaching danger. Had the cubs been half-grown, they would have known what it meant; but being so young, mother quickly told them: translating the far barking into low sounds of menace,

she sent them tumbling back into the den, where in dim light they quietly finished each the piece of Muskrat that he had secured.

Among the farms of New England alone there are at least a thousand pairs of Foxes. Each and every pair raises a family every year, and it is very certain that such home-scenes as this described take place by every den door at least once every fine day during the late spring and early summer. Not fewer than a hundred thousand times every year, then, it is repeated in one form or another under our very noses, and yet so furtive are they, so clever and so unremitting are father and mother, that not more than one man in every hundred thousand has the good luck to see this family group that charms us by its appeal to the eye, and touches our hearts by showing how very near these creatures are to us in their affections and their trials.

The lucky man in the township of Goldur, the hundred-thousandth man, was Abner Jukes, and he was not a man at all, but a long-legged, freckle-faced, straw-thatched Yankee boy, who had climbed a tree after a crow's-nest when he should have been bringing in the cows.



He had taken in the merry scene below with something more than the mere hunting instinct of a boy: he had felt little thrills of delight that told of a coming naturalist. He had noted the dark cub with the coon-like mask or domino, and had smiled with pleasure over the cub's exploits. He had no thought of injuring the family or even of disturbing their frolic, but he was the cause of its ending then, and later of a sad bereavement.

Like many of the farmer boys, Abner used to fox-hunt in the winter. He was the proud possessor of a Hound that promised to be "the finest in the State." Though only a puppy, he already was large-limbed, thin-flanked, and deep-chested. He had a voice of peculiar resonance and power, and a sullen, savage

temper that boded ill in his prime. Abner had locked him up, but a chance had set the puppy free, and off he went in search of Abner. It was his near approach on his master's track that had startled the father Fox.

The mother, having seen her seven young hopefuls safe indoors, now ran to intercept the danger. She deliberately laid her trail so as to catch the Hound should he come near the den, and in a little while heard a brassy bellow that made even her stout heart beat faster.

But she had no thought for herself. She led the lumbering Hound away; then at the safe distance of a mile dismissed him by a very simple double-back, and came again to the den, to find all safe, indeed, but the dark-faced cub, the one that usually met her at the door, was now crouching farthest back, with his nose in the sand of the floor.

He had been peering out when that weird and penetrating Hound note came. It had sent vibrant chills down his small spine to the tip of his woolly tail; it also sent him back in haste to the farthest end of the home, where he groveled till long after the danger was over.

Men of science tell us that there is a master-chord for each and every thing, that each bell-jar is responsive to a certain pitch that, continued, can split it asunder, that the organist can seek out and sound a note that will wreck the cathedral's noblest window, that a skilful bugler can raise a strain that will shatter the

nigh-looming iceberg. So also there seems to be a note that can play on the unreasonable chords of fear, that can shake the stoutest heart; and the dusky cub, had he been able to think of such things, must have felt that day that this was the sound to undo him,-a sound to sap the strength of his limb and heart,-this was his note of horror-thrill. His world had so far been a world of love; that day it was entered by fear.

II TROUBLE

IT is a matter of wide belief among hunters that a Fox never harries the barn-yard next his home. He has no desire to invite vengeance from the near neighbor, so goes by preference to distant farms for forage. This may have been why the Jukes's barn-yard escaped while the Bentons' was raided again and again. Old man Benton had not large patience, and his little store was more than gone when a quarter of his fine hens had disappeared. He reckoned that he "would cl'ar the farm of shooting-irons if the boys didn't make out somehow to protect the chickens."

Si and Bud Benton were walking on the hilltop the next Sunday when they heard the voice of the Jukes's Hound on the trail of a Fox. Boys and Hound were not on speaking terms, so they did not interfere. They watched the valley below, saw something of the

chase, and were delighted to note the ease with which the Hound was disposed of when the Fox was tired of the run; it would make a capital story to tell the post-office crowd in presence of some of the Jukes.

But even while they watched, the Fox reappeared, carrying a snow-white hen and made across the valley. Benton's prize Dorkings were the pride of his heart; there could be no doubt that this was one of them, and that the Fox was taking it home. The whiteness of the victim helped the boys to keep sight of the Fox through the brushwood to the very hollow of the den, and half an hour later they were standing beside the doorway, amid snow-white thoroughbred plumes. A big pole was used to probe the hole. The curve of the burrow prevented it touching the cubs, though they were terribly frightened, and their parents ranged the near woods, vainly seeking some way of helping them. Their earliest thought was of mother omnipotent; but this was the beginning of disillusionment: here were creatures of whom even wonderful mother was afraid.

Though it was on the Jukes's farm, the Benton boys decided to come next day and dig out the Foxes. But the mother instincts were aroused. The home had become a place of danger. At once she set about preparing a new den, and at dawn began to move her family.



Among the country folk, when it is decided to save only one of a litter of kittens, there is a simple, natural way of selecting the best. The litter is left in the open field. The mother soon finds her young, and begins carrying them back to the barn; and it is believed that the first that she brings is always the best. There is at least one good reason for this: the liveliest will get on top of the pile and force itself first on mother's notice, and so be first brought back. Thus it was now. The

mother Fox was met in the tunnel by the liveliest cub, the eldest and strongest, him of the domino face, and she carried him first to the safety of the new home. At the next visit his most vigorous sister, and at the third a sturdy little brother, were taken away. Meanwhile the father was wholly occupied with sentinel duty in the neighboring hills, and day was beaming when he gave the warning just as mother ran off with number three.

The Benton boys had come armed with shovel and pick to dig out the family, and ordinarily would have succeeded in an hour; but three feet from the entrance their progress was barred by a great ledge of rock. They were debating what to do, when the sound of a blast from the quarry in the hills suggested a plan. One of the boys went for a charge of dynamite. This, with fuse and cap, was fixed in a cranny of the rock. In a minute there was a fearful shock and blast, the hillside trembled in a cloud of dust, and then it was seen that the upheaval had not opened the den, but had buried the tunnel in broken rocks, and that the cubs within were doubtless crushed and stifled. The shock had made a tomb of the home, and the boys went away.

That night, had they been there, they might have seen father and mother Fox clawing out the earth and vainly mouthing the broken granite in their efforts to reach the home den. The next night they came again. On the third night the mother came alone, and then gave up the hopeless task.

III

THE NEW HOME

THE new home of the Foxes was a mile away, and not on a hilltop, but down by the river, the broad Shawban, where it quits the hills and for a time spreads out in peaceful pasture-lands. Here in a great hollow facing the stream on a slope that was bordered by rocks all interbound with aspen roots and birch was the new-made den. Two granite slabs of rock were wardens of the gate, for the Foxes still believed that in the rocks lay their safety. That earlier den was a hillside in the pine-woods, this in a little aspen vale; the pine-tree soughs and sighs; the aspen twitters or shivers and rattles aloud, while the river goes singing and tinkling. Ever after that day of fear, the pine-song was an evil memory, even as now the aspen and the river sang together a song of peace.

Sloping away from the den door was a long, smooth sward. Passing by banks of bramble and bracken, it dropped to a sedgy bay, where the river paused to smile and purl. This green slope was the training-ground of the three, and here was played, not once, but fifty times, that summer that old scene of the home-coming hunter laden with food. The ground was beaten with the battling of cubs and the stamping of tiny feet in mimic fight. But the little Foxes were

growing fast now, the eldest fastest of all, and as he grew, his coat and the mark across his face turned daily darker.

The parents were now training them for the hunt. They were almost weaned; their food was that of grown-up Foxes, and they had in a way to find it for themselves. Father and mother would bring the new kill, and leave it not at the door, but in the woods, fifty yards away, a hundred yards away, and more, as the young grew stronger, and then encouraged by mother's *churring* "All-well" call, they rushed forth for a very serious game of "seek or go hungry." How they raced about in the bramble cover, how they skimmed and circled on the grassy banks and peered with eyes and noses into every hole! How they tumbled gleefully over one another when the breeze brought all at once a little hint or whisper, "Come this way," and how well they learned at length to follow the foot-tracks of father and mother at full speed till it brought them to the hidden food!

This was the beginning of the life-game for them, and in this way they were taught the real hunting. The old ones provided abundantly, and it seemed as though all had an equal chance; but there are no equal chances in life: 'to him that hath shall be given.' The oldest cub was the brightest, strongest, and ablest, so he was the one that could best find the hidden food and therefore was best nourished; his always were the choicest and

largest morsels. He grew faster than the others; the difference in their size and strength was daily more apparent, and in yet one more way they grew apart. His baby coat, a dull, dark gray, grew darker. When brother and sister began to show the red and yellow of their kin, he showed daily a deeper tinge, which already on face and legs was black.

It was late July now. The old ones had not only labored tirelessly to feed the young on the fat of the farms, but had also been vigilant to ward off all danger. More than once the ringing note of the dark Hound sounded near their dale, and never failed to give the creeps to the dusky cub; but each time one of the old Foxes had gone to meet the foe, and had served him with some simple trick that sent him home defeated. They found this so easy among the river rocks that they grew over-confident; they despised their clumsy enemy, till one day while the cubs-the dark one, the slim sister, and the little brother-were rollicking about the glade in search of father's latest kill, the brindled Hound burst in upon them. His sudden roar struck terror in their hearts. They scattered, but the little brother was not quick enough; the great jaws snapped and crunched his ribs, and the mongrel Hound carried him away, pausing once or twice to break the slender bones or grind in his bloody jaws the tender, woolly fur, but still bearing the body, till in the farm-yard he dropped it at his master's feet, and looked expectant for

the praise that did not come.

Troubles never come singly. The father Fox was trotting home at dawn next day with a new-killed duck when a clamor of Dogs sent him round by a way that he had never explored. It led to a high-fenced lane that he could not scale without loosing the duck, so he kept on; but the Dogs were behind him now. He rushed, alas! into a barn-yard, into the home of another Dog, and there he died the death.

But his family knew only that he never came home, and their mourning, however real, had none of the poignancy of that which comes to those who have seen the loved one's tragic end. Thus the mother and her two cubs were left in the den by the aspen bank, and the widow took up the burden without fear. Her task was, in truth, nearly done. With August the young began to follow her on long hunts and to find their own food. By September the sister was as big as the mother, and the dark brother was much taller, as well as stronger, and clad in a coat of black. A strange feeling now sprang up between the sister and brother, and then between mother and son. They began to shrink from the big, splendid brother and at length to avoid him. The mother and daughter still lived as before,-for a time at least,-but some subtle instinct was at work to break the family bond. The tall, black Fox and they were friends when they met, yet all three seemed to avoid a meeting. So now that he was swift and able to care for himself,

Domino left the old aspen dale, with its gentle memories and the river-song, and drifted away in the life of a Fox that is alone.

IV THE NEW GARB AND THE NEW LIFE

HIS was his entering of the larger, stormier world that lay beyond the aspen shade. Now he began life for himself; now he must rely only on his own powers for food and safety. So paying the price, he garnered the recompense, and daily developed in speed, in brains, and in beauty.

Not long after he had quit the home den he had a brunt of chase that put his swiftness to the hardest test, that showed him legs may be slower than wits, and that brought to his knowledge a friend for the hour of peril—a friend he had seen every day of his life and had never known till now.

Pursued by a couple of Dogs, he ran round and round the rocky hills till his feet were cut and bleeding. It was a dry, sultry day, and by a great effort he got far enough ahead of the enemy to make for the river, where he might bathe his hot, weary, and bleeding feet. In the shallow margin he waded along and found the cooling waters sweet, keeping on up-stream. In this way he had come a quarter mile when the nearing voices of the foe were followed by their appearance in plain view on the

trail. Instinctively the cub sought shelter on a brushy island, and from this safe retreat he saw those Dogs run to the edge and lose the scent, work up and down, but find it not, then homeward turn at last, entirely baffled.

It did not perhaps come clearly to the Fox that the water spoiled the trail, but he gathered the idea that the river was a good place to go to when over-pressed. It proved so more than once and in different ways. On the other side, far down, was a stretch of sand that seemed to hold no trail, so told no tales. When winter came, with glare ice on the stream, he found he could run with ease on the thin sheet, which broke, to plunge a Dog in the flood. But chief help be found on a long, straight cliff, the wall of the gorge where the river leaves the hills. Here was a pathway, broad at first, then narrowing to a scanty foothold for himself,-too small for any Hound,-after which it continued to round a point, then gently climb the cliff, and reach a forest that, by any other road, was two miles from the pathway entering in.

Finally he learned that when the hunting was elsewhere bad he could always find a meal along the river. It might be a stranded fish, a long-dead bird, or only a frog, but still good food, and the idea within him grew, "Along the river is a pleasant place-a place to seek in every kind of strait." The river was his friend.

These were the inner changes of the Fox; these were the things that made for his success in life. And