

## Nasty Foxfur

He was called Nasty Foxfur because he had red hair. And he had red hair because he was a bad, malicious boy, who gave every promise of ending up a complete villain. And so all the men at the red-sand pit called him Foxfur. And even his mother, hearing him called that so often, had almost forgotten the name he was baptised by.

Besides, she only saw him on Saturday evenings, when he came home with those few coins he had earned during the week. And because he was a redhead it was also to be feared that he had kept a few of those coins back for himself. So, to clear up any doubt, his elder sister welcomed him home with a box on the ear.

However, the boss of the pit had confirmed that he was paid so much and no more. And in all conscience even that was too much for Foxfur, a dirty little brat whom nobody wanted around, and whom everyone shunned like a mangy dog, and stroked with his foot when he came within range.

He really was an ugly customer, surly, ill-tempered, and wild. At midday, when all the other workers in the pit were sitting together having their soup and a bit of a break, he used to go off and hide in a corner, with his basket between his knees, to gnaw away at his ration of bread, as all animals do. And all the others had a go at jeering at him, and threw stones at him, until the foreman sent him back to work with a kick. He thrived between kicks, and let himself be more heavily burdened than the grey donkey, without daring to complain. He was always ragged and filthy with red sand, since his sister had got engaged, and had other things to bother about. Nevertheless, he was so well known throughout Monserrato

and Carvana that the pit where he worked was known as 'Foxfur's pit', which was a source of considerable annoyance to the owner. The fact is that they kept him on as an act of charity and because the skilled workman Misciu, his father, had died in the pit.

This is how he died. One Saturday he had wanted to finish a certain job which he had taken on as piece-work. This was to demolish a pillar which had been left standing some time back as a support for the roof of the pit, and which was no longer needed now, and which he and the boss had roughly calculated to contain thirty-five or forty loads of sand. In fact, Misciu dug for three days, and there was still enough left to last for half of Monday. It had been a poor deal, and only a simpleton like Misciu would let himself be imposed upon in this way by the boss. That is precisely why they called him Misciu the Jackass, and he was the beast of burden for the whole pit. He, poor devil that he was, let them go on talking and was content to scrape a living with his two hands, rather than turn them on his workmates and pick a quarrel. Foxfur used to pull a face, as if all those impositions fell upon his shoulders, and, little as he was, he gave such looks as made the others say: 'Get away! You won't die in your bed, like your father.'

However, his father did not die in his bed either, even though he was a good-natured jackass. Uncle Mommu, who was crippled, had said that that pillar there, he wouldn't have taken it away, not for twenty onze, it was so dangerous. But, on the other hand, everything is dangerous in the pit, and if you are going to bother about danger, then you had better go and be a lawyer.

So on that Saturday evening Misciu was still scraping away at his pillar quite a while after the angelus had rung and all his

workmates had lit their pipes and gone off, telling him to have fun slaving his guts out for love of the boss, and advising him not to die like a rat in a trap. He was used to mockery and paid no attention to them, responding merely with the ugh! ugh! of the full-blooded blows of his mattock. As he worked he muttered, 'That's for bread! That's for wine! That's for a skirt for Nunziata!' And so he went on, keeping count of how he would spend the money for what he called his 'contract', this piece-worker!

Outside the pit the sky was swarming with stars, and down there the lantern was smoking and spinning like a top. And the huge red pillar, ripped open by the blows of the mattock, twisted itself and bent over as though it had stomach ache and were saying, 'Ugh! Ah!' Foxfur kept clearing the ground round it, and put the pickaxe, the empty sack, and the flask of wine in a safe place. His father, who loved him, the poor little fellow, kept on saying to him, 'Keep away!' or 'Watch out! Watch out, in case any bits of stone or lumps of sand fall down!' All of a sudden he stopped speaking, and Foxfur, who had turned to replace the tools in the basket, heard a dull, suffocated noise, such as the sand makes when it comes down all at once, and the light went out.

That evening, when they rushed to find the engineer who directed the work at the pit, they found him at the theatre. He would not have exchanged his seat in the stalls there for a throne, for he was a great enthusiast. Rossi was putting on *Hamlet*, and there was a very good audience. All the poor women of Monserrato were in a circle round the door, shrieking and beating their breasts to announce the great misfortune which had befallen Santa. She, poor woman, was the only one who was not saying anything, but her teeth were chattering as if it were January. The engineer, when they told

him that the accident had happened about four hours ago, asked them what was the use of coming to him after four hours. All the same, he went there with ladders and wind-proof torches, but that took another two hours, which made six altogether, and the lame man said that it would take a week to clear the underground passage of all the stuff that had fallen into it.

There certainly were more than forty cartloads of sand! A whole mountain of sand had fallen, all very fine and burnt by the lava, so that it could have been worked into mortar with the hands alone, and it would take two parts of lime to one of sand. There was enough there to fill carts for weeks. A fine bit of business for Jackass!

The engineer went back to see Ophelia buried, and the other miners shrugged their shoulders and went back home one by one. With such a crowd and all the chatter no one took any notice of a boy's voice, which had nothing human in it, and which screamed, 'Dig! Dig here! Now!' 'Look!' said the lame man. 'It's Foxfur! Where did Foxfur spring from? If you hadn't been Foxfur, you wouldn't have escaped. No, you wouldn't!' The others started to laugh, and someone said that Foxfur had the devil's own luck, and someone else said that he had nine lives like a cat. Foxfur did not reply, he did not even weep, he dug with his fingernails in the sand there, inside the hole, so that no one noticed him. And when they came near him with the light they saw such a distorted face, such glassy eyes, and such foam around his mouth as to inspire fear. His fingernails were torn out and hung from his hands all covered in blood. When they tried to pull him away, it became a nasty business. Since he could no longer scratch, he bit them like a mad dog, and they had to seize him by the hair to drag him away by main force.

However, he did come back to the pit after a few days. His whimpering mother led him there by the hand, since the bread you eat does not grow on trees. Indeed, he did not want to keep away from that gallery in the pit, and he dug there relentlessly, as if he were lifting every basket of sand off his father's chest. At times, while he was digging, he stopped suddenly with his mattock in the air, his face grim and his eyes rolling, and it looked as though he had stopped to listen to something which his demon was whispering in his ears, from the other side of the mountain of fallen sand. In those days he was so much more sad and wicked than usual that he hardly ate, and threw his bread to the dog, as if it were not one of God's gifts. The dog liked him, because dogs do not bite the hand that feeds them. But the grey donkey! It was on that poor, emaciated, and bandy-legged beast that Foxfur vented all his wickedness. He beat it without mercy, with the handle of his mattock, and muttered, 'You'll kick the bucket all the sooner!'

After his father's death it seemed as if the devil had got into him, and he worked like those ferocious buffaloes which have to be held by an iron ring through the nose. Knowing that he was Foxfur, he was prepared to be as bad as he could be, and if an accident occurred, or if a workman mislaid his tools, or a donkey broke a leg, or part of the gallery fell away, they always knew it was his doing. And in fact he took all the blows without complaining, just like the donkeys, which take them and arch their backs but go on doing things in their own way. With the other boys too he was downright cruel, and it seemed as if he wanted to avenge on those weaker than himself all the wrong which he imagined they had done to him and to his father. He certainly took a strange delight in recalling in detail all the ill-treatment and abuse to which they had

subjected his father, and the way in which they had let him die. And when he was alone he would mutter, 'They're doing the same to me too! And they called my father Jackass because he didn't do the same to them!' And once, when the boss was passing by, he said, giving him a dirty look, 'He was the one who did it, for a few coppers!' And on another occasion, behind the lame man's back, 'And him too! And he started to laugh! I heard him, that evening!'

In a refinement of malignity he seemed to have taken under his wing a poor little lad, who had recently come to work in the pit, and who had dislocated his thigh in a fall from a bridge and was no longer able to be a bricklayer's labourer. The poor little fellow, when he was carrying his basket of sand on his shoulder, hobbled so much that he seemed to be dancing the tarantella, and that made all the men in the pit laugh. And that is why they gave him the name of Frog. However, working underground, frog though he was, he did manage to scrape a living, and Foxfur even gave him some of his bread, to have the pleasure of tyrannising over him, it was thought.

In fact he tormented him in a hundred different ways. At times he beat him without cause and without mercy, and if Frog did not defend himself, he beat him harder, and more furiously, and said to him, 'Take that, jackass! A jackass is what you are! If you haven't got the guts to defend yourself against someone who doesn't even hate you, it means that you'll let every Tom, Dick, and Harry walk all over you!'

Or when Frog was wiping away the blood which was coming out of his mouth and nose: 'So, if it hurts you to be beaten, you'll learn to hit back!' When Foxfur was driving a donkey up the steep slope which led from underground, and he saw it dig its heels in, exhausted, its back bending under the weight, panting and dull-eyed, he would beat it without mercy,

with the handle of his mattock, and the blows sounded hard and dry on its shins and its bare ribs. Sometimes a beast would bend itself double under the beating, but then, exhausted, be unable to take another step, and fall on its knees. There was one which had fallen so many times that it had two wounds on its legs. Then Foxfur confided to Frog, 'A donkey gets beaten because it can't hit back. If it could hit back, it would trample us underfoot and tear our flesh off with its teeth.'

Or else he would say, 'When it comes to blows, make sure that you hit as hard as you can, and then those you hit will think you're better than they are, and you'll have so much less to put up with.'

When he was working with pick or mattock he moved his limbs furiously, as though he really had it in for the sand, and he struck and struck again with clenched teeth, and with that ugh! ugh! sound which his father had made. 'Sand is treacherous,' he whispered to Frog. 'It's just like all the others. If you're weaker, then it walks all over you, and if you're stronger, or if there are a lot of you (which is how the lame man works), then it gives up. My father was always striking it, and he never struck anyone but the sand, so they called him Jackass, and the sand swallowed him up treacherously, because it was stronger than he was.'

Every time that Frog had to do some work that was too heavy for him, and was whimpering like a chit of a girl, Foxfur struck him on the back and told him off, saying, 'Shut up, you sissy!' And if Frog did not stop whimpering, he gave him a hand, saying with some pride, 'Let me do it. I'm stronger than you.' Or else he gave him his half onion, and was happy to eat his own bread with nothing on it, and shrugged his shoulders, adding, 'I'm used to it.'

And he was used to everything – to boxes on the ear, to

kicks, to blows with the handle of a shovel, or with a pack-saddle strap, to seeing himself cursed and made fun of by everyone, to sleeping on stones, with his arms and his back worn out by fourteen hours' work. He was even used to being hungry, when the boss punished him by taking his bread and soup away from him. He used to say that his allowance of blows was the one thing his boss had never taken away from him, but of course blows didn't cost anything. He never complained however, and he got his revenge on the sly, by trickery, pulling one of those strokes which made it seem as though the devil was in him. And so he always brought down the punishment on himself even when he was not the guilty party. If he was not guilty, he was quite capable of it, and he never tried to excuse himself, since that would have been pointless anyway. And sometimes when Frog was terrified and pleaded with him in tears to tell the truth and prove himself innocent, he repeated, 'What's the good? I'm Foxfur!' And no one could tell whether that continual bowing of his head and shoulders came from sullen pride or desperate resignation, or whether he was by nature savage or timid. What is for sure is that his mother had never received a caress from him, and so she never gave him one.

As soon as he arrived home on Saturday evenings, with his ugly face spattered with freckles and red sand, and those rags of clothes hanging all over him, his sister grabbed the broom-handle if he presented himself at the door in that get-up, for it would have made her young man take to flight if he had seen what kind of brother-in-law he had to put up with. His mother was always at some neighbour's house or other, and so he went and curled up on his straw mattress like a sick dog. And so on Sundays, when all the other boys in the neighbourhood put on clean shirts to go to Mass, or to romp about outside, he



seemed to have no other pastime but to go wandering through the orchards, hunting and stoning the poor lizards, which had done nothing to him, or damaging the hedges of prickly pears. Anyway, he did not like the jokes and stone-throwing of the other boys.

Misciu's widow was in despair at having such a bad character for a son, for such everyone said he was. And in fact he was reduced to the condition of those dogs which, by dint of getting kicked and having stones thrown at them by everyone, finish by putting their tails between their legs and running away from everyone they come across, and end up famished, with no fur on their bodies, and as wild as wolves. At least, underground in the sandpit, ugly and ragged and unkempt as he was, they did not make fun of him any more, and he seemed to have made on purpose for that job, even down to the colour of his hair, and those baleful nocturnal eyes that blinked if they saw the sun. There are donkeys like that, which work in the pits for years and years without ever getting out, and in those galleries where the pit shaft is vertical they let them down on ropes, and they stay there as long as they live. They are old donkeys, it is true, bought for only twelve or thirteen lire when they are about to be taken to the Plaja to be strangled. But they are still good for the work which they have to do down there in the pit. And Foxfur was certainly worth no more than they were, and if he did come out of the pit on Saturday evenings, that was because he had hands which enabled him to climb the rope, and he had to go and take his mother his week's pay.

He would certainly have preferred to be a bricklayer's labourer, as Frog had been, and sing while he worked on bridges, up in the air, in the middle of the bright blue sky, with the sun on his back, or to be a carter, like Gaspare who came to

take the sand away from the pit, drowsily lounging on the shafts of his cart, with his pipe in his mouth, travelling all day long on the lovely country roads. Or better still he would have liked to be a peasant spending his life in the fields, in the middle of green things, under the leafy carob trees, with the sea in the background, deep blue in colour, and birdsong overhead. But mining had been his father's trade, and it was the trade he had been born into. And as he thought about all that, he showed Frog the pillar that had fallen on his father, and which still provided fine, burnt sand which the carter came to load onto his cart, with his pipe in his mouth and lounging on the shafts of his cart. And he said that when they had finished digging they would find his father's body, which should be wearing fustian breeches that were almost new. Frog was afraid, but he was not. He told how he had always been there, from when he was a child, and had always seen that black hole which plunged down into the earth, and into which his father used to take him by the hand. Then he spread his arms out to right and left, and described how the intricate labyrinth of the galleries spread out everywhere below their feet, in this direction and that, even to where they could see the black and desolate lava waste, grimy with scorched broom. And he told how so many men had ended up either squashed to death or lost in the darkness, and that they had been walking for years and were still walking without managing to find the ventilation shaft by which they had entered, and without being able to hear the despairing cries of their children searching for them in vain.

But once, when they were filling the baskets, they found one of Misciu's shoes, and Foxfur was seized with such a fit of trembling that they had to pull him up into the open air on ropes, just like a donkey that was about to breathe its last. However, they could not find either his almost-new breeches

or what was left of Misciu himself, even though the experts insisted that that must be the exact spot where the pillar had fallen on top of him. And some workmen, new to the job, remarked upon the curious fact that the sand was capricious, knocking Jackass about here and there, and sending his shoes in one direction and his feet in another.

After that shoe was found, Foxfur was seized with such a fear of seeing his father's bare foot also appear in the sand that he refused to give another blow with his mattock. They hit him on the head with it. He went to work in another section of the gallery, and refused to go back to that place again. Two or three days afterwards they did in fact discover Misciu's corpse, still wearing the breeches, and stretched out face-down, looking as though he were embalmed. Uncle Mommu observed that he must have found it hard to die, because the pillar had bent in an arch over him and had buried him alive. It was even possible to see still how Misciu had tried instinctively to get free by burrowing in the sand, and his hands were lacerated and his fingernails broken. 'Just like his son Foxfur,' said the lame man. 'He was digging away in here, while his son was digging out there.' But they said nothing to the boy, because they knew that he was malignant and vengeful.

The carter cleared the corpse out of the workings in the same way as he cleared the fallen sand and the dead donkeys, only this time, in addition to the stink of the carcass, there was the fact that this was 'baptised flesh'. And the widow cut the breeches and the shirt down to fit Foxfur, who was thus for the first time dressed in almost-new clothes. And the shoes were put away for when he had grown more, since it is not possible to cut shoes down to size, and his sister's fiancé had not wanted the shoes of a dead man.

Whenever Foxfur stroked these almost-new fustian breeches

on his legs, he thought they were as soft and smooth as his father's hands when they used to stroke his hair, rough and red as it was. He kept these shoes hung on a nail in his straw mattress, as if they had been the Pope's slippers, and on Sundays he took them in his hands, and polished them, and tried them on for size. Then he put them on the ground side by side, and stayed contemplating them, with his elbows on his knees and his chin in his hands, for hours on end, turning over who knows what ideas in that nasty brain of his.

He did have some strange ideas did Foxfur! Since he had also inherited his father's pickaxe and mattock, he used them, even though they were too heavy for someone of his age. And when they asked him if he wanted to sell them, and said they would pay him for them as though they were new, he said no, his father had made their handles so smooth and shiny with his own hands, and he could not make any others more smooth and shiny, even if he had used them for hundreds and hundreds of years.

By then the grey donkey had died of hard work and old age, and the carter had carried it off to fling it onto the lava waste far away. 'That's what they do,' muttered Foxfur. 'Things that are no use to them any more they just fling away into the distance.' He paid a visit to the corpse of the grey donkey in the bottom of the gorge, and he forced Frog to go with him, even though Frog did not want to go. And Foxfur told him that in this world you had to get used to looking everything in the face, whether it was beautiful or ugly. And he watched with the keen curiosity of a dirty little brat the dogs which came running from all the farms around to fight over the grey donkey's flesh. The dogs ran off yelping when the boys appeared, and they roamed about and whined on the crags opposite, but the redhead did not allow Frog to drive them away by stoning them. 'You see

that black bitch,' he said to him, 'that one that isn't afraid of your stones? She isn't afraid because she's more hungry than the others. You see those ribs on her?' Now the grey donkey was not suffering any more, but lay there quietly with its four legs stretched out, and allowed the dogs to enjoy themselves emptying out its eye sockets and stripping the flesh off its white bones. And the teeth that were tearing at its entrails could not make it arch its back as the slightest blow of a shovel used to when they gave him one to put some energy into his body when he was climbing up the steep track from the pit. That's how things go! The grey donkey too had had blows from mattocks and sores on its neck from its harness, and it too, when it was bent beneath its burden, without the breath to carry on, had that look in its eyes, even while they were beating it, that seemed to say, 'No more! No more!' But now those eyes were being eaten by dogs, and the donkey was laughing at all the blows and sores with that fleshless mouth which was nothing but teeth. And it would have been better if it had never been born.

The lava waste stretched out, melancholy and bare, as far as the eye could see, and rose into peaks and fell into ravines, black and wrinkled, with not a cricket to chirp on it and not a bird to fly over it. Nothing could be heard, not even the pickaxe blows of those working underground. And Foxfur kept on saying that underneath it was all hollowed out in galleries, everywhere, towards the mountain and towards the valley, so that once a miner had gone in there with black hair, and had come out with white hair, and another, whose torch had gone out, had cried out for help in vain, for no one could hear him. He was the only one who could hear his own shouts, said the boy, and at this thought, although he had a heart harder than the lava waste itself, he shuddered.

‘The boss often sends me off a long way, where the others are afraid to go. But I am Foxfur, and if I don’t come back, no one will look for me.’

And yet, on fine summer nights the stars shone brightly even on the lava waste, and the countryside round about was itself black, like the lava waste, but Foxfur, tired from the long day’s work, stretched out on his palliasse with his face turned up to the sky, to enjoy that peace and those illuminations up above. And so he hated moonlit nights, when the sea was swarming with sparkling lights, and the countryside could be seen outlined vaguely here and there. The lava waste seemed then more bare and desolate. ‘For us who are made to live underground,’ thought Foxfur, ‘it ought to be dark always and everywhere.’ A screech owl would hoot above the lava waste and flutter about here and there. Then Foxfur thought, ‘Even that owl can sense that there are dead people under the ground here, and it’s desperate because it can’t go and find them.’

Frog was afraid of the owls and the bats, but Foxfur told him off, because anyone who has to live alone must be afraid of nothing, and even the grey donkey was not afraid of the dogs which tore its flesh off, now that its flesh no longer felt it painful to be eaten.

‘You were used to working on roofs like a cat,’ he said to him, ‘and that was quite different. Now that you’ve got to live underground, like the rats, you mustn’t be afraid of rats any more, or of bats, which are only old rats with wings, and rats like living in the company of the dead.’

Frog, on the other hand, took some pleasure in explaining to him what the stars were doing up there above. And he told him that up there was Paradise, where dead people go when they have been good and not annoyed their parents. ‘Who told you that?’ asked Foxfur, and Frog said that his mother had told him.

Well then, Foxfur scratched his head, smiled, and gave him the opinion of a malicious little brat who knows what's what. 'Your mother says that to you because you shouldn't wear breeches but a skirt.'

And after he had thought about it a while:

'My father was a good man and harmed nobody, and so they called him Jackass. And yet he's down there, and they've even found his tools and shoes and these breeches here which I'm wearing.'

Shortly afterwards Frog, who had been ailing for some time, fell so ill that they had to carry him out of the pit that evening on a donkey, stretched between the baskets, shivering with fever like a frightened rabbit. One workman said that that boy would never have made old bones doing that job, and that to work in a mine without losing your life you had to be born to it. Then Foxfur felt proud of being born to it and keeping so healthy and strong in that unhealthy atmosphere, and with all those hardships. He took the burden of Frog on himself, and cheered him up in his own way, shouting at him and hitting him. But on one occasion, when he was hitting him on the back, Frog threw up a lot of blood. Then Foxfur was frightened to death, and he looked into Frog's nose and mouth to see what he had done to him, and swore that he could not have done him much harm, beating him as he did. And to demonstrate this to him, he hit himself hard on his chest and back with a stone. In fact, a workman who happened to be there gave him a great kick on his shoulders, a kick which echoed like a drum, and yet Foxfur did not move, and only when the workman had gone away did he add, 'You see that? He's done nothing to me. And he hit me much harder than I hit you. I swear he did.'

Meanwhile Frog did not get any better, and he went on feverishly spitting blood every day. Then Foxfur did steal a

little of his week's pay to buy Frog some wine and hot soup, and he gave him his almost-new breeches to keep him better covered. But Frog was coughing all the time and he seemed at times to be suffocating, and in the evenings there was no way to stop him shivering with the fever, neither with sacks nor by covering him with straw, nor by placing him in front of a blaze. Foxfur stood there silent and motionless, bending over him with his hands on his knees, fixing him with those nasty, wide-open eyes, as if he wished to paint his portrait. And then when he heard him give a feeble moan, and saw his worn-out face and his dull eyes, just like the dead donkey panting in exhaustion under its load as it climbed up the track from the pit, he muttered to him, 'It's better if you croak quickly! If you've got to suffer like that, it's better to croak!' And the boss said that Foxfur was quite capable of smashing the boy's head in, and they had better keep an eye on him.

At long last one Monday Frog failed to come to the pit, and the boss washed his hands of him, because in the state he was reduced to by now he was more of a nuisance than anything. Foxfur found out where he lived, and on the Saturday he went to see him. Poor Frog already belonged more to the other world than to this one, and his mother wept in her desperation just as if her son were one of those who earn ten lire a week.

This was something which Foxfur just could not understand, and he asked Frog why his mother was shrieking like that, when for two months he had not even earned as much as he ate. But poor Frog paid no attention to him, and seemed to be only concerned with counting the beams in the ceiling. Then the redhead racked his brains and decided that Frog's mother was shrieking in that way because her little son had always been weak and sickly, and she had always looked after him like one of those brats who are never weaned. He himself,



on the contrary, had been healthy and strong, and a redhead, and his mother had never wept for him because she had never been afraid of losing him.

Shortly afterwards they said in the pit that Frog was dead, and Foxfur thought that now the owl was hooting for him too in the night, and he went back to see the bare bones of the grey donkey, in the ravine where he used to go with Frog. Now there was nothing left of the grey donkey but bones here and there, and Frog too would be like that, and his mother would dry her eyes, because Foxfur's mother had dried hers after Misciu's death, and now she had married again and gone to live at Cifali, and his sister had married too, and the house was shut up. From now on, when he was beaten it would not matter to them any more, and it would not matter even to him, and when he was like the grey donkey or Frog he would not feel anything any more.

Round about that time a man came to work in the pit who had never been seen before, and who kept himself hidden as much as he could. The other workmen said among themselves that he had escaped from prison, and that if he was caught he would be shut up again for years and years. It was then that Foxfur learnt that prison was a place where they put thieves and bad lots like himself, and shut them up for ever, and kept an eye on them.

From that time he felt an unhealthy curiosity about that man who had known what it was like to be in prison and had escaped. After a few weeks, however, the fugitive said loud and clear that he was sick of that miserable existence, living like a mole, and he'd rather spend his life in prison, because prison was a paradise in comparison, and he'd rather go back there on his own two feet. 'Then why don't all the men who work in the pit get themselves put in prison?' asked Foxfur. 'Because

they're not redheads like you!' answered the lame man. 'But don't worry, you'll go there, and you'll leave your bones there.'

Instead, Foxfur left his bones in the pit, like his father, but in a different way. There came a time when they had to explore a passage which they thought communicated with the big shaft to the left, towards the valley, and if that was true, they would save a good half of the labour needed to dig the sand out. But if it was not true, there was the danger of getting lost and never returning. And so no one who was the father of a family would venture on it, or let any of his flesh and blood run such a risk for all the gold in the world.

But Foxfur did not have anyone who would take all the gold in the world for his skin, even if his skin had been worth all the gold in the world. His mother had married again and gone to live at Cifali, and his sister was married too. The door of his home was shut, and he had nothing but his father's shoes hanging on the nail. That is why they always entrusted the most dangerous jobs to him, and the most hazardous undertakings, and if he did not look after himself at all, the others certainly did not look after him. When they sent him on that journey of exploration, he remembered the miner who had got lost, years and years before, and who still walks and walks in the dark, crying for help, without anyone being able to hear him. But Foxfur said nothing. What good would it have done anyway? He took his father's tools, the pickaxe, the mattock, the lantern, the sack of bread, and the flask of wine, and went away. Nothing more was ever heard of him.

So even Foxfur's bones were lost, and the boys in the pit lower their voices when they speak about him in the workings, for they are afraid of seeing him appear in front of them, with his red hair and his nasty grey eyes.