

The Cunning Fox

by Jean de La Fontaine

A fox once practised, 'tis believed,
A stratagem right well conceived.
The wretch, when in the utmost strait
By dogs of nose so delicate,
Approach'd a gallows, where,
A lesson to like passengers,
Or clothed in feathers or in furs,
Some badgers, owls, and foxes, pendent were.
Their comrade, in his pressing need,
Arranged himself among the dead.
I seem to see old Hannibal
Outwit some Roman general,
And sit securely in his tent,
The legions on some other scent.
But certain dogs, kept back
To tell the errors of the pack,
Arriving where the traitor hung,
A fault in fullest chorus sung.
Though by their bark the welkin rung,
Their master made them hold the tongue.
Suspecting not a trick so odd,
Said he, "The rogue's beneath the sod.
My dogs, that never saw such jokes,
Won't bark beyond these honest folks."

The rogue would try the trick again.
He did so to his cost and pain.
Again with dogs the welkin rings;
Again our fox from gallows swings;
But though he hangs with greater faith
This time, he does it to his death.

*So uniformly is it true,
A stratagem is best when new.*