



Unwilling Hunter

The next morning was hot and dry, and when I looked out of my window the air was brown with dust. I could hardly see the forest. It was like the dust had become magnetized by the sun and was rising to meet it.

Happ was lying in the yard under a tree. He had given up his chase at some point during the night and was now in a state of collapse. The heat was already unbearable. The earth had not cooled off during the night and now the sun had already begun to reheat it.

I went downstairs and the only person at the table with any animation was Uncle Fred. Hazeline was sitting with her chin in her hand, sullenly dipping a slice of toast into her coffee and then nibbling at it. Aunt Millie usually sat straight as a broom, but this morning she too was leaning forward on the table. 'Sit down and get yourself some cereal.'

I sat down and she said, 'I swear if we don't get some rain we are all going to dry up and blow away like the crops.'

'I'm going to start pumping water from the pond this morning,' Uncle Fred said.

'It won't do any good.' Aunt Millie turned her napkin over in her lap as if she were looking for the cool side.

'And then this afternoon,' Uncle Fred said to me, 'you and I'll go after the fox.' I could see that it was this thought that had caused his spirits to rise. 'Right?'

'Yes.' I did not want to go, of course, but I had the idea that if I was there, if I was right at his elbow every minute, there might come a time when I could jar his elbow as he fired his gun and save the fox. It was a noble thought but I knew even then it wasn't going to work.

'In case anyone is interested,' Hazeline said in a low voice, 'Mikey is not going to marry me.'

'What, Hazeline?'

'I said Mikey's not going to marry me!' And she slammed down her napkin and left the room.

'What is *that* all about?' Uncle Fred asked.

'Mikey's not going to marry her unless she loses twenty pounds,' I said.

'I cannot stand one more thing. I cannot!' Aunt Millie said. 'If one more thing happens in this house I just don't know what I'm going to do.'

'Now, now. Mikey is going to marry Hazeline. The rain is going to come. And we are going to get the fox that's after your chickens,' Uncle Fred said. 'Come on, Tom, help me with the pump.'

'Well, don't let the boy get a heat stroke out there,' Aunt Millie said. 'I mean it. That will be absolutely the last straw.'

'I'll be all right.'

It was afternoon before the pump was working and the muddy water was moving between the small, dusty rows of vegetables.

'Well, that's that. Now, let's take some time off and go into the woods.' Uncle Fred paused, then said, 'If you're too tired, you don't have to come.'

'No, I want to.'

He looked pleased. 'I think you'll enjoy it.'

We went to the house and I waited on the back steps while Uncle Fred went in and got his gun. He came out carrying it, muzzle down, and I could tell just from the

way he held it that he knew everything there was to know about that particular gun. I knew that his hands had been over that gun so many times that, blindfolded, he could load it and aim it and probably hit whatever he wanted.

'Let's go.'

It was like in an army movie when the sergeant says, 'All right, men, let's move out,' and all the tired discouraged soldiers get up, dust themselves off, and start walking. I fell behind Uncle Fred and we went through the orchard – Happ leading the way – and down to the creek. We passed the place where we had found the turkey eggs, passed the place where I had sat and first seen the black fox. There! My eyes found the very spot where I had first seen her coming over the crest of the hill.

Uncle Fred crossed the creek in one leap – the water was that low now – and stepped up the bank. Silently I followed. 'Fox tracks,' he said, and with the muzzle of his gun he pointed down to the tiny imprints in the sand. I had not even noticed them.

If I had hoped that Uncle Fred was not going to be able to find the black fox, I now gave up this hope once and for all. What it had taken me weeks and a lucky accident to accomplish, he would do in a few hours.

'The fox must be up there in the woods,' I said

eagerly, knowing she was not, or that if she was, she had gone there only to make a false track.

'Maybe,' Uncle Fred said.

'Let's go there then,' I said and I sounded like a quarrelsome, impatient child.

'Don't be in too big a hurry. Let's look a bit.'

Happ had caught the scent of something and he ran up the creek bank, circled the field, then returned. Uncle Fred walked slowly along the bank. We were now about half a mile from the fox's den. If we kept on walking up the creek, past the fallen tree, past the old chimney, if we rounded a bend and looked up through the brambles in a certain way, then we could see the fox's den. It seemed to me as I stood there, sick with the heat and with dread, that the fox's den was the plainest thing in the world. As soon as we rounded the bend, Uncle Fred would exclaim, 'There it is.'

I said again, 'Why don't we go up in the woods and look? I think the fox's up there.'

'I'm not looking for the fox,' he said. 'We could chase that fox all day and never get her. I'm looking for the den.' He walked a few feet farther and then paused. He knelt and held up a white feather. 'One of Millie's chickens,' he said. 'Hasn't been enough breeze in a week to blow it six inches. Come on.'

We walked on along the creek bank in the direction I

had feared. I was now overtaken by a feeling of utter hopelessness. My shoulders felt very heavy and I thought I was going to be sick. Usually when something terrible happened, I would get sick, but this time I kept plodding along right behind Uncle Fred. I could not get it out of my mind that the fox's life might depend on me. I stumbled over a root, went down on my knees, and scrambled to my feet. Uncle Fred looked back long enough to see that I was still behind him and then continued slowly, cautiously watching the ground, the woods, everything. Nothing could escape those sharp eyes.

Suddenly we heard, from the woods above, the short high bark I knew so well. The black fox! Uncle Fred lifted his head and at once Happ left the creek bank and dashed away into the woods. He bayed as he caught the scent of the fox, and then his voice, like the sound of a foghorn, was lost in the distant trees.

'That was the fox,' I said.

Uncle Fred nodded. Slowly he continued to move up the creek, stepping over logs, rocks, brushing aside weeds, his eyes and the muzzle of his gun turned always to the ground.

We walked up the field and then back to the creek. We crossed the creek and while we were standing there Happ returned. He was hot, dusty, panting. He lay down in the shallow water of the creek with his

legs stretched out behind him and lapped slowly at the water.

'Happ didn't get the fox,' I said. Every time I spoke, I had the feeling I was breaking a rule of hunting, but I could not help myself. As soon as I had said this, we heard the bark of the fox again. The time it seemed closer than before. Uncle Fred shifted his gun in his hand, but he did not raise it. Happ, however, rose at once to the call, dripping wet, still panting from his last run. Nose to the ground, he headed for the trees.

The sound of his baying faded as he ran deeper into the woods. I knew the fox had nothing to fear from the hound. The fox with her light movements could run from this lumbering dog all day. It was Uncle Fred, moving closer and closer to the den with every step, who would be the end of the black fox.