



## *The Stormy Rescue*

I had no intention of going to sleep when I lay down on the bed; I did not think I would ever be able to sleep again, but that is what I did. I fell right asleep and did not even move until four hours later when I awoke. It was one o'clock in the morning.

The storm was in full force, or perhaps it was a second storm, but the house was quiet. I got up and went out into the hall. I could not hear anything but the sound of the rain and Hazeline's transistor radio, which was sputtering with static beside her on the pillow.

I went down the stairs, one by one. I did not make a sound. I stepped on the part of the steps near the wall because Petie had told me that was how burglars got up stairs unheard. I was just stepping into the hall when without warning the hall light went on. Aunt Millie was standing there in her bathrobe squinting at me.

'What's wrong?' she asked.

'Nothing. I just didn't know what time it was.'

'Well' – she looked closely at her watch – 'it's just past one o'clock.'

'I went to sleep in my clothes.'

'Well, you get on your pyjamas and get back to bed. This is the first good sleeping night we've had, and you mustn't let it go to waste.'

'Sure.'

'Well, go on back up the steps.' She watched me go up two steps and then she said, 'Goodness, we've gotten on so well all summer, I'd hate for anything to happen now right before your parents get home.'

'Aunt Millie, did Uncle Fred get the fox?'

'No.'

'Is he still out on the porch?'

'In this rain? No, he is fast asleep in his bed like you ought to be.'

She waited until I was up the stairs and then she turned out the light. I went into my room and she called, 'Are you getting in bed?'

I lay down. 'Yes.'

'And go to sleep.'

I lay in bed for a long time, still in my clothes, and then I got up very carefully. I walked over to the window and looked out at the tree Bubba and Fred Jr used to just run up and down all the time like monkeys. I could imagine them climbing up, laughing and brown, racing, going out on all sorts of perilous limbs just to be first at the window. I opened the window, pushed out the screen, reached out into the rain, and felt for the smooth spot Aunt Millie had told me was worn into the bark of the tree.

I took off my shoes and knelt on the window sill. There was an enormous flash of lightning that turned the whole world white for a moment, and then I climbed out onto the nearest branch and circled the trunk round with my arms.

I thought that I could never get one step farther. I thought that I could never move even one muscle or I would fall. I thought that in the morning when Aunt Millie came up to see why I wasn't at breakfast she would find me here, pressed into the tree, still frozen with fear.

The rain was hard and slanting directly into my face. Finally I got up just enough courage to turn my face out of the rain. Then lightning flashed again and I saw the ground about a million miles below. I held

the tree so tightly the bark was cutting into my cheek.

I don't know how long I stayed that way. If I had tried to look at my watch, just that little movement would have thrown me off balance. After a while, though, I began to sort of slip down the tree. I never let go of the main trunk for a second. I just moved my arms downward in very small movements. Then, slowly, when I was practically kneeling on the first limb, I let my foot reach down for the next one.

If there were smooth spots on those branches, my feet never found them. They only touched one rough limb after another as, slowly, I kept inching down the tree, feeling my way, never looking down at the ground until, finally, my foot reached out for another limb and felt the cold wet grass. It shocked me for a moment and then I jumped down landing on my hands and knees.

I got up and ran to the rabbit hutch. The baby fox was huddled in one corner of the pen where there was some shelter from the rain. The lightning flashed and I saw him watching me.

'I'm going to get you out,' I said.

He crouched back farther in the hutch. In the next flash of lightning I looked on the ground for a rock and I saw at my feet a small dead frog. I knew that the black fox in all this rain had brought that frog

here to her baby. She was right now watching me somewhere.

There were bricks stacked in a neat pile under the hutch and I took one and began to bang it against the lock. I was prepared to do this all night if necessary, but the lock was an old one and it opened right away.

The noise had scared the baby fox and he was now making a whimpering sound. I unhooked the broken lock, opened the cage, and stepped back against the tree.

The baby fox did not move for a moment. I could barely see him, a small dark ball in the back of the cage. He waited, alert and suspicious, and then, after a moment he moved in a crouch to the door of the cage. He cried sharply. From the bushes there was an answering bark.

He crouched lower. The lightning flashed again and in that second he jumped and ran in the direction of the bushes. He barked as he ran. There was an immediate answer, and then only the sound of the rain. I waited against the tree, thinking about them and then I heard the black fox bark one more time as she ran through the orchard with her baby.

And I thought, some day I will be in a famous museum, walking along on the marble floors, looking at paintings. There will be one called 'Blue Flowers' and I will look at that for a while, and the next one will

be 'Woman on the Beach' and I will look at that for a while, and then I will glance at the name of the next painting and it will be 'Fox with Baby at Midnight', and I will look up and my heart will stop beating because there it will be, just the way it was this night, the black fox and her baby running beneath the wet ghostly apple trees towards a patch of light in the distance. And I thought, leaning against that tree in the rain: If there is a picture like that, I hope some time I will get to see it.

Suddenly the rain began to slacken and I walked around the house. I had never been so wet in my life and now that it was over I was cold too. And I was tired. I looked up at the tree and there didn't seem to be any point in climbing back up when in just a few hours everyone would know what I had done anyway. I went up on the porch and rang the doorbell.

In all my life I have never felt so dumb and foolish as I did barefooted, soaking wet on that slick porch at two o'clock in the morning, waiting for someone to come and answer the door.

It was Aunt Millie in her cotton robe who turned on the porch light and peered out through the side windows at me.

I must have been an awful sight, like the poor little match girl, for she flung open the door at once and drew me in.

'What are you doing out there? What are you doing?'

'Who is it?' Uncle Fred asked as he came into the hall. He was pulling his pants up over his pyjamas.

'It's Tom,' Aunt Millie said.

'I meant who's at the door.'

'Tom,' she said again.

'Tom?'

'Yes, he was just standing out there on the porch.'

They both turned and looked at me, waiting for an explanation, and I cleared my throat and said, 'Uncle Fred and Aunt Millie, I am awfully sorry but I have let the baby fox out of the rabbit hutch.' I sounded very stiff and formal, and I thought the voice was a terrible thing to have to depend *on*, because I really did want them to know that I *was* sorry, and I didn't sound it the least bit. I knew how much Uncle Fred had looked forward to the hunt and how important getting rid of the fox was to Aunt Millie, and I hated for them to be disappointed now.

There was a moment of silence. Then Aunt Millie said, 'Why, that's perfectly all right, isn't it, Fred? Don't you think another thing about that. You just come on to bed. You're going to get pneumonia standing there in that puddle.' She started for the linen closet. 'I'll get you some towels.'

Uncle Fred and I were left in the hall alone and I

looked up at him and he looked like an enormous blue-eyed Indian.

'I'm sorry,' I said again.

He looked at me and I knew he was seeing through all the very casual questions I had been asking all summer about foxes, and seeing through the long days I had spent in the woods. He was remembering the sorry way I had tried to keep him from finding the fox's den and the way I had looked when we did find it. I think all those pieces just snapped into place right then in Uncle Fred's mind and I knew that if there was one person in the world who understood me it was this man who had seemed such a stranger.

He cleared his throat. 'I never liked to see wild things in a pen myself,' he said.

Aunt Millie came down the hall and threw a towel over my head and started rubbing. 'Now get upstairs. I am not going to have you lying in bed with pneumonia when your mother arrives.'

We went upstairs, she rubbing my head the whole way, me stumbling over the steps, and Hazeline calling from her room, 'Who was that at the door?'

'Tom,' Aunt Millie said.

'Who?'

'Me,' I said.

'Oh.'

We went into my room. 'There,' Aunt Millie

exclaimed at the sight of my open window, 'I knew it! I knew you'd be out there on that tree at the first opportunity.' She shut the window with a bang, 'There is no explaining a boy.'

She turned down my bed, went out, and came back with a glass of milk.

'I'm sorry about your turkey and hen,' I said.

'Oh, that! I bet you think I'm awful, carrying on the way I did.'

'No.'

'It was more the heat than anything else, like Fred said. Just don't think about it any more. That fox and her baby are miles away from here now, and they'll never come back to bother my birds. That's one thing about a fox. He learns.'

She turned out the light, said, 'It is starting to rain again. I declare we are going to be flooded out,' and then went downstairs.