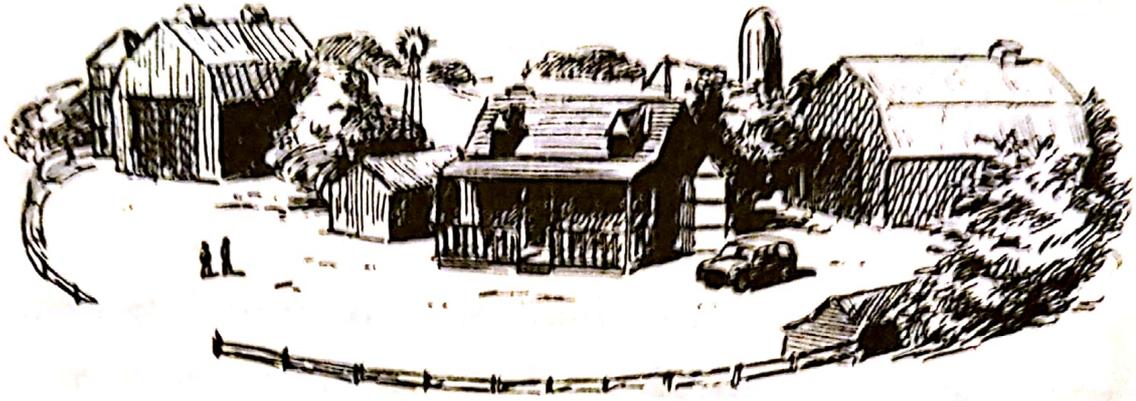


CHAPTER 18



Good-bye

The next week I spent in the woods, assuring myself that the black fox had gone. I sat on the rock over the ravine, I lay by the creek, I went back to the den again and again to look at the ruins, I sat by the field where the mice ran. I never once saw or heard the black fox and I knew I never would again.

While I was making my last trip through the woods – a great double-clover-leaf walk that covered the entire forest – my parents came driving up to the farm. I had not expected them that day but they were

so eager to see me – they told me this later – that they had got in the car practically as soon as they got home and set off for the farm.

I was up the creek having one more look at the old ruined den when I heard this honking coming from near the house. The honking stopped and even though I couldn't hear him I knew that it was my father and that he was now saying, 'Anybody home?'

I ran down the creek and through the orchard, and my mom had come around to the back of the house looking for me. She grabbed me and said, 'Oh, you look so good,' and, 'You are the tallest thing I ever saw,' and to Dad, 'Look, we have a giant for a son now.' Dad came over and punched me on the arm and said, 'How are you, sport?'

'I'm fine, Dad.'

'Look who we brought with us.'

I looked and there was Petie Burkis, and I knew suddenly why I looked so different and tall to my parents, because that was the way Petie looked to me.

'Hi, Petie.'

'Hi,' he said.

He came over and said, 'Well, I bet you're surprised to see me.'

'I didn't know you were coming.'

'I know.'

'You take Petie around and show him the farm if

you want to,' Aunt Millie said to me, then to Mom, 'Honestly, that boy of yours has not given me one minute of trouble the whole summer. Come on in the house. He has just been *wonderful*.'

They went into the house and I hoped that Aunt Millie was not going to tell about my climbing out the window and down that tree, because the way she would tell it, I would sound like Tom Sawyer, and Mom and Dad would get a great false hope that I had in one summer suddenly changed into an athlete.

'This doesn't look too bad for a farm,' Petie was saying.

'No, it's not too bad.'

'I bet you had fun out here.'

'It was all right.'

'I wouldn't mind spending a whole summer out here. I really wouldn't.' He fell in beside me as we walked to the barn. 'It would be better than being home. There wasn't anything but re-runs on TV all summer.'

'Those are Uncle Fred's pigs down there. The big one got some sort of prize.'

In silence we stopped and looked at the pigs. Then Petie said, 'Hey, you know what happened?'

'What?'

'Teddy Wilson - that big boy with the silver bicycle - broke his leg.'

'I didn't know that.'

'And you know that girl that sat in the front of our room in maths?'

'Mary McGee?'

'Yes. Well, she accidentally started her father's car and wrecked into a tree.'

Then we were silent again. It was a funny thing – I could have gone into the house right then and written Petie a five-page letter about all kinds of things, but I couldn't think of anything to say.

'Boy, they sure have got some sickening commercials on TV though,' Petie said. 'They have this one for corns and calluses where they show this plastic foot with these fake, lift-out corns. It would make you sick.'

'What else do they have?'

'They have this one about room deodorants. It's real sickening. It has a kitchen that looks like it smells bad, and then it shows this woman coming into the kitchen and a man's voice says, "It's a scientific fact that you can get used to any smell in 151 seconds, only why bother?" And then this hand comes out and sprays room deodorant everywhere.'

'You believe that about the 151 seconds?'

'I don't believe it,' Petie said. 'That's just what the commercial says.'

'We could test it. I've got my watch.'

Suddenly Petie looked like himself again. He was rubbing his hands up and down his shirt, which is what he always does when he gets enthusiastic about something.

'Where is the worst smell on this whole farm?' he said. 'The very worst?'

'Come on.'

'And, listen,' he continued, 'if it doesn't work, I will write them a letter – very business-like – and say something like this. "Gentlemen: Contrary to your scientific fact, my friend –" No, make that, "my partner and I have tested a wide variety of smells. Our discoveries are below." '