The Storm

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Thunderstorms hold a peculiar fascination for me. The dark clouds arising suddenly out of the west; a strange stillness in the air as if the world had stopped in anticipation of some portentous event; the pale, eerie light in the atmosphere which gradually turns into darkness as the clouds draw near; the rumble of distant thunder and intermittent flashes of lightning across the horizon and the consequent climax in wind, rain, and bright, sharp streaks of lightning with crackling thunder, gives to me, instead of fear, a reeling of loneliness, a depressed, awful feeling.

The storm on that day was having the usual effect. It had arisen suddenly out of the west. There had been a yellowish tint to the clouds, which, my grandmother said, was a forewarning of hail. I had marked with wonderment the rolling, mixing motion of the upper part of the cloud as it approached, and the swaying of the treetops in the rising wind.

"I hope John gets here before long," I heard my mother say. She was somewhat fearful on such occasions. So was the rest of the family, except my father, who seemed to be not only unafraid, but even somewhat amused by thunderstorms, and viewed their development with interest and a speculative attention. This amused interest was due in part, I dare say, to the fact that an opportunity was afforded him to come in from the fields and spend the remainder of the day about the house. I heard him come in just before the rain started. He said something about its looking like a bad storm.

The rain soon came. I stood looking out the window watching the wind-driven sheets of rain and the few hailstones bouncing on the grass. I wondered if they would hurt if they should hit anyone.

From my position in the window, I had a good view up the valley to where the Wilsons and the Daltons lived. Not long after a particularly bright flash of lightning and the almost simultaneous crash of thunder when Grandmother remarked, "That must have struck somewhere close," I saw a red glow about the location of the Wilson farm.

I called my father, "Come here! Come here quick! Look!" I said as he came up beside me.

"Yes sir," he said. "That's Cap Wilson's barn on fire. That lightning must have struck there."

Soon the whole family had gathered around the window. Someone said, "His barn was full of hay. That probably accounts for its burning even in the rain." We could almost distinguish the flames now through the storm. "I wonder what old Cap would think about this if he were alive," my father remarked. No one said anything in answer to his question. For a moment we were silent, listening to the sounds of the storm outside. Then he added, "I suppose he would think it was another vengeful act of God, sent upon him because of his wicked ways."

He turned and walked towards the big chair in the center of the room. "You know," he said, "That was an unusual element in the character of Cap Wilson. He believed firmly in God and in almost anything in the realm of the supernatural,
but he obstinately refused to submit to
the demands made by such a belief.”

My mother, grandmother and my sis-
ter had turned from the window and
assumed comfortable positions about the
room. I remained standing by the win-
dow, watching the storm as well as listen-
ing to the conversation of those in the
room.

“There’s no doubt that he was one
of the most temperamental and impulsive
men that we ever had for a neighbor,”
my mother said.

“And about the meanest, too,” Grand-
mother added. “There has never been
anyone who could curse like that man.
I’ve heard him say such things that I
wouldn’t have been surprised if the earth
had opened under him and swallowed
him up.”

“He killed a man, too, didn’t he,
John?” I turned from the window when
my mother said that.

“Yes, but he might have been justi-
ied in doing it. He killed John Powers
with a shotgun one day when they were
rabbit hunting together. They quar-
relled about something and Powers start-
ed for Cap, swinging his gun by the
barrel. That was when he made his mis-
take because Cap used his gun as it was
intended to be used. He served two years
for it, I think.”

I turned back to the window. The
storm, I thought, must be near its climax.
The hall had stopped, but the rain was
falling faster, now. The thunder and
lightning were nearly constant, and the
wind was whipping the tree-tops like
blades of grass.

“Yes,” my father’s voice rose above
the storm, “Cap was a tempestuous char-
acter. He died about the same way that
he had lived. He was kicked by a mule,
you know, but I was thinking of the way
he actually died rather than what caused
his death. After the mule had kicked
him and he had been in bed for a few
days, he told his wife and friends that he
knew he was going to die. He possessed
some uncanny sense of foreknowledge
which he used on a number of occasions
... and, everytime he was right. People
respected Cap Wilson’s judgment about
happenings and the course of events.

“I believe he said it this way a few
days before he died. “The Lord isn’t
going to let me live much longer.”

My mother said, “But, what do you
mean, John, about the way he actually
died?”

I turned from the window again. There
was an exceedingly bright flash of light-
ning, and the thunder with it rattled the
windows. Father continued. “Well, they
had to tie him in bed. He died scream-
ing. His wife says, of course, she may
have been a victim of over-wrought
nerves, but she says that shortly after he
died that night, a hand of fire moved
through the window and stood over his
body, and then disappeared. However
it may be, old Cap never gave up, even
when he saw he was done.”

I looked out the window again. The
worst of the storm had passed. The fire
was no longer visible, probably having
burned itself out. My father came back
to the window, put his hand on my
shoulder, and said, “Well, son, I believe
it’s about over. The skies are clearing
up a little in the west. I’m worried about
Mrs. Wilson. I wonder if the livestock
was burned with the barn.”

I didn’t say anything. I was think-
ing about the little hailstones. They had
all melted and were gone.