

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 feeling 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 sister had turned from the window and assumed comfortable positions about the room. I remained standing by the window, watching the storm as well as listening 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," Grandmother 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 justified in doing it. He killed John Powers with a shotgun one day when they were rabbit hunting together. They quarrelled about something and Powers started for Cap, swinging his gun by the barrel. That was when he made his mistake 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 hail 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 character. 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 lightning, and the thunder with it rattled the windows. Father continued. "Well, they had to tie him in bed. He died screaming. 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 thinking about the little hailstones. They had all melted and were gone.