The Hurt Man
(1888)

When he was five Mat Feltner, like every other five-year-old who had lived in Port William until then, was still wearing dresses. In his own thoughts he was not yet sure whether he would turn out to be a girl or a boy, though instinct by then had prompted him to take his place near the tail end of the procession of Port William boys. His nearest predecessors in that so far immortal straggle had already taught him the small art of smoking cigars, along with the corollary small art of chewing coffee beans to take the smoke smell off his breath. And so in a rudimentary way he was an outlaw, though he did not know it, for none of his grown-ups had yet thought to forbid him to smoke.

His outgrown dresses he saw worn daily by a pretty neighbor named Margaret Finley, who to him might as well have been another boy too little to be of interest, or maybe even a girl, though it hardly mattered – and though, because of a different instinct, she would begin to matter to him a great deal in a dozen years, and after that she would matter to him all his life.

The town of Port William consisted of two rows of casually maintained dwellings and other buildings scattered along a thoroughfare that nobody had ever dignified by calling it a street; in wet times it hardly deserved to be called a road. Between the town's two ends the road was unevenly rocked, but otherwise had not much distinguished itself from the buffalo trace it once had been. At one end of the town was the school, at the other the graveyard. In the center there were

several stores, two saloons, a church, a bank, a hotel, and a blacksmith shop. The town was the product of its own becoming, which, if not accidental exactly, had also been unplanned. It had no formal government or formal history. It was without pretense or ambition, for it was the sort of place that pretentious or ambitious people were inclined to leave. It had never declared an aspiration to become anything it was not. It did not thrive so much as it merely lived, doing the things it needed to do to stay alive. This tracked and rubbed little settlement had been built in a place of great natural abundance and beauty, which it had never valued highly enough or used well enough, had damaged, and yet had not destroyed. The town's several buildings, shaped less by art than by need and use, had suffered tellingly and even becomingly a hundred years of wear.

Though Port William sat on a ridge of the upland, still it was a river town; its economy and its thoughts turned toward the river. Distance impinged on it from the river, whose waters flowed from the eastward mountains ultimately, as the town always was more or less aware, to the sea, to the world. Its horizon, narrow enough though it reached across the valley to the ridgeland fields and farmsteads on the other side, was pierced by the river, which for the next forty years would still be its main thoroughfare. Commercial people, medicine showmen, evangelists, and other river travelers came up the hill from Dawes Landing to stay at the hotel in Port William, which in its way cherished these transients, learned all it could about them, and talked of what it learned.

Mat would remember the town's then-oldest man, Uncle Bishop Bower, who would confront any stranger, rap on the ground with his long staff, and demand, 'Sir! What might your name be?'

And Herman Goslin, no genius, made his scant living by meeting the steamboats and transporting the disembarking passengers, if any, up to the hotel in a gimpy buckboard. One evening as he approached the hotel with a small trunk on his shoulder, followed by a large woman with a parasol, one of the boys playing marbles in the road said, 'Here comes Herman Goslin with a fat lady's trunk.'

'You boys can kiss that fat lady's ass,' said Herman Goslin. 'Ain't that tellin 'em, fat lady?'

The town was not built nearer the river perhaps because there was no room for it at the foot of the hill, or perhaps because, as the town loved to reply to the inevitable question from travelers resting on the hotel porch, nobody knew where the river was going to run when they built Port William.

And Port William did look as though it had been itself forever. To Mat at the age of five, as he later would suppose, remembering himself, it must have seemed eternal, like the sky.

However eternal it might have been, the town was also as temporal, lively, and mortal as it possibly could be. It stirred and hummed from early to late with its own life and with the life it drew into itself from the countryside. It was a center, and especially on Saturdays and election days its stores and saloons and the road itself would be crowded with people standing, sitting, talking, whittling, trading, and milling about. This crowd was entirely familiar to itself; it remembered all its history of allegiances, offenses, and resentments, going back from the previous Saturday to the Civil War and long before that. Like every place, it had its angers, and its angers as always, as everywhere, found justifications. And in Port William, a dozen miles by river from the courthouse and the rule of law, anger had a license that it might not have had in another place.

Sometimes violence would break out in one of the saloons or in the road. Then proof of mortality would be given in blood.

And the mortality lived and suffered daily in the town was attested with hopes of immortality by the headstones up in the graveyard, which was even then more populous than the town. Mat knew – at the age of five he had already forgotten when he had found out – that he had a brother and two sisters up there, with carved lambs resting on the tops of their small monuments, their brief lives dated beneath. In all the time he had known her, his mother had worn black.

But to him, when he was five, those deaths were stories told. Nothing in Port William seemed to him to be in passage from any beginning to any end. The living had always been alive, the dead always dead. The world, as he knew it then, simply existed, familiar even in its changes: the town, the farms, the slopes and ridges, the woods, the river, and the sky over it all. He had not yet gone farther from Port William than to Dawes Landing on the river and to his Uncle Jack Beecham's place out on the Bird's Branch Road, the place his mother spoke of as 'out home'. He had seen the steamboats on the river and had looked out from the higher ridgetops, and so he understood that the world went on into the distance, but he did not know how much more of it there might be.

Mat had come late into the lives of Nancy and Ben Feltner, after the deaths of their other children, and he had come unexpectedly, 'a blessing'. They prized him accordingly. For the first four or so years of his life he was closely watched, by his parents and also by Cass and Smoke, Cass's husband, who had been slaves. But now he was five, and it was a household always busy with the work of the place, and often full of company. There had come to be times, because his grown-ups were occupied and he was curious and active, when he would be out

of their sight. He would stray off to where something was happening, to the farm buildings behind the house, to the blacksmith shop, to one of the saloons, to wherever the other boys were. He was beginning his long study of the town and its place in the world, gathering up the stories that in years still far off he would hand on to his grandson Andy Catlett, who in his turn would be trying to master the thought of time: that there were times before his time, and would be times after. At the age of five Mat was beginning to prepare himself to help in educating his grandson, though he did not know it.

His grown-ups, more or less willingly, were letting him go. The town had its dangers. There were always horses in the road, and sometimes droves of cattle or sheep or hogs or mules. There were in fact uncountable ways for a boy to get hurt, or worse. But in spite of her losses, Nancy Beechum Feltner was not a frightened woman, as her son would learn. He would learn also that, though she maintained her sorrows with a certain loyalty, wearing her black, she was a woman of practical good sense and strong cheerfulness. She knew that the world was risky and that she must risk her surviving child to it as she had risked the others, and when the time came she straightforwardly did so.

But she knew also that the town had its ways of looking after its own. Where its worst dangers were, grown-ups were apt to be. When Mat was out of the sight of her or his father or Cass or Smoke, he was most likely in the sight of somebody else who would watch him. He would thus be corrected, consciously ignored, snatched out of danger, cursed, teased, hugged, instructed, spanked, or sent home by any grown-up into whose sight he may have strayed. Within that watchfulness he was free – and almost totally free when, later, he had learned to escape it and thus had earned his freedom. 'This was

a *free* country when I was a boy,' he would sometimes say to Andy, his grandson.

When he was five and for some while afterward, his mother drew the line unalterably only between him and the crowds that filled the town on Saturday afternoons and election days when there would be too much drinking, with consequences that were too probable. She would not leave him alone then. She would not let him go into the town, and she would not trust him to go anywhere else, for fear that he would escape into the town from wherever else she let him go. She kept him in sight.

That was why they were sitting together on the front porch for the sake of the breeze there on a hot Saturday afternoon in the late summer of 1888. Mat was sitting close to his mother on the wicker settee, watching her work. She had brought out her sewing basket and was darning socks, stretching the worn-through heels or toes over her darning egg and weaving them whole again with her needle and thread. At such work her fingers moved with a quickness and assurance that fascinated Mat, and he loved to watch her. She would have been telling him a story. She was full of stories. Aside from the small movements of her hands and the sound of her voice, they were quiet with a quietness that seemed to have increased as it had grown upon them. Cass had gone home after the dinner dishes were done. The afternoon had half gone by.

From where they sat they could see down into the town where the Saturday crowd was, and they could hear it. Doors slammed, now and then a horse nickered, the talking of the people was a sustained murmur from which now and then a few intelligible words escaped: a greeting, some bit of raillery, a reprimand to a horse, an oath. It was a large crowd in a small

place, a situation in which a small disagreement could become dangerous in a hurry. Such things had happened often enough. That was why Mat was under watch.

And so when a part of the crowd intensified into a knot, voices were raised, and there was a scuffle, Mat and his mother were not surprised. They were not surprised even when a bloodied man broke out of the crowd and began running fast up the street toward them, followed by other running men whose boot heels pounded on the road.

The hurt man ran toward them where they were sitting on the porch. He was hatless. His hair, face, and shirt were bloody, and his blood dripped on the road. Mat felt no intimation of threat or danger. He simply watched, transfixed. He did not see his mother stand and put down her work. When she caught him by the back of his dress and fairly poked him through the front door – 'Here! Get inside!' – he still was only alert, unsurprised.

He expected her to come into the house with him. What finally surprised him was that she did not do so. Leaving him alone in the wide hall, she remained outside the door, holding it open for the hurt man. Mat ran halfway up the stairs then and turned and sat down on a step. He was surprised now but not afraid.

When the hurt man ran in through the door, instead of following him in, Nancy Feltner shut the door and stood in front of it. Mat could see her through the door glass, standing with her hand on the knob as the clutch of booted and hatted pursuers came up the porch steps. They bunched at the top of the steps, utterly stopped by the slender woman dressed in mourning, holding the door shut.

And then one of them, snatching off his hat, said, 'It's all right, Mrs Feltner. We're his friends.'

She hesitated a moment, studying them, and then she opened the door to them also and turned and came in ahead of them.

The hurt man had run the length of the hall and through the door at the end of it and out onto the back porch. Nancy, with the bunch of men behind her, followed where he had gone, the men almost with delicacy, as it seemed to Mat, avoiding the line of blood drops along the hall floor. And Mat hurried back down the stairs and came along in his usual place at the tail end, trying to see, among the booted legs and carried hats, what had become of the hurt man.

Mat's memory of that day would always be partly incomplete. He never knew who the hurt man was. He knew some of the others. The hurt man had sat down or dropped onto a slatted green bench on the porch. He might have remained nameless to Mat because of the entire strangeness of the look of him. He had shed the look of a man and assumed somehow the look of all things badly hurt. Now that he had stopped running, he looked used up. He was pallid beneath the streaked bright blood, breathing in gasps, his eyes too widely open. He looked as though he had just come up from almost too deep a dive.

Nancy went straight to him, the men, the friends, clustered behind her, deferring, no longer to her authority as the woman of the house, as when she had stopped them at the front door, but now to her unhesitating, unthinking acceptance of that authority.

Looking at the hurt man, whose blood was dripping onto the bench and the porch floor, she said quietly, perhaps only to herself, 'Oh my!' It was as though she knew him without ever having known him before.

She leaned and picked up one of his hands. 'Listen!' she said,

and the man brought his gaze it seemed from nowhere and looked up at her. 'You're at Ben Feltner's house,' she said. 'Your friends are here. You're going to be all right.'

She looked around at the rest of them who were standing back, watching her. 'Jessie, you and Tom go see if you can find the doctor, if he's findable.' She glanced at the water bucket on the shelf over the wash table by the kitchen door, remembering that it was nearly empty. 'Les, go bring a fresh bucket of water.' To the remaining two she said, 'Get his shirt off. Cut it off. Don't try to drag it over his head. So we can see where he's hurt.'

She stepped through the kitchen door, and they could hear her going about inside. Presently she came back with a kettle of water still warm from the noon fire and a bundle of clean rags.

'Look up here,' she said to the hurt man, and he looked up.

She began gently to wash his face. Wherever he was bleeding, she washed away the blood: first his face, and then his arms, and then his chest and sides. As she washed, exposing the man's wounds, she said softly only to herself, 'Oh!' or 'Oh my!' She folded the white rags into pads and instructed the hurt man and his friends to press them onto his cuts to stop the bleeding. She said, 'It's the Lord's own mercy we've got so many hands,' for the man had many wounds. He had begun to tremble. She kept saying to him, as she would have spoken to a child, 'You're going to be all right.'

Mat had been surprised when she did not follow him into the house, when she waited on the porch and opened the door to the hurt man and then to his friends. But she had not surprised him after that. He saw her as he had known her: a woman who did what the world put before her to do.

At first he stayed well back, for he did not want to be told to get out of the way. But as his mother made order, he grew bolder

and drew gradually closer until he was almost at her side. And then he was again surprised, for then he saw her face.

What he saw in her face would remain with him forever. It was pity, but it was more than that. It was a hurt love that seemed to include entirely the hurt man. It included him and disregarded everything else. It disregarded the aura of whiskey that ordinarily she would have resented; it disregarded the blood puddled on the porch floor and the trail of blood through the hall.

Mat was familiar with her tenderness and had thought nothing of it. But now he recognized it in her face and in her hands as they went out to the hurt man's wounds. To him, then, it was as though she leaned in the black of her mourning over the whole hurt world itself, touching its wounds with her tenderness, in her sorrow.

Loss came into his mind then, and he knew what he was years away from telling, even from thinking: that his mother's grief was real; that her children in their graves once had been alive; that everybody lying under the grass up in the graveyard once had been alive and had walked in daylight in Port William. And this was a part, and belonged to the deliverance, of the town's hard history of love.

The hurt man, Mat thought, was not going to die, but he knew from his mother's face that the man *could* die and someday would. She leaned over him, touching his bleeding wounds that she bathed and stanched and bound, and her touch had in it the promise of healing, some profound encouragement.

It was the knowledge of that encouragement, of what it had cost her, of what it would cost her and would cost him, that then finally came to Mat, and he fled away and wept.

What did he learn from his mother that day? He learned it all his life. There are few words for it, perhaps none. After that,

her losses would be his. The losses would come. They would come to him and his mother. They would come to him and Margaret, his wife, who as a child had worn his cast-off dresses. They would come, even as Mat watched, growing old, to his grandson, Andy, who would remember his stories and write them down.

But from that day, whatever happened, there was a knowledge in Mat that was unsurprised and at last comforted, until he was old, until he was gone.

Fly Away, Breath
(1907)

Andy Catlett keeps in his mind a map of the country around Port William as he has known it all his life and as he has been told about it all his life from times and lives before his. There are moments, now that he is getting old, when he seems to reside in that country in his mind even as his mind still resides in the country.

This is the country of his own life and history, fragmentary as they necessarily have been. It is his known country. And perhaps it differs also from the actual, momentary country insofar as time is one of its dimensions, as reckonable in thought as length and breadth, as air and light. His thought can travel like a breeze over water back and forth upon the face of it, and also back and forth in time along its streams and roads.

As in thought he passes backward into time, the country becomes quieter, and it seems to grow larger. The sounds of engines become less frequent and farther apart until finally they cease altogether. As the roads get poorer or disappear, the distances between places seem to grow longer. Distances that he can now travel in minutes in an automobile once would have taken hours and much effort.

But it is possible, even so, to look back with a certain fondness to a time when the sounds of engines were not almost constant in the sky, on the roads, and in the fields. Our descendants may know such a time again when the petroleum all is burnt. How they will fare then will depend on the neighborly

wisdom, the love for the place and its genius, and the skills that they may manage to revive between now and then.

The country in Andy Catlett's mind has assuredly a past, which exists in relics and scraps of memory more or less subject to proof. It has presumably a future that will verify itself only by becoming the past. Its present is somewhat conjectural, for old Andy Catlett, like everybody else, cannot be conscious of the present while he is thinking of the past. And most of us, most of the time, think mostly of the past. Even when we say, 'We are living now', we can mean only that we were living a moment ago.

Nevertheless, in this sometimes horrifying, sometimes satisfying, never-sufficiently-noticed present, between a past mostly forgotten and a future that we deserve to fear but cannot predict, some few things can be recalled.

In all the country from Port William to the river, one light shines. It is from a flame on the wick of an oil lamp, turned low, on a little stand table at the bedside of Maximilla Dawe in a large unpainted house facing the river in Glenn's Bottom between Catlett's Fork and Bird's Branch. The old lady lies somewhat formally upon the bed, seemingly asleep, in a long-sleeved flannel nightgown, clean but not new, the covers laid neatly over her. Her arms lie at her sides, the veined and gnarled old hands at rest. She is propped, in the appearance at least of comfort, on several pillows, for she is so bent by age and work that she could not lie flat.

She has been old a long time. Though 'Maximilla' was inscribed in her father's will, by which he left her the farm in the river bottom, the family of 'the slave woman known as Cat', and his stopped gold watch, and though it was signed in her own hand at the end of two or three legal documents, she

was never well known even to herself by that name. Once upon a time she was 'Maxie' – 'Miss Maxie' to the Negroes and some whites. For at least as long, to herself as to all the neighborhood of Port William, she has been 'Aunt Maxie'. To her granddaughter, who was Andy Catlett's grandmother, she had always been 'Granny Dawe', as to Andy she still is known.

Andy's grandmother, born Margaret Finley, now Margaret Feltner, sits by the bedside of Granny Dawe in that room in the dim lamplight in the broad darkness of the river valley in the fall of 1907, a hundred years ago. Margaret Feltner is a pretty woman – or girl, as the older women still would have called her – with a peculiar air of modesty, for she knows she is pretty but would prefer not to be caught knowing it. She is slenderly formed and neatly dressed, even prettily dressed, for her modesty must contend also with her knowledge that her looks are pleasing to Mat Feltner, her young husband.

With her are three other young women, also granddaughters of the old woman on the bed. They are Bernice Gibbs, and Oma and Callie Knole. Kinswomen who know one another well, they sit close together, leaving a sort of aisle between their chairs and the bed.

Their voices are low, and their conversation has become more and more intermittent as the night has gone on. The ancient woman on the bed breathes audibly, but slowly too and tentatively, so that they who listen even as they talk are aware that at any moment there may be one more breath, and then no more.

But she is dying in no haste, this Aunt Maxie, this Granny Dawe, who lived and worked so long before she began to die that she was the only one alive who still knew what she had known. She was born in 1814 in the log house that long ago was replaced by the one in which she now is dying. At the time

of her birth, the Port William neighborhood was still in its dream of itself as a frontier, 'the West', a new land. The chief artery of trade and transportation for that part of the country then was the river, as it would be for the next hundred years. When the time came, she bestowed her land, her slaves, and herself upon a man named James John Dawe, whose worldly fortune consisted of a singular knack for trade and the store and landing, the port of Port William, known as Dawe's Landing. He left the care of the farm to her. With the strength and the will and the determined good sense that have kept the farm and household in her own hands until now, she ruled and she served through times that were mostly hard.

The Civil War had its official realization in movements of armies and great battles in certain places, but in places such as Port William it released and licensed an unofficial violence also terrible, and more lasting. At its outset, Galen Dawe, on his way to join the Confederate army, was shot from his horse and left dead in the road, no farther on his way than Port William, by a neighbor, a Union sympathizer, with whom he had quarreled. And Maxie Dawe, with the help of a slave man named Punkin, loaded the dead boy onto a sled drawn by a team of mules. Looking neither right nor left at those who watched, she brought home the mortal body of her one son, which she washed and dressed herself, and herself read the great psalm over him as he lay in his grave.

The rest of her children were daughters, four of them. Her grief and her bearing in her grief gave her a sort of headship over daughters and husband that they granted without her ever requiring it. When a certain superiority to suffering, a certain indomitability, was required, she was the one who had it. Later, when a band of self-denominated 'Rebel' cavalry hung about

the neighborhood, she saved her husband, the capable merchant James John, from forcible recruitment or murder, they never knew which, by hiding him three weeks in a succession of corn shocks, carrying food and water to him after dark. By her cunning and sometimes her desperate bravery, she brought her surviving family, her slaves, and even a few head of livestock through the official and the unofficial wars, only to bury her husband, dead of a fever, at the end of the official one.

When the slaves were freed in Kentucky, when at last she had heard, she gathered those who had been her own into the kitchen. She told them: 'Slavery is no more, and you are free. If you wish to stay and share our fate, you are free to stay, and I will divide with you as I can. If you wish to go, you are free to go.'

There were six of them, the remaining family of the woman known as Cat, and they left the next morning, taking, each of them, what could be carried bundled in one hand, all of them invested with an official permission that had made them strange to everything that had gone before. They left, perhaps, from no antipathy to staying, for they arrived in Hargrave and lived there under the name of Dawe – but how could they have known they were free to go if they had not gone? Or so, later, Maxie Dawe would explain it, and she would add, 'And so would I have, had it been me.'

She and her place never recovered from the war. Unable to manage it herself, and needing money, she sold the landing. She hired what help she could afford. She rented her croplands on the shares. After her daughters married and went away, she stayed on alone. To her young granddaughters, and probably to herself as well, the world of the first half of her life was another world.

No more would she be 'Maxie' to anybody. Increasingly she

would be 'Aunt Maxie'. She was respected. By those who lacked the sense to respect her she was feared. She held herself strictly answerable to her necessities. She worked in the fields as in the house. Strange and doubtful stories were told about her, all of them perhaps true. She was said to have shot off a man's ear, only his ear, so he would live to tell it.

And now her long life, so strongly determined or so determinedly accepted by her, has at last submitted. It is declining gently, perhaps willingly, toward its end. It has been nearly a day and now most of a night since she uttered a word or opened her eyes. A younger person so suddenly moribund as she would have been dead long ago. But she seems only asleep, her aspect that of a dreamer enthralled. The two vertical creases between her brows suggest that she is raptly attentive to her dream.

That she is dying, she herself knows, or knew, for early in the morning of the previous day, not long before she fell into her present sleep, her voice, to those who bent to listen, seeming to float above the absolute stillness of her body, and with the tone perhaps of a small exasperation, she said, 'Well, if this is dying, I've seen living that was worse.'

The night began cloudy, and the clouds have deepened over the valley and the old house with its one light. The first frosts have come, hushing the crickets and the katydids. The country seems to be waiting. At about dawn a season-changing rain will begin so quietly that at first nobody will notice, and it will fall without letup for two days.

When midnight passes through the room, nobody knows, neither the old woman on the bed nor the young ones who watch beside it. The room would seem poor, so meager and worn are its furnishings, except that its high ceiling and fine

proportions give it a dignity that in the circumstances is austere. Though the night is not quite chilly, the sternness of the room and the presence of death in it seemed to call for additional warmth, and the young wives have kindled a little fire. From time to time, one or another has risen to take from the stone hearth a stick of wood and lay it on the coals. From time to time, one or another has risen to smooth the bedclothes that need no smoothing, or to lay a hand upon the old woman's forehead, or to touch lightly the pulse fluttering at her wrist.

After midnight, stillness grows upon them all. The talk has stopped, the fire subsided to a glow, when Bernice Gibbs raises her hand and the others look at her. Bernice is the oldest of the four. The others have granted her an authority which, like their grandmother perhaps, she has accepted merely because she has it and the others don't. She looks at each of them and looks away, listening.

They listen, and they hear not a sound. They hear instead a silence that reaches into every room and into the expectant night beyond. They rise from their chairs, first Bernice, and then, hesitantly, the others. They tiptoe to the bed, two to a side, and lean, listening, at that edge which they and all their children too have now passed beyond. The silence grows palpable around them, a weight.

Now, as Andy Catlett imagines his way into this memory that is his own only because he has imagined it, he is never quite prepared for what he knows to have happened next. Always it comes to him somewhat by surprise, as it came to those who remembered it from the actual room and the actual night.

In silence that seems to them utterly conclusive, the young women lean above the body of the old woman, the mold in which their own flesh was cast, and they listen. And then,

just when one of them might have been ready to say, 'She's gone,' the old woman releases with a sigh her held breath: 'Hooo!'

They startle backward from the bedside, each seeing in the wide-opened mouths and eyes of the others her own fright. Oma Knole, who is clumsy, strikes the lamp and it totters until Bernice catches and steadies it.

They stand now and look at one another. The silence has changed. The dying woman's utterance, brief as it was, spoke of a great weariness. It was the sigh of one who has been kept waiting. The sound hangs in the air as if visible, as if the lamp flame had flown upward from the wick. It stays, nothing moves, until some lattice of the air lets pass the single distant cry of an owl – 'Hoo!' – as if in answer.

Callie Knole turns away, bends forward, and emits what, so hard suppressed, might have been a sob, but it is a laugh.

And then they all laugh, at themselves, at one another, and they cannot stop. Their sense of the impropriety of their laughter renews their laughter. Looking at each other, flushed and wet-eyed with laughter, makes them laugh. They laugh because they are young and they are alive, and life has revealed itself to them, as it often had and often would, by surprise.

Margaret Feltner, when she had become an old woman, 'Granny' in her turn, told Andy of this a long time ago. 'Oh, it was awful!' she said, again laughing. 'But the harder we tried to stop, the funnier it was.'

And Andy, a hundred years later, can hear their laughter. He hears also the silence in which they laugh: the ancient silence filling the dark river valley on that night, uninterrupted in his imagination still by the noise of engines, the great quiet into which they all have gone.

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The laughter, which threatened to be endless, finally ends and is gathered into the darkness, into the past. The night resumes its solemn immensity, and again in the silence the old woman audibly breathes. But now her breaths come at longer intervals, until the definitive quiet settles upon her at last. They who have watched all night then fold her hands. Her mouth has fallen open, and Bernice thinks to bind it shut. They draw the counterpane over her face. Day whitens again over the old house and its clutch of old buildings. As they sit on in determined noiselessness, it comes to the young women that for some time they have been hearing the rain.

A Consent
(1908)

For my friends at Monterey, Kentucky

Ptolemy Proudfoot was nothing if not a farmer. His work was farming, his study and passion were farming, his pleasures and his social life occurred in the intervals between farm jobs and in the jobs themselves. He was not an ambitious farmer – he did not propose to own a large acreage or to become rich – but merely a good and a gifted one. By the time he was twenty-five, he had managed, in spite of the hard times of the 1890s, to make a down payment on the little farm that he husbanded and improved all his life. It was a farm of ninety-eight acres, and Tol never longed even for the two more that would have made it a hundred.

Of pleasures and social life, he had a plenty. The Proudfoots were a large, exuberant clan of large people, though by my time Tol was the last one of them in the Port William neighborhood, and Tol was childless. The Proudfoots were not, if they could help it, solitary workers. They swapped work among themselves and with their neighbors, and their workdays involved a mighty dinner at noontime, much talk and laughter, and much incidental sport.

As an after-dinner amusement and aid to digestion, the Proudfoot big boys and young men would often outline a square or a circle on the ground, and get into it and wrestle. Everybody wrestled with everybody, for the object was to see who would be the last one in the ring. The manpower involved

might better have been rated as horsepower, and great feats of strength were accomplished. Now and again great physical damage was accomplished, as when, for example, one Proudfoot would endeavor to throw another Proudfoot out of the ring through the trunk of a large tree. Sometimes, after failing to make headway through a tree trunk or barn door, a Proudfoot would lie very still on the ground for several minutes before he could get up. Sometimes, one Proudfoot or another would be unable to go back to work in the afternoon. These contests would be accompanied by much grunting, and by more laughter, as the Proudfoots were hard to anger. For a Proudfoot boy to become big enough and brave enough finally to set foot in that ring was a rite of passage. For a Proudfoot to stand alone in that ring – as Tol did finally, and then often did – was to know a kind of triumph and a kind of glory. Tol was big even for a Proudfoot, and the others could seldom take him off his feet. He tumbled them out, ass over elbows, one by one, in a manner more workmanly than violent, laughing all the time.

Tol was overabundant in both size and strength. And perhaps because animate creatures tended to get out of his way, he paid not much attention to himself. He damaged his clothes just by being in them, as though surprising them by an assortment of stresses and strains for which they had not been adequately prepared. The people around Port William respected Tol as a farmer; they loved to tell and retell and hear and hear again the tales of his great strength; they were amused by the looks of him, by his good humor, and by his outsized fumblings and foibles. But never, for a long time, would any of them have suspected that his great bulk might embody tender feelings.

But Tol did embody tender feelings, and very powerful tender

feelings they were. For Tol, through many years, had maintained somewhere about the center of himself a most noble and humble and never-mentioned admiration for Miss Minnie Quinch. Miss Minnie was as small and quick as Tol was big and lumbering. Like him, she was a Port Williamite. She had taught for many years at Goforth School, grades one through eight, which served the neighborhood of Katy's Branch and Cotman Ridge in which Tol's farm lay. When she was hardly more than a girl, Miss Minnie had gone away to a teacher's college and prepared herself to teach by learning many cunning methods that she never afterward used. For Miss Minnie loved children and she loved books, and she taught merely by introducing the one to the other. When she had trouble with one of the rougher big boys, she went straight to that boy's father and required that measures be taken. And measures usually were taken, so surprisingly direct and demanding was that lady's gaze.

For as many years as Miss Minnie had taught at Goforth School, Tol had admired her from a distance, and without ever looking directly at her when she might have been about to look directly at him. He thought she was the finest, prettiest, nicest little woman he had ever seen. He praised her to himself by saying, 'She's just a pocket-size pretty little thing.' But he was sure that she would never want to be around a big, rough, unschooled fellow like himself.

Miss Minnie did, from time to time, look directly at Tol, but not ever when he might have been about to look directly at her. More than once she thought rather wistfully that so large and strong a man as Tol ought to be some woman's knight and protector. She was, in fact, somewhat concerned about him, for he was thirty-six, well past the age when men usually got married. That she herself was thirty-four and unmarried was something

she also thought from time to time, but always in a different thought. She kept her concern about Tol limited very strictly to concern, for she was conscious of being a small person unable even to hope to arrest the gaze of so splendid a man.

For years, because of mutual avoidance of each other's direct gaze, their paths did not cross. Although they met and passed, they did not do so in a way that required more than a polite nod, which they both accomplished with a seriousness amounting almost to solemnity. And then one morning in Port William, Tol came out of Beater Chatham's store directly face-to-face with Miss Minnie who was coming in, and who smiled at him before she could think and said, 'Well, good morning, Mr Proudfoot!'

Tol's mouth opened, but nothing came out of it. Nothing at all. This was unusual, for Tol, when he felt like it, was a talkative man. He kept walking because he was already walking, but for several yards he got along without any assistance from his faculties. Sight and sense did not return to him until he had walked with some force into the tailgate of his wagon.

All the rest of that day he went about his work in a somewhat visionary state, saying to himself, and to the surprise of his horses and his dog, 'Good morning, mam!' and 'How do you do, Miss Minnie?' Once he even brought himself to say, bowing slightly and removing his hat, 'And a good morning to you, little lady.'

And soon, as if they had at last come into each other's orbit, they met face-to-face again. It was a fine fall afternoon, and Tol happened to be driving down past Goforth School, slowing his team, of course, so as not to disturb the concentration of the scholars inside. Miss Minnie was standing by the pump in front of the schoolhouse, her figure making a neat blue silhouette against the dingy weatherboarding.

Again she smiled at him. She said, 'How do you do, Mr Proudfoot?'

And Tol startled at the sound of her voice as if he had not seen her there at all. He could not remember one of the pleasantries he had invented to say to her. He looked intently into the sky ahead of him and said quickly as if he had received a threat, 'Why, howdy!'

The conversation thus established was a poor thing, Tol knew, so far as his own participation in it went, but it was something to go on. It gave him hope. And now I want to tell you how this courtship, conducted for so long in secret in Tol's mind alone, became public. This is the story of Miss Minnie's first consent, the beginning of their story together, which is one of the dear possessions of the history of Port William.

That fall, Miss Minnie and her students had worked hard in preparation for the annual Harvest Festival at the school. The Harvest Festival was Miss Minnie's occasion; she had thought it up herself. It might have been a Halloween party, except that Halloween in that vicinity got enough out of hand as it was without some public function to bring all the boys together in one place. And so she had thought of the Harvest Festival, which always took place two weeks before Halloween. It was a popular social event, consisting of much visiting, a display of the students' work, recitations by the students, an auction of pies and cakes to raise money for books and supplies, and abundant refreshments provided by the mothers of the students.

Ptolemy Proudfoot had never been to the Harvest Festival. He had no children, he told himself, and so did not belong there. But in fact he had always longed to go, had always been afraid to intrude himself without excuse into Miss Minnie's world, and had always, as a result, spent an unhappy night at

home. But this year, now that he and Miss Minnie were in a manner of becoming friends, he determined that he would go.

Tol had got along as bachelors must. He had even become a fair cook. From the outside, his house was one of the prettiest and best kept in the neighborhood. It was a small house with steep, gingerbreaded gables, and it stood under two white oaks in the bend of the road, just where the road branched off to go down into the Katy's Branch valley where Goforth and its school were. Tol kept the house painted and the yard neat, and he liked to turn in off the road and say to himself, 'Well, now, I wonder who lives in such a nice place!' But what he had thought up to do to the inside of the house was not a great deal above what he had thought up to do to the inside of his barn. Like the barn, the house was clean and orderly, but when he went into it, it did not seem to be expecting him, as it did after Miss Minnie came there to live.

On the day of the festival, Tol cut and shocked corn all day but he thought all day of the festival, too, and he quit early. He did his chores, fixed his supper and ate it, and then, just as he had planned in great detail to do, he began to get ready. He brought his Sunday clothes to the kitchen and laid them out on a chair. He hunted up his Sunday shoes and polished them. He set a large washtub on the floor in front of the stove, dipped hot water into it from the water well at the end of the stove, cooled the hot water with water from the water bucket on the shelf by the door, put soap and washrag and towel on the floor beside the tub. And then he undressed and sat in the tub with his feet outside it on the floor, and scrubbed himself thoroughly from top to toe. He dried himself and put on his pants. Gazing into the mirror over the little wash table by the back door, he shaved so carefully that he cut himself in several places. He put on his shirt, and after several tries buttoned the

collar. He put on his tie, tying a knot in it that would have broken the neck of a lesser man and that left even him so nearly strangled that he supposed he must look extremely handsome. He wet his hair and combed it so that when it dried it stuck up stiffly in the air as Proudfoot hair was inclined to do. He put on his suspenders, his gleaming shoes, and his Sunday hat. And then he sat in a chair and sweated and rubbed his hands together until it was time to hitch old Ike to the buggy and drive down to the school.

Before he got to the schoolhouse, he could hear voices, an uninterrupted babble like the sound of Katy's Branch in the spring, and then he could see a glow. When he got to the bottom of the hill and saw, among the trunks of the big walnuts and water maples and sycamores that stood there, the schoolhouse windows gleaming and the school yard strung with paper lanterns, lighting the bare-worn ground and throwing the shadows of the trees out in all directions like the spokes of a wheel, he said, 'Whoa, Ike.' The light around the old schoolhouse and within it seemed to him a radiance that emanated from the person of Miss Minnie herself. And Tol's big heart quaked within him. He had to sit there in the road behind his stopped horse and think a good while before he could decide not to go on by, pretending to have an errand elsewhere.

Now that he had stopped, it became quiet where he was; he could hear the crickets singing, and he was aware of Willow Hole on Katy's Branch, a little beyond the school, carrying on its accustomed business in the dark. As he sat and thought – thought hard about nothing that he could fix in a thought – Tol slid his fingers up beneath his hat from time to time and scratched, and then jerked the hat down firmly onto his head again, and each time he did this he rotated the front of his hat a little further toward his right ear. Presently the sound of

another buggy coming down the hill behind him recalled him to himself; he clucked to Ike and drove on, and found a hitching place among the other buggies and the wagons and the saddled horses at the edge of the school yard.

There was a perimeter of voices out on the very edge of the light, where the boys had started a game of tag, unwilling to come nearer the schoolhouse than they had to. Near the building the men were gathered in groups, smoking or chewing, talking, as they always talked, of crops, livestock, weather, work, prices, hunting, and fishing, in that year and the years before.

Tol, usually a sociable man, had nothing to say. He did not dare to say anything. He went past the men, merely nodding in response to their greetings, and since he did not want to talk and so could not stop, and was headed in that direction, he went on into the schoolhouse, and immediately he realized his mistake. For there were only women and girls in there, and not one man, not a single one. Beyond the boys' voices out on the edge of the dark and the men's voices in the school yard was this bright, warm nucleus of women's voices, and of women themselves and of women's eyes turned to see who had burst through the door with so much force.

Those women would always remember the way Tol looked when he came in that night. After all his waiting and anxiety, his clothes were damp and wrinkled, his shirt-tail was out, there was horse manure on one of his shoes. His hat sat athwart his head as though left there by somebody else. When, recognizing the multiflorous female presence he was in, he snatched his hat off, his hair stuck up and out and every which way. He came in wide-eyed, purposeful, and alarmed. He looked as if only his suspenders were holding him back – as if,

had it not been for that restraint upon his shoulders, he might have charged straight across the room and out through the back wall.

He had made, he thought, a serious mistake, and he was embarrassed. He was embarrassed, too, to show that he knew he had made a mistake. He did not want to stay, and he could not go. Struck dumb, his head as empty of anything sayable as a clapperless bell, he stood in one place and then another, smiling and blushing, an anxious, unhappy look in his eyes.

Finally, a voice began to speak in his mind. It was his own voice. It said, 'I would give forty dollars to get out of here. I would give forty-five dollars to get out of here.' It consoled him somewhat to rate his misery at so high a price. But he could see nobody to whom he could pay the forty dollars, or the forty-five either. The women had gone back to talking, and the girls to whispering.

But Tol's difficulty and his discomfort had not altogether failed of a compassionate witness. His unexpected presence had not failed to cause a small flutter in the bosom of Miss Minnie and a small change in the color of her face. As soon as she decently could, Miss Minnie excused herself from the circle of women with whom she had been talking. She took the bell from her desk and went to the door and rang it.

Presently the men and boys began to come inside. Tol, though he did not become inconspicuous, began at least to feel inconspicuous, and as his pain decreased, he was able to take intelligent notice of his whereabouts. He saw how prettily the room was done up with streamers and many candles and pictures drawn by the students and bouquets of autumn leaves. And at the head of the room on a large table were the cakes and pies that were to be auctioned off at the end of the evening.

In the very center of the table, on a tall stand, was a cake that Tol knew, even before he heard, was the work of Miss Minnie. It was an angel food cake with an icing as white and light and swirly as a summer cloud. It was as white as a bride. The sight of it fairly took his breath – it was the most delicate and wondrous thing that he had ever seen. It looked so beautiful and vulnerable there all alone among the others that he wanted to defend it with his life. It was lucky, he thought, that nobody said anything bad about it – and he just wished somebody would. He took a position in a corner in the front of the room as near the cake as he dared to be, and watched over it defensively, angry at the thought of the possibility that somebody *might* say something bad about it.

'Children, please take your seats!' Miss Minnie said.

The students all dutifully sat down at their desks, leaving the grown-ups to sit or stand around the walls. There was some confusion and much shuffling of feet as everybody found a place. And then a silence, variously expectant and nervous, fell upon the room. Miss Minnie stepped to the side of her desk. She stood, her posture very correct, regarding her students and her guests in silence a moment, and then she welcomed them one and all to the annual Harvest Festival of Goforth School. She told the grown-ups how pleased she was to see them there so cherishingly gathered around their children. She gave them her heartfelt thanks for their support. She asked Brother Overhold if he would pronounce the invocation.

Brother Overhold called down the blessings of Heaven upon each and every one there assembled, and upon every family there represented; upon Goforth School and Miss Minnie, its beloved teacher; upon the neighborhood of Katy's Branch and Cotman Ridge; upon the town of Port William and all the countryside around it; upon the county, the state,

the nation, the world, and the great universe, at the very center of which they were met together that night at Goforth School.

And then Miss Minnie introduced the pupils of the first grade, who were to read a story in unison. The first grade pupils thereupon sat up straight, giving their brains the full support of their erect spinal columns, held their primers upright in front of them, and intoned loudly together:

'Once – there – were – three – *bears*. The – big – bear – was – the – *pop*pa – bear. The – middle – bear – was – the – *mom*ma bear. The – little – bear – was – the – *ba*by bear' – and so on to the discovery of Goldlilocks and the conclusion, which produced much applause.

And then, one by one, the older children came forward to stand at the side of the desk, as Miss Minnie had stood, to recite poems or Bible verses or bits of famous oratory.

A small boy, Billy Braymer, recited from Sir Walter Scott:

> *Breathes there the man with soul so dead*
> *Who never to himself hath said:*
> *'This is my own, my native land'?*

– and on for thirteen more lines, and said 'Whew!' and sat down to enthusiastic applause. Thelma Settle of the sixth grade, one of the stars of the school, made her way through 'Thanatopsis' without fault to the very end. The audience listened to 'A Psalm of Life', the First, the Twenty-third, and the Hundredth Psalms, 'The Fool's Prayer', 'To a Waterfowl', 'To Daffodils', 'Concord Hymn', 'The Choir Invisible', 'Wolsey's Farewell to His Greatness', Hamlet's Soliloquy, 'The Epitaph' from Gray's 'Elegy Written in a Country Church-Yard', and other pieces. Hibernia Hopple of the eighth grade declared with a steadily deepening blush and in furious haste that she

loved to the depth and breadth and height her soul could reach. Walter Crow said in a squeaky voice and with bold gestures that he was the master of his fate and the captain of his soul. Buster Niblett implored that he be given liberty or death.

And then Miss Minnie called the name of Burley Coulter, and a large boy stood up in the back of the room and, blushing, made his way to the desk as he would have walked, perhaps, to the gallows. He turned and faced the audience. He shut his eyes tightly, opened them only to find the audience still present, and swallowed. Miss Minnie watched him with her fingers laced at her throat and her eyes moist. He was such a good-looking boy, and – she had no doubt – was smart. Against overpowering evidence she had imagined a triumph for him. She had chosen a poem for him that was masculine, robust, locally applicable, seasonally appropriate, high spirited, and amusing. If he recited it well, she would be so pleased! She had the poem in front of her, just in case.

He stood in silence, as if studying to be as little present as possible, and then announced in an almost inaudible voice, '"When the Frost Is on the Punkin" by James Whitcomb Riley'.

He hung his hands at his sides, and then clasped them behind him, and then clasped them in front of him, and then put them into his pockets. He swallowed a dry-mouthed swallow that in the silence was clearly audible, and began:

> *'When the frost is on the punkin and the fodder's in the shock,*
> *And you hear the kyouck and gobble of the struttin' turkey-cock,*
> *And the clackin' of the* – of the, uh – *the clackin' of the –'*

'Guineys!' Miss Minnie whispered.

'Aw, yeah, guineys,' he said:

'And the clackin' of the guineys, and the cluckin' of the hens,
And the rooster's hallylooyer as he tiptoes on the fence
– uh, let's see –'

'Oh, it's then's . . .'

'Oh, it's then's the time's a feller' is a-feelin' at his best,
With the risin' sun to greet him from a night of peaceful rest,
When he – uh –'

'As he leaves . . .'

'As he leaves the house, bare-headed, and goes out to feed the stock,
When the frost is on the punkin and the fodder's in the shock.'

He looked at his feet, he scratched his head, his lips moved soundlessly.

'They's something . . .'

'Aw, yeah.

'They's something kindo' harty-like about the atmusfere
When the heat of summer's over – uh – *kindo' lonesome-like,*
but still – uh –

'When, let's see. Uh –

'Then your apples – Then your apples all –'

Miss Minnie was reading desperately, trying to piece the poem together as he dismembered it, but he had left her behind and now he was stalled. She looked up to see an expression on