

“No Cure for It”

Thomas Wolfe The Hills Beyond (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1941)

SON! SON! WHERE ARE YOU, BOY?

He heard her call again, and listened plainly to her now, and knew she would break in upon his life, his spell of time, and wondered what it was she wanted of him. He could hear her moving in the front of the house.

Suddenly he heard her open the front door and call out sharply: “Oh, Doctor McGuire! . . . Will you stop in here a minute? . . . There’s something I want to ask you.”

He heard the iron gate slam, and the doctor’s slow, burly tread, the gruff rumble of his voice, as he came up the steps. Then he heard them talking in low voices at the front hall door. He could not distinguish their words until, after a minute or two, she raised her voice somewhat and he heard her say reflectively, “Why-y, no-o!” ---and knew that she was pursing her lips in a startled, yet thoughtful manner, as she said it. Then she went on in her curiously fragmentary, desperate, and all-inclusive fashion: “I don’t think so. At least, he’s always seemed all right. Never complained of anything. . . . It’s only the last year or so. . . . I got to thinkin’ about it---it worried me, you know. . . . He seems strong an’ healthy enough. . . . But the way he’s growin’! I was speakin’ to his father about it the other day---an’ he agreed with me, you know. Says, ‘Yes, you’d better ask McGuire the next time you see him.’”

“Where is he?” McGuire said gruffly. “I’ll take a look at him.”

“Why, yes!” she said quickly. “that’s the very thing! . . . Son! . . . Where are you, boy?”

Then they came back along the hall, and into the sitting room. The gangling boy was still stretched out on the smooth, worn leather of his father’s couch, listening to the time-strange tocking of the clock, and regarding his bare brown legs and sun-browned toes with a look of dreamy satisfaction as they entered.

“Why, boy!” his mother cried in a vexed tone. “What on earth do you mean? I’ve been callin’ for you everywhere!”

He scrambled up sheepishly, unable to deny that he had heard her, yet knowing, somehow, that he had not willfully disobeyed her.

Doctor McGuire came over, looking like a large tousled bear, smelling a little like his horse and buggy, and with a strong stench of cigar and corn whiskey on his breath. He sat his burly figure down heavily on Gant’s couch, took hold of the boy’s arm in one large, meaty hand, and for a moment peered at him comically through his bleared, kindly, dark-yellow eyes.

“How old are you?” he grunted.

Eugene told him he was seven, going on eight, and McGuire grunted indecipherably again.

He opened the boy’s shirt and skinned it up his back, and then felt carefully up and down his spinal column with thick, probing fingers. He wriggled the boy’s neck back and forth a few times, held the skinny arm out and inspected it solemnly, and then peered with grave, owlish humor at the boy’s enormous hands and feet. After that he commanded the boy to stoop over without bending his knees and touch the floor.

Eugene did so; and when the doctor asked him if he could bend no farther, the boy put his hands down flat upon the floor, and remained bent over, holding them that way, until

the doctor told him to stand up and let his arms fall, his hands hung level with his knees, and for a moment McGuire peered at him very carefully. Then he turned and squinted comically at Eliza with his look of owlish gravity, and said nothing. She stood there, her hands clasped in their loose, powerful gesture at her apron strings, and when he looked at her she shook her puckered face rapidly in a movement of strong concern and apprehension.

“Hm! Hm! Hm! Hm! Hm!” she said. “I don’t like it! It don’t seem natural to me!”

McGuire made no comment, and did not answer her. After staring at her owlishly a moment longer, he turned to the boy again and told him to lie down upon the couch. Eugene did so. McGuire then told him to raise his legs and bend them back as far as they would go, and kept grunting, “Farther! Farther!” until the boy was bent double. Then McGuire grunted sarcastically:

“Go on! Is that the best you can do? I know a boy who can wrap his legs all the way around his neck.”

When he said this, the boy stuck his right leg around his neck without any trouble at all, and remained in that posture for some time, happily wriggling his toes under his left year. McGuire looked at him solemnly, and at last turned and squinted at his mother, saying nothing.

“Whew-w!” she shrieked with a puckered face of disapproval. “Get out of here! I don’t like to look at anything like that! . . . Hm! Hm! Hm! Hm! Hm!” she muttered, shaking her head rapidly with an expression of strong concern, as the boy un-wound his legs and straightened out again.

Eugene stood up. For a moment McGuire held him by the arm and squinted comically at him through his bleared eyes, without saying a word. Then his burly, bearlike shoulders began to heave slowly, a low, hoarse chuckle rose in his throat, and he said, poking the boy in the ribs with one fat thumb:

“Why, you little monkey!”

“Hah! What say? What is it? cried his mother in a sharp startled tone.

The doctor’s huge shoulders heaved mountainously again, the hoarse sound rumbled in his throat, and, shaking his head slowly, he said:

“I’ve seen them when they were knock-kneed, bow-legged, cross-eyed, pigeon-toed, and rickety---but that’s the damndest thing I ever saw! I never saw the beat of it!” he said---and the boy grinned back at him proudly.

“Hah! What say? What’s wrong with him?” Eliza said sharply.

The burly shoulders heaved again:

“Nothing,” McGuire said. “Nothing at all! He’s all right! He’s just a little monkey!”---and the rumbling noises came from his inner depths again.

He was silent for a moment, during which he squinted at Eliza as she stood there pursing her lips at him, then he went on:

“I’ve seen them when they shot up like weeds, and I’ve seen them when you couldn’t make them grow at all,” he said, “but I never saw one before who grew like a weed in one place while he was standing still in anther! . . . look at his hands and feet! Did you ever in your life see such hands and feet on a child his age?”

“Why, it’s awful! his mother agreed, nodding. “I know it is! We can’t find anything in the stores to fit him now! What’s it goin’ to be like when he gets older? It’s an awful thing!” she cried.

“Oh, he’ll be all right,” McGuire said, as he heaved slowly. “He’ll get all of his parts together some day and grow out of it! . . . But God knows what he’ll grow into!” he said, rumbling inside again and shaking his head as he peered at the boy. “A mountain or an elephant ---I don’t know which!” He paused, then added: “but at the present time he’s just a little monkey. . . . That’s what you are---a monkey!” and the tremendous shoulders heaved again.

Just then the iron gate slammed, and the boy heard his father lunge across the walk, take the front steps in bounds of three, and come striding around the porch into the sitting room. He was muttering madly to himself, but stopped short as he came upon the little group, and with a startled look in his uneasy cold-gray eyes, he cried out---“Hey?” although no one had spoken to him.

Then, wetting his great thumb briefly on his lips, and slamming down the package he was carrying, he howled:

“Woman, this is your work! Unnatural female that you are, you have given birth to a monster who will not rest until he has ruined us all, eaten us out of house and home, and sent me to the poorhouse to perish in a pauper’s grave! Nor man nor beast hath fallen so far! . . . Well, what’s your opinion, hey?” he barked abruptly at McGuire, half bending toward him in a frenzied manner.

“He’s all right,” McGuire said, slowly heaving. “He’s just a monkey.”

For a moment Gant looked at his son with his restless, cold-gray eyes.

“Merciful God! He said. “If he had hair on him, they couldn’t tell him from a monkey now!” Then, wetting his great thumb, he grinned thinly and turned away. He strode rapidly about the room, his head thrown back, his eyes swinging in an arc about the ceiling; then he paused, grinned again, and came over to the boy. “Well, son,” he said kindly, putting his great hand gently upon the boy’s head, “I’m glad to know that it’s all right. I guess it was the same with me. Now don’t you worry. You’ll grow up to be a big man some day.”

They all stood looking at the boy---his mother with pursed, tremulous, bantering, proudly smiling lips, his father with a faint, thin grin, and McGuire with his owl-like, bleared, half-drunken, kindly stare. The boy looked back at them, grinning proudly, worried about nothing. He thought his father was the grandest, finest person in the world, and as the three of them looked at him he could hear, in the hush of brooding noon, the time-strange tocking of his father’s clock.