

Sample from *The Strange and True Tale of Horace Wells, Surgeon Dentist*  
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Riggs cradled the Bible against his chest, closed his eyes, moved his lips in prayerful silence. Wells closed his eyes, too, dropped his head, and folded his hands, whispered, "Amen."

Then he adjusted the bladder in his lap as if wanting the gas itself to feel at ease. He placed his mouth over the faucet, turned the key, and inhaled.

"Count ten," said Colton.

Wells did, then exhaled. He inhaled again. Another ten count.

Then Wells stopped holding his breath or turning the key. He breathed back into the bladder, inhaled from it, breathed again into it, his mouth tight over the faucet. Colton counted breaths, and at six jumped from his chair.

"That's enough," he said. "That's enough! We agreed to six." He seized the bladder, cranked the key to shut the faucet. With a hand to Wells's brow, Riggs lifted the heavy head away from the spigot and set it to rest against the padded pillow of the chair. Colton noticed Cooley at work and seized the sketchbook. "No record, I said!" He tore at the pages, taking half of one and almost all of the other. Then he gave the crumpled mess to the fire. Cooley recovered his book and made an obscene gesture at Colton's back.

Wells's skin had blanched like the scales of a fish belly, so his red hair seemed even more like flame. He blinked, his blue eyes shifted, lids half

closed but the eyes still seeming to see. But see what? The pupils lazed about, sometimes settling on an object, then moving in the direction of another: from open drawer in the tool chest to a green-glass bottle of chemical to a fleur-de-lis pattern in the wallpaper. Riggs placed a fingertip against Wells's neck.

"His pulse is tranquil," he said. He counted. "The beats spread widely but with regularity."

Colton pushed his knuckles into his own brow with such force he left his skin mottled pink. "Is he awake? Is he asleep?"

Though Wells's eyes remained open, he appeared unaware, helpless. His vulnerability troubled Riggs with a sense of responsibility he'd not experienced in all his days as a dentist. He glanced out a window and saw that snow still fell, layering the shingles of the tobacconist across the corner. "Neither asleep nor awake, I think."

Colton waved his hands in front of Wells's placid face. "Open your mouth!" he shouted.

Wells opened his mouth.

"He's not deaf," said Riggs, less reproach to Colton than a note to himself. He reached for the tooth key, crouched near Wells's face. "Open wider," he said. Wells did.

In the next moment, Riggs found the tooth, secured the key. He felt his own pulse jump. "Shouldn't someone hold his arms?" he asked.

"Just pull," said Colton. "Now."

Riggs tightened his fist on the handle, gasped as he yanked.

Nothing else happened. Wells lay in his chair, his expression unchanged.

"Not even a flinch," said Cooley.

The men stood a moment, watching for some other reaction. As if by reflex, Riggs wiped Wells's blood and saliva from his fingers onto his apron. Then he presented the bloody molar to Colton, showed Cooley. Riggs's whole arm trembled, and the molar shook in the air like some strange moth in a light.

Riggs whispered near Wells's ear. "What do you feel?"

Wells's lips moved like an infant's in its sleep.

It had begun, Horace would later remember, with a tingling. He had made a mental note.

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*Tingling.*

*Tips of fingers.*

*Tips of toes.*

Then numbness overtook his limbs. He thought to tap his foot, to lift it at the ankle and tap his shoe sole against the floor. Strange, this part, because he sensed no subsequent movement. Given that his mind was a scientific mind, he did not assume that an absence of a sense of movement proved failure to move. Perhaps his foot had tapped but he hadn't felt the sensations of tapping. Perhaps absence of pain required absence of all feeling. Perhaps. Perhaps Charley could learn to tap dance. He should ask Riggs. He thought to say, "Might Charley make a good tap dancer?" but again, he sensed no movement in his mouth. But he felt something. Or his head did. Whichever it was, he approved. His body became waves—waves instead of legs, waves instead of arms, waves instead of lungs, the weightless pleasure of waves. He experienced something like a laugh, but it was the laugh of soul rather than body. So the two—soul and body—are separate after all! What a thing to discover! What else? He could hear. A pulsing beat, a sound the color of gold. A beat that sounded as if it rang from inside the bell of the world. Ah, the church bell of Creation. The

heartbeat of God. He looked around. Cooley tap dancing! A delight. Riggs a delight, too, and Colton, and teeth, and gums—all a delight! The room expanded. Or rather, Horace shrank. Or rather, the room expanded. Somewhere he heard a sharpening wheel, and he saw its sparks spray into the air. What ecstasy to be a spark in this universe, one of an infinity of sparks, all brilliant, all in flight. A spark streaked by his face, and it spoke to him in a voice like God's. "Open your mouth!" said the spark, and Horace imagined his mouth opening, and perhaps it did or did not but did it matter? Brilliant and humble and in flight! Rapture!

And then, he felt himself breathing. His lungs, no longer waves, had become lungs again. He blinked and saw blinding brightness. He felt the blink. He held his eyes shut a moment. The pulse that had been God's heartbeat seemed now to be a throbbing, as if it were a visitor knocking on his forehead with two knuckles. His mouth tasted of iron. His tongue felt leaden. Still, it moved at his bidding, sort of, so he explored his mouth and found a hole along his gum line where he remembered no hole. He opened

his eyes with care, and in the brightness he saw Riggs in his apron. Riggs held a tooth key, and lodged in the key was a tooth. It looked to him white as could be, as if polished, as if it were the tooth of an angel.

“Did you feel it, Wells? Did you feel the tooth pull?”

He had not. He had not, and even as he felt tired, wanting to sleep, the awareness that the angel tooth Riggs held was his own sparked through him like some celestial fire. He tasted blood and tongued the spot where his sore tooth had been, felt its emptiness, and even the pressure of his tongue in the hollow space felt as no more than a caress.

He clapped his hands once, then let them fall, benumbed birds alighting in his lap.

Thus does the map of the known world widen and its mysteries multiply. Giddy with discovery, a dentist staggers to and fro, laughing as he upends a tool tray, caught by a companion as he tumbles into a bird cage, spilling seed and litter. “Oxygen!” one fellow yells. “Open the window!” But no one does. A more momentous thing has opened, and in this second-floor office above a frozen-dirt main street in a provincial capital, men gape at a new panorama, knowing they are first to see. Being men, they want to speak of what makes them whoop and cheer, but words have yet to be invented for the unknown that demands to be explored. “Pray, keep this secret,” mumbles the dentist (his mouth packed with cotton) as his fellows leave to return to their commonplaces—a bill to pay, a floor to sweep, a bench seat on a train beside a boy crying over his stubbed toe—all that humdrum which will buoy them as it never has before, its monotony lightened by their new hope for humanity. “Hold your tongues,” says the dentist. “Not a word. Not yet.”