# Through a Brutal Night into a Dawn of Adolescence - Reading Hemingway's 'Indian Camp' -

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I

Ernest Miller Hemingway (1899-1961) composed a series of short fictions which all trace the life of the same hero named Nicholas Adams from boyhood through adolescence into early adulthood and paternity. These pieces were originally published in different journals and magazines and later collected, along with some new stories, in *The Nich Adams Stories* (1972): there are 24 stories altogether in the collection. Indian Camp' is one of the earliest works in the series and the author's oeuvre as well. It was first published in *The Transatlantic Review* (1924) edited by Ford Madox Ford in Paris and included again in *In Our Time* (1925). For all its brevity and simplicity, 'Indian Camp' deserves careful scrutiny in its own right and also provides a solid launching pad for exploration into Hemingway's burgeoning concept of style, structure and storytelling. Almost a century after its first publication, 'Indian Camp' still enjoys high critical acclaim. It also remains relatively popular among ordinary readers although the author's fame and reputation have incurred a slight but steady erosion, presumably due to his 'emphasis on the masculine point of view' (Jackson J. Benson, 29), in the wake of the emergence of Feminism and Postcolonialism towards the end of the twentieth century.

'Indian Camp' is an epitome of short fiction recounted in a breath. What is unique and remarkable about it is its tautness in both concept and diction. The terse, almost unkindly brusque style conduces to the speedy flow of action and resonates with the thematic cohesion to formulate the synthetic narrative unity. Elmore Leonard, an American writer, refers obliquely to Hemingway's style during an interview when he replies to the question of what his favorite book as a child was:

'... I started reading popular novels. I always thought they used too many words, no matter who (sic.) they were - except Hemingway'. (Time, 2)

The testimony neatly applies to 'Indian Camp', which is extremely sparing, even frugal, of words. Carlos Baker comments on Hemingway's style for fiction writing:

He learned how to get the most from the least, how to prune language and avoid waste motion, how to multiply intensities, and how to tell nothing but the truth in a way that always allowed for telling more than the truth. (117)

Robert Weeks strikes the same chord by coining such axiomatic expressions as 'this ruthless economy' and 'Less is more'(1). Recounted in this celebrated style, 'Indian Camp' occupies the very limited space of four pages in printing and three in effect(*Hemingway*, pp. 67-70: page numbers alone to be cited hereafter). Its storyline takes a linear and distinct orbit of development from beginning to end in accordance with the natural passage of time. No digression, no subplot, no narrative embellishment, is included. In structure, 'Indian Camp' hinges on three segments which reflect the shifts of action and location. The first section sketches Nick's nocturnal excursion with his father Henry Adams and Uncle George across a lake to an Indian settlement. The second section is loaded with the serious themes of birth and death that take place in a shanty at the village. The last section deals with the hero's return journey with his father alone at the daybreak.

It is commonly acknowledged that 'Indian Camp' is a *Bildungsroman* whose leitmotif is 'initiation' or a rite of passage to adolescence: the hero encounters extreme cases of life and death at the guide of his doctor-father and becomes aware of his own selfhood for the first time. While it is admitted that there is no shortage of the critique on 'Indian Camp', there might remain some stones still left unturned. This small study, a part of the sequence of commentaries on well-known short fictions by the present author, intends to integrate a variety of critical approaches to the story and, if possible, add something new through close reading and analysis.

In his study of Hemingway's short fictions, William Watson defines a perfect story as one with 'a fully developed character, a powerful drama whose resolution we fearfully anticipate, and a point of view that seems wholly natural and realistic' (Web. 1). Whether this is a perfect definition of a perfect short fiction, character, drama and realism can indeed be accepted as three elements of supreme significance for the genre. Also indispensable are motif, style and unity. 'Indian Camp' is certainly equipped, albeit in varying degrees, with most of these elements and may be classified, whether or not a perfect fiction, at least as an 'amazing and/or endearing story of initiation' on a par with, for example, James Joyce's 'Araby' (1914) and Katherine Mansfield's 'The Garden Party' (1922).

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Abruptness might be the benchmark of storytelling in 'Indian Camp', especially at the opening. There is no introduction of the main characters or no direct information about such circumstantial elements as time and place. Even the hero's age, absolutely vital to a tale of initiation, remains unspecified. Lean and bare facts alone carry the plot forward, setting aside a large part of narrative details and particulars. The third-person narrator hardly cares to do more than to provide the gist and contour of the storyline and stoically stays away from the emotions and feelings of the

characters. Carl Ficken's view that 'Hemingway matched his narrative perspective with his hero's mental state' (95) sounds suggestive. Whatever is left blank or blurry by the narrator must be filled by the reader's imagination. The story opens all of a sudden where the action is already under way:

At the lake shore there was another rowboat drawn up. The two Indians stood waiting. (67)

In view of 'the camp rowboat' (67) mentioned a few lines later, 'another' in the opening line implies the arrival of newcomers, whose identity is disclosed immediately in the second sentence. The first paragraph comes to an end there. The author gazes at the skeleton alone and disregards the sinews and muscles, needless to say the flab. The title does not serve as a mere nameplate which stands outside the tale: in fact, it is incorporated into the storyline and leitmotif. The specific place designated by the title envisages a different world, a far-away place, cut off from the main-stream society of white Americans. The two Indians have come over from there by rowing across the lake. Their mission is to bring a doctor back to their settlement. Rowboats afford a slow but convenient medium of transportation between the two places, the two lifestyles, the two mentalities, which rarely meet in everyday life under ordinary circumstances. In this sense, the lake represents for the hero a huge psychological rather than geographical divide, an entrance to a nether world where, in a hindsight, things beyond the mundane and banal, such as fantasies and nightmares, lurk in ambush for strangers.

Nick and his father get in the Indians' boat and sit in its stern, to be rowed by one of the visitors. Uncle George steps in the camp boat with the other Indian. How the five people get aboard the two boats seems to be a trifling question which receives undue attention in the second paragraph. The truth is, however, totally contrary: the opening scene stands in sharp contrast to the finale and shows the state of things before changes are made over one single night, the changes in the hero's frame of mind, his awareness as an independent being, and his relationship with his father. As is stated above, there is no exact indication of the time of the day when the two boats slide into the lake. The expressions, 'in the dark', 'cold on the water' and 'in the mist' (67), afford all the clues. The darkness of the night, reinforced by the mist, nullifies the faculty of Nick's eyes but instead sharpens his other senses. His ears arrest 'the quick choppy strokes' (67) of the oars while his skin discerns the intensifying rawness of the air. His sight is next to be mobilized and put to work after he is transported to the destination, further to be followed by his inner being which now waits to be shaken to full awakening.

Despite a night journey bound for a location totally unfamiliar to him, Nick scarcely appears worried: 'Nick lay back with his father's arm around him' (67). His father provides him with the

absolute protection and comfort, which he takes for granted. As if in unison with the brisk, rhythmical sounds of the oars, the father and son engage in a brief conversation comprised of short, practical words:

"Where are we going, Dad?" Nick asked.

"Over to the Indian camp. There is an Indian lady very sick."

"Oh." said Nick. (67)

The dialogue makes it clear that Nick is informed of neither the destination nor the purpose of their journey in advance. Everything is arranged within a short period of time by his father, who seems to him so reliable and erudite as to appear almost almighty and know-all. At this early stage of the plot, Nick is kept 'in the dark' and 'in the mist' in both a literary and a figurative sense; his self-consciousness dozes at ease in his carefree boyhood and naivety. The three-line conversation is the only thing that takes place in the whole passage of the journey. Nothing else receives verbal description, and the three in the same boat sit quietly, muffled in the chill and gloom of the night. Inadvertent to what encroaches on him, Nick thus sets out on an expedition to an unknown terrain of experience under the watchful guidance of his loving father.

The rest of the first section depicts the landing of the party on the other side of the lake and their walk through a meadow and woods along the trail which leads up to the final destination. Reunited with Nick and the doctor, Uncle George gives cigars to the Indians. His behaviour arouses two opposite responses from the reader: if taken as a token of gratitude and friendship, it will be harmless and rather pleasing. Some personal bond is actually formed later between him and one of the Indian youths as is shown in '... the young Indian who had rowed Uncle George over laughed at him' (68) and again 'The young Indian smiled reminiscently' (69). If taken as a form of tipping, on the other hand, Uncle George's gift-giving will be judged a little too patronizing and indicative of the discriminatory attitude of white people toward the coloured. It is Uncle George again who screams, 'Damn squaw bitch!' (68), when bitten on the arm by the Indian pregnant woman during Caesarian section. This reading leads up to the notion that 'Indian Camp' rests on the overwhelming supremacy of the white people over the Indians.

In the meantime, the same issue can be approached from a completely different angle, which might help to broaden an interpretative scope for this fiction. Given the history of the habit of smoking which was, succinctly speaking, originated in the New World and transferred to the Old World during the Geographic Exploration of the 15th and 16th centuries, Uncle George's act of giving cigars indicates that the product for smoking is now handed back to the descendants of the incipient practitioners. Implied in this reading, although it might sound a little far-fetched, is the

idea of circulation, which is unmistakably prominent in 'Indian Camp' and is well aligned with a cycle from birth to death, the round trip by the son and father, and ripples created on the lake by a jumping fish. The list of cyclical movements further extends to a cold, long night giving way to a crisp air of dawn, the rising sun marking the arrival of a new day, and the transmission of experience and wisdom from father to son.

Another thing to be mentioned in the first section also looks trivial at first glance. One of the Indians blows out the lantern when he leads the white guests into the logging road. Out into the open space which is described as 'much lighter' (67) even in the middle of the night, he simply needs no artificial light. The question to be asked here is what message this seemingly inessential anecdote bears or, more significantly, whether there is any message at all in it, while detail after detail is mercilessly pared out throughout the tale. Apparently, the two Indians, who play a peripheral role in the plot, cannot and should not be the object of description. The reader might be reminded to keep things in a wider perspective, to regard fine details as integrated parts of the whole. After the nocturnal journey across the dark lake and through the dark woods, the young Indian's act directs attention to 'light', whose symbolical meaning gains momentum in the second section. The focus of narration is in due course shifted from light itself to what it renders visible in the darkness. When the objects of illumination and revelation are narrowed down on specific actions or items, emphasis is gradually laid on the fact that light is relayed if not directly from person to person, from the young Indian to an old woman 'holding a light' (67) to Nick's father 'with the lamp in one hand (69, repeated twice). Here can be pointed out another instance of circulation. Lit by the soft but revealing rays of a lamp, things stand out in sharp relief against the surrounding murkiness. When extinguished, an artificial light is replaced by a spiritual beacon, a new beam of insight. Eventually it is driven out by the arrival of day, and Nick's journey into the night is brought to an end, with an enlightened spirit preserved permanently inside him.

'Light' has a further function in 'Indian Camp'. It primarily constitutes the antithesis of darkness and is also related with the predicament of the Native Americans. First, light and dark are so conspicuous in the story as symbols and thematic topics that they cannot pass unnoticed. The story begins at nighttime and ends in the refreshing gleams of the sun to syncopate with the progress of the hero's rite of passage. In the meantime, darkness reflects the Native Americans' standard of living and level of social consciousness, both of which were dismal and lower than those of their white counterparts back in the 1920s. Due to their poverty, lamp oil must definitely be saved whenever possible as is done by the young Indian. The Indians in the story make their living as bark-peelers at a logging factory. Their hard life is utilized as a background against which a

white boy's first contact with the reality is staged with telling effects. The Indian camp manifests to Nick 'the primitive and dark side of life' according to Joseph DeFalco(161), or an alien, backward place which has nothing to do with his own and from which he is expected, at least at this stage of the story, to come back unscathed after a lesson of life as is set up by his father. The only mishap that transcends the doctor's prescience and thwarts his educational scheme for his son is caused by another father, who, at the expense of his own life, places a formidable homework of death on the still fragile shoulders of the hero, a homework which might take Nick and anyone else many years to solve and, in the case of the author himself, his own life years later.

#### III

Section 2 takes place exclusively in the small space of a shanty at the Indian village. Beckoned silently by a lamp in an old woman's hand, the party of five enter the modest cottage. Inside, there is a two-story bunk bed which accommodates a pregnant woman on the lower berth and her husband on the upper. The woman has been suffering an unusual labour pain for two days. The reason for her husband's repose is that, while at work, he cut his own foot severely with an axe three days earlier. What with her heavy perspiration and the pipe he smokes, the room is filled with an unpleasant smell. Outside the cabin, the fellow male Indians sit in the darkness out of the range of the woman's screams: no knowledge about the cause of her ordeal keeps them in a combined state of fear and perplexity. But all the women at the camp lend themselves to the mother-to-be in one way or another. In 'Indian Camp', things often come out in pairs, either in contrast or by analogy. This type of dualism or binary perspective is extended to two men in their display of masculinity and fatherhood. Upon his arrival at the patient's abode, Doctor Adams loses no time in changing himself from a holiday angler into a medical practitioner and begins to issue precise orders and requests with alacrity. The other father, or father-to-be, to put it precisely, is bedridden and unable to do anything for himself and his wife. With a doctor's dignity and authority resumed on the spot, Nick's father explains to his son: 'This lady is going to have a baby, Nick' (68). Failing to notice his mental and psychological transition, the hero wearily answers, 'I know' (68). Suddenly, the fatherly tenderness yields to the stern and sober sense of mission that pertains only to first-rate professionals. The father corrects his son in a quiet but decisive tone: 'You don't know' (68). He goes on to warn Nick for a life-or-death case about to break open and asks him to be more attentive: 'Listen to me. What she is going through is ...'(68). Nick realizes the seriousness of the situation and replies sincerely, 'I see' (68). The simple and compact words exchanged between father and son convey the quality of their relationship and enhance the tense atmosphere of the scene.

To a piercing scream of the pregnant woman, the two fathers again make opposite responses: Nick's father coolly says, 'I don't hear them because they are not important' (68) while her husband 'roll[s] over against the wall' (68). The dilemma that racks the latter's heart, his frustrated feeling of inadequacy and uselessness, pulsates in his silence and physical turn away from the sight and sound of his wife's predicament. Understandably, the plot concentrates on the heroic father, in practical terms on how cautiously he sterilizes his hands and make-shift tools and then tries not to touch anything prior to the operation. Here again, no expression is given to his emotions or feelings first-hand at these strained moments: his inner landscape can be viewed only through his external actions and movements. Even the reason for the doctor's decision to bring the son along on this extraordinary house call and his wishful thinking about the junior's future are insinuated by an utterance which sounds like casual bantering: 'How do you like being an interne?' (68). Truly, 'Indian Camp' is woven of a series of such brief, trifling anecdotes.

It is around the time the operation is finished that the first symptom of some discrepancy begins to intervene between father and son. Nick has long lost his interest in what his father has been working on, but the doctor continues to be in high spirits: 'There, that gets it' (69). At once relieved of the formidable task in surgery and elated at his own success under the least favourable circumstance, he is apparently blind to his son's weariness and surfeited feelings displayed in 'Nick didn't look at it' (69) and 'The son's curiosity had been gone for a long time' (69). The doctor's joy and pride soar further, almost to the height of hubris:

'That's one for the medical journal, George,' he said. 'Doing a Caesarian with a jack-knife and sewing it up with nine-foot, tapered gut leaders'. (69)

Uncle George replies in assent though his attention is riveted on the bite inflicted on the arm by the Indian woman: 'Oh, you're a great man, all right' (69). Everything up to this point goes as the doctor wished and planned, including his son's participation in the expedition and his internship in the surgery. His inveterate desire to keep things under his control and even to manipulate his son's course of life overrides the boundary of parental affection and violates Nick's personal dignity and independence. In Greek tragedy, human hubris is destined to meet divine fury and punishment. Even weak, powerless and nameless people stand up and fight back on the least expected occasions. Still in excitement and jubilation, the doctor comes to notice the woman's husband lying in stony calmness on the upper bunk:

'Ought to have a look at the proud father. They're usually the worst sufferers in these little affairs,' the doctor said. 'I must say he took it pretty quietly.' (69)

To address birth as a 'little affair', even though the doctor has triumphantly finished handling a

difficult case of it, is more than a euphemistic understatement and could be taken as a manifestation of arrogance and self-aggrandizement. At the same time, he impinges on the Indian husband's personal pride and masculine authority by referring indirectly to the latter's complete lack of cooperation and contribution as 'pretty quietly'. Now adversity raises its ugly head to devour the doctor and his hapless son. At this juncture, the narrative shifts its voice of storytelling to a tone of tragedy. It is ironically Nick's boastful father, not the tacitum Indian father, who stumbles on one of 'these little affairs' and has a disastrous fall.

The doctor lifts up the blanket and reveals a horrifying scene to the eyes of everyone present in the shanty: death stares back impassively at him from the murky corner of the bed. The man called 'proud father' lies in a pool of his own blood, with his throat cut deeply across. It is apparent that he killed himself while his wife was laid down by other men and operated on by the white doctor. The medium of his death is seen in the blankets but no reason, no explanation, for his death is within sight. Encountered by something totally beyond his calculation and prediction, the doctor loses his poise and confidence for the first time. All he can barely manage to do at this horrifying juncture is to retain his paternal protection for his son and shout, 'Take Nick out of the shanty, George' (69). It is too late, and Nick has a full view of what his father wished him not to see. Inserted at the end of Section 2 is the final mention of a lamp, which casts a merciless light on the grisly sight:

Nick, standing in the door of the kitchen, had a good view of the upper bunk when his father, the lamp in his hand, tipped the Indian's head back. (69)

As for the other father, it is not enough to say that 'the man's love for his wife and his identification with her suffering had led to death' (Burhans, Jr., 21). He actually does something worthy of the epithet 'proud father' in its true sense and well matches the other father's feat. The context of the binary representation in the story places the Indian husband in a role of 'midwife of death' for Nick's sake while his counterpart toils hard as a 'surgeon of life' on behalf of his own son. The former impeccably enacts the stark reality of the end of life while the latter helps his flesh and blood come out into this world. Furthermore, reference should be made to the way the Indian father kills himself - without leaking any moan or producing any physical disturbance. Probably, two contrastive interpretations, one negative and the other positive, might be set forth about his unsung act. He lacks the strength to endure his wife's suffering and the shame of his own total inability to help her out. On the other hand, it can be surmised that he examines and assesses the situation on his own and bravely decides first to sacrifice himself for appeasement of the wrath of some supernatural power that seems to him to have been tormenting his wife and then to pave the

way to this world for his son. It remains open to interpretation who stamps a stronger mark on Nick's memory, but the possibility might be high that the mask of death and violence on the Indian father's face will remain indelible in the impressionable perception of the youth.

IV

The turbulent night passes off, disturbingly eventful for everyone and poignantly traumatic for Nick. Section 3 opens in clear contrast to the previous segments. In the midst of the fresh air of an early morning aglow with the first beams of the rising sun, Nick and his father are on their way back. Noticeable in the scene is Uncle George's absence, which the doctor lamely explains to Nick by saying, 'He'll turn up all right' (70). It is likely that, as one of the immediate witnesses to the suicide, the uncle volunteers to stay in the village to deal with the legal aspects of the death. In narratological terms, more significantly, his absence is attributed to the acute necessity of isolating the father and son from the rest of the cast. The story is focused on the pair in its preparation for a close. Another distinctive feature of the final section is detected in the prominence of conversation in proportion. Unlike the preceding scenes, the end of 'Indian Camp' is composed mostly of dialogue, a dialogue which passes between Nick and his father as before but, conducted in a different mode, serves to alter the rhythm of the narrative as well as the father-son relationship.

Back on the logging road that leads up to the lake, Doctor Adams, before anything else, sincerely apologizes to his son: T'm terribly sorry I brought you along, Nickie' (69). His candid words mark a definite step away from his elation at the end of the operation and even from his affectionate and protective stance in the first section. The transition from 'Nick' to 'Nickie' not only signals his gentler feelings but also chronicles much about the humiliation he has learnt over the night and his realization of his own vulnerability and fellow human beings'. Surprisingly, however, the doctor's feelings of penance and regret elicit little direct reaction from the hero: the chasm between the two grows further, at least further than the father anticipated. Nick is now preoccupied with looking inside and discussing with himself under the fresh influence of his extraordinary experience at the Indian camp. The father and son have both learnt new lessons but gained a different wisdom, by which the tables are turned between them as is shown in their subsequent conversation. Nick assumes the initiative and poses one question after another beginning with birth and delivery. When he moves on to the specific issue of the Indian's self-killing, the doctor, who sternly said to Nick before the operation, 'You don't know', replies:

'I don't know, Nick. He couldn't stand things, I guess. (69)

The man who at one time ensconced himself on the all-knowing throne and played a game of life or

death at will – and with panache - now confesses humbly that he does not know and that all he can do is to 'guess'. The dialogue comes to a halt with an ultimate question and a tentative answer that relies on contingencies and conditions:

'Is dying hard, Daddy?'

'No, I think it's pretty easy, Nick. It all depends.' (70)

The session of inquisition and elucidation thus tapers to a hesitant, indecisive conclusion. There is no more talk in the story. The real conclusion, which consummates this story of initiation, is enunciated in the hero's mind as a 'personal resolution'.

The final scene reverts to an objective depiction of the scenery of the lake in which the father and son travel together alone by rowboat. Their positioning in the boat is illustrated graphically again: 'They were seated in the boat, Nick in the stern, his father rowing' (70). No arm embraces Nick's shoulders any more: he has psychologically grown out of any paternal care and protection. The darkness of the night, accentuated by the dim light of lamps and candles, finally vanishes at the onset of the sun 'coming up over the hills' (70). Another day comes around to the pristine wilderness, to the serene lake, to the remote Indian camp. Another round of daily routines and activities will be carried out. For Nick, however, it is a new dawn endowed with special vigour and mirth, with a new awareness of the endless circulation of life in which a bass jumps out of the lake and 'mak[es] a circle in the water' (70). The celebration of life is crystallized into the dynamic leap of a single creature into the air. The joy of life is immediately transmitted to Nick's hand which feels the warmth of the water 'in the sharp chill of the morning' (70). Once again, the emotionless pictures of nature evoke the internal landscape with reserved but lingering vividness. A rich reservoir of life, the lake might be related with the maternal fertility of the Indian mother in opposition to the masculine principles and views embodied by Doctor Adams.

'Indian Camp' ends as it started – abruptly. Its narrative tone is shifted without notice. The sudden departure from dialogue and the brusque style entails a descriptive summary of Section 3 mingled with an inner declaration by the hero against self-immolation:

In the early morning on the lake sitting in the stern of the boat with his father rowing, he felt quite sure that he would never die. (70)

Due to his lack of time for reflecting on his own experiences, Nick's silent statement, too, sounds abrupt and also prototypical rather than stereotypical as is criticized in Harry Levin's citation of William Hazlitt's generalization: 'No young man ever thinks he shall die' (83-4). Yet nothing might, in some sense, be more effective for finishing a tale of initiation and securing an aftertaste of growth and change than the deviation from the established style at the very end. This small study

is concluded with another reminder of the perennial repetition of circular movements in human life: the arrival of morning at the end of the story, as Joseph DeFalco shrewdly contends, 'foreshadows the coming of night again' (163). It is pathetic as well as ironical that, many years after the composition of 'Indian Camp', Hemingway himself failed to live up to the resolution of his alter ego and put an end to his own life like the Indian husband.

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