STAGEDBOOKS · READING EDITION

Indian Camp

Ernest Hemingway · 1924

The complete text, as performed. With the cast, the atlas, and the notes from the margin. No pictures.

DRAMATIS PERSONÆ

NICK
the boy

HIS FATHER
the doctor

THE TWO INDIANS
one rows Nick and his father; the young Indian rows Uncle George

UNCLE GEORGE
smoking a cigar in the dark

AN OLD WOMAN
in the doorway, holding a lamp

A YOUNG INDIAN WOMAN
two days trying to have her baby

HER HUSBAND
in the upper bunk · an ax wound, three days old

A NOTE ON THE TEXT

Performed exactly as Hemingway published it in 1924. We do not alter the author's words.

"Indian Camp," Transatlantic Review, Paris, April 1924; collected in In Our Time, 1925. Public domain in the United States.

Ernest Hemingway

At the lake shore there was another rowboat drawn up. The two Indians stood waiting.[1]

1 INDIAN CAMP
First published in the Transatlantic Review, Paris, April 1924; collected in In Our Time, 1925. Hemingway was twenty-four.

Nick and his father got in the stern of the boat and the Indians shoved it off and one of them got in to row. Uncle George sat in the stern of the camp rowboat. The young Indian shoved the camp boat off and got in to row Uncle George.[2]

2 UNCLE GEORGE
Hemingway had an uncle George. The doctor is drawn from his father, Dr. Clarence Hemingway, an Oak Park physician.

The two boats started off in the dark. Nick heard the oar-locks of the other boat quite a way ahead of them in the mist. The Indians rowed with quick choppy strokes. Nick lay back with his father's arm around him. It was cold on the water. The Indian who was rowing them was working very hard, but the other boat moved further ahead in the mist all the time.[3]

3 THE LAKE
Unnamed in the story. The Nick Adams stories are set around Walloon Lake, near Petoskey, Michigan, where the Hemingways summered.

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

"Over to the Indian camp. There is an Indian lady very sick."[4]

4 THE INDIAN CAMP
The Ottawa and Ojibwe people of the Little Traverse Bay country, many of them working the lumber camps.

"Oh," said Nick.

Across the bay they found the other boat beached. Uncle George was smoking a cigar in the dark. The young Indian pulled the boat way up the beach. Uncle George gave both the Indians cigars.

They walked up from the beach through a meadow that was soaking wet with dew, following the young Indian who carried a lantern. Then they went into the woods and followed a trail that led to the logging road that ran back into the hills. It was much lighter on the logging road as the timber was cut away on both sides. The young Indian stopped and blew out his lantern and they all walked on along the road.[5]

> **5 THE LOGGING ROAD**
> *Northern Michigan's white pine was cut out by 1900; the roads and the stumps stayed.*

They came around a bend and a dog came out barking. Ahead were the lights of the shanties where the Indian bark-peelers lived. More dogs rushed out at them. The two Indians sent them back to the shanties. In the shanty nearest the road there was a light in the window. An old woman stood in the doorway holding a lamp.[6]

> **6 BARK-PEELERS**
> *Workers who stripped hemlock bark for the tanneries — hemlock tannin cured leather.*

Inside on a wooden bunk lay a young Indian woman. She had been trying to have her baby for two days. All the old women in the camp had been helping her. The men had moved off up the road to sit in the dark and smoke out of range of the noise she made. She screamed just as Nick and the two Indians followed his father and Uncle George into the shanty. She lay in the lower bunk, very big under a quilt. Her head was turned to one side. In the upper bunk was her husband. He had cut his foot very badly with an ax three days before. He was smoking a pipe. The room smelled very bad.[7]

> **7 AN AX WOUND**
> *Three days old. The nearest doctor lives across the lake.*

Nick's father ordered some water to be put on the stove, and while it was heating he spoke to Nick.

"This lady is going to have a baby, Nick," he said.

"I know," said Nick.

"You don't know," said his father. "Listen to me. What she is going through is called being in labor. The baby wants to be born and she wants it to be born. All her muscles are trying to get the baby born. That is what is happening when she screams."[8]

> 8 LABOR
> *The doctor's explanation to Nick is medically accurate.*

"I see," Nick said.

Just then the woman cried out.

"Oh, Daddy, can't you give her something to make her stop screaming?" asked Nick.

"No. I haven't any anaesthetic," his father said. "But her screams are not important. I don't hear them because they are not important."[9]

> 9 ANAESTHETIC
> *Ether and chloroform had been in surgical use since the 1840s. The doctor has brought none.*

The husband in the upper bunk rolled over against the wall.

The woman in the kitchen motioned to the doctor that the water was hot. Nick's father went into the kitchen and poured about half of the water out of the big kettle into a basin. Into the water left in the kettle he put several things he unwrapped from a handkerchief.

"Those must boil," he said, and began to scrub his hands in the basin of hot water with a cake of soap he had brought from the camp. Nick watched his father's hands scrubbing each other with the soap. While his father washed his hands very carefully and thoroughly, he talked.[10]

10 SCRUBBING
Antiseptic surgery — hands, instruments boiled — dates from Lister, 1867; the doctor observes it even here.

"You see, Nick, babies are supposed to be born head first but sometimes they're not. When they're not they make a lot of trouble for everybody. Maybe I'll have to operate on this lady. We'll know in a little while."

When he was satisfied with his hands he went in and went to work.

"Pull back that quilt, will you, George?" he said. "I'd rather not touch it."

Later when he started to operate Uncle George and three Indian men held the woman still. She bit Uncle George on the arm and Uncle George said, "Damn squaw bitch!" and the young Indian who had rowed Uncle George over laughed at him. Nick held the basin for his father. It all took a long time.[11]

11 SQUAW
Hemingway's word, printed as he wrote it in 1924. The text is performed unaltered.

His father picked the baby up and slapped it to make it breathe and handed it to the old woman.

"See, it's a boy, Nick," he said. "How do you like being an interne?"[12]

12 INTERNE
The older spelling of intern — a junior doctor in training.

Nick said, "All right." He was looking away so as not to see what his father was doing.

"There. That gets it," said his father and put something into the basin.

Nick didn't look at it.

"Now," his father said, "there's some stitches to put in. You can watch this or not, Nick, just as you like. I'm going to sew up the incision I made."

Nick did not watch. His curiosity had been gone for a long time.

His father finished and stood up. Uncle George and the three Indian men stood up. Nick put the basin out in the kitchen.

Uncle George looked at his arm. The young Indian smiled reminiscently.

"I'll put some peroxide on that, George," the doctor said.

He bent over the Indian woman. She was quiet now and her eyes were closed. She looked very pale. She did not know what had become of the baby or anything.

"I'll be back in the morning," the doctor said, standing up. "The nurse should be here from St. Ignace by noon and she'll bring everything we need."[13]

> 13 ST. IGNACE
> *Across the Straits of Mackinac, on the Upper Peninsula — the nurse would come by ferry; there was no bridge until 1957.*

He was feeling exalted and talkative as football players are in the dressing room after a game.

"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."[14]

> 14 A CAESARIAN WITH A JACK-KNIFE
> *A jack-knife is a folding pocket knife. Tapered gut leaders are fishing tackle — the fine catgut lengths that join line to hook.*

Uncle George was standing against the wall, looking at his arm.

"Oh, you're a great man, all right," he said.

"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 all pretty quietly."

He pulled back the blanket from the Indian's head. His hand came away wet. He mounted on the edge of the lower bunk with the lamp in one hand and looked in. The Indian lay with his face toward the wall. His throat had been cut from ear to ear. The blood had flowed

down into a pool where his body sagged the bunk. His head rested on his left arm. The open razor lay, edge up, in the blankets.[15]

> **15 THE OPEN RAZOR**
> *A straight razor — the blade every man of 1924 shaved with.*

"Take Nick out of the shanty, George," the doctor said.

There was no need of that. Nick, standing in the door of the kitchen, had a good view of the upper bunk when his father, the lamp in one hand, tipped the Indian's head back.

It was just beginning to be daylight when they walked along the logging road back toward the lake.

"I'm terribly sorry I brought you along, Nickie," said his father, all his post-operative exhilaration gone. "It was an awful mess to put you through."

"Do ladies always have such a hard time having babies?" Nick asked.

"No, that was very, very exceptional."

"Why did he kill himself, Daddy?"

"I don't know, Nick. He couldn't stand things, I guess."[16]

> **16 HE COULDN'T STAND THINGS**
> *Hemingway's father, Dr. Clarence Hemingway, killed himself in 1928 — four years after this story was written.*

"Do many men kill themselves, Daddy?"

"Not very many, Nick."

"Do many women?"

"Hardly ever."

"Don't they ever?"

"Oh, yes. They do sometimes."

"Daddy?"

"Yes."

"Where did Uncle George go?"

"He'll turn up all right."

"Is dying hard, Daddy?"

"No, I think it's pretty easy, Nick. It all depends."

They were seated in the boat, Nick in the stern, his father rowing. The sun was coming up over the hills. A bass jumped, making a circle in the water. Nick trailed his hand in the water. It felt warm in the sharp chill of the morning.[17]

> 17 A BASS
> *Smallmouth bass — the game fish of the northern Michigan lakes.*

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.



Northern Michigan · the country of the Nick Adams stories



The nurse from St. Ignace

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