
Summary

Part I

An Up-Hill Hike: The story is set in Michigan, the Two Hearted River being an actual stream which empties into Lake Superior. Nick Adams arrives by train at what was the town of Seney before it burnt down. He carries a heavy backpack and a case with fishing rods. He stands on a bridge and watches trout in the stream beneath. It has been a long time since he last saw trout. The observation is satisfactory, and Nick contentedly starts to hike:

‘It was hard work walking up-hill. His muscles ached and the day was hot, but Nick felt happy. He felt he had left everything behind, the need for thinking, the need to write, other needs. It was all back of him.’

Nick reaches the top of the hill. A view of the pine plain and the river in distance opens in front of him. He sits down to rest. He has a smoke and watches the scenery. He notices a grasshopper that is covered with black dust from living in the burnt-over land. He wonders how long the recovery after the fire will take.

In the Fern & Forest: Nick descends on the other side of the hill. He crosses the fire line, entering first the sweet fern and then the pine forest. He keeps on going to strike the river as far upstream as possible. He lays down to rest his back from the load. He falls asleep. When he wakes up, the evening is approaching, so he turns to hit the river. He walks for a while along the stream and watches trout feeding on insects settling on the surface. He looks for a level piece of ground to make his camp. When he finds a suitable spot, he pulls out the sweet fern bushes and spreads three blankets carefully on the ground. He pitches his tent and covers the entry with a cheesecloth against mosquitoes:

‘Nick was happy as he crawled inside the tent. He had not been unhappy all day. This was different though. Now things were done. There had been this to do. Now it was done. […] He had made his camp. He was settled. Nothing could touch him. It was a good place to camp. He was there, in the good place. He was in his home where he had made it.’

Camping Overnight: Nick hangs the pack with his supplies on a tree. He empties cans of pork and beans and spaghetti into a frying pan. He builds a fire and erects a wire grill over it. He is very hungry, and the meal satisfies him. He fetches water from the river to make some coffee. He recalls his friend Hopkins and the argument that they once had over the way of making coffee. He cannot remember which side he took but then he realizes that he is making the coffee in Hopkins’s way. Hopkins was a rich and successful young man who presumably got killed after having distributed his possessions among friends. Nick eats some canned apricots:

‘‘I’ve got a right to eat this kind of stuff, if I’m willing to carry it,’’ Nick said.’

He drinks the coffee, paying tribute to Hopkins. His mind starts to work, but he is tired so that he suppresses all disturbing thoughts easily. He goes to sleep.

Part II

Morning Preparations: Nick wakes up early in the morning. He is impatient to start to fish:

‘Nick was excited. He was excited by the early morning and the river. He was really too hurried to eat breakfast, but he knew he must.’

He builds a small fire and puts on a coffee pot. He sets off for the meadow to get some grasshoppers for bait. The grasshoppers are wet with dew and cannot jump until the sun warms them, so that Nick soon collects enough. There are several hundred of them under a log, and Nick knows that he will have plenty of grasshoppers every morning. He puts them in a bottle which he corks with a pine stick, leaving but a small hole to let the air in. Back in the camp, he mixes buckwheat flour with water and fries some flapjacks for breakfast.

First Tries: After finishing his breakfast and coffee, Nick wraps the remaining flapjack spread with apple butter in oiled paper for lunch. He also prepares two onion sandwiches for later. He joints the fishing rod, puts on the reel and threads the fly line. He ties a gut leader to the line and fastens a hook on its end. It is a shock when he steps into the cold stream. He puts a grasshopper on the hook, and soon a small trout strikes. He releases it, handling it carefully so as not to disturb its delicate mucus. He recalls when he used to fish with other men in one stream and saw many dead fish floating around. Some fishermen are careless enough to touch live fish with a dry hand, which disturbs the mucus and kills the fish in effect. Therefore Nick prefers fishing alone.

Failure & Success: The next strike is a huge trout, so huge that it breaks the leader. Nick feels disappointment:

‘His mouth dry, his heart down, Nick reeled in. He had never seen so big a trout. There was a heaviness, a power not to be held, and then the bulk of him, as he jumped. […] Nick’s hand was shaky. […] The thrill had been too much. He felt, vaguely, a little sick, as though it would be better to sit down.’

He climbs from the stream on a meadow and sits down on some logs. He has a smoke and his disappointment gradually vanes. On the next try he catches one good trout. He puts it into a long flour sack which hangs from his shoulders in the water. He moves further downstream in the shallows. He tries to fish a deep hole in the stream. Trout strikes but the line gets hooked in the branches and the trout escapes. He catches another big trout later and does not care to get more.

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Avoiding the Swamp: The day starts to get hot, so Nick climbs on a log in the midst of the stream which is partly in a pleasant shade. He has his lunch. He smokes and considers the swamp lying ahead. Swamps are difficult to fish because the fisherman is clumsy when standing in deep water and the hook keeps on getting stuck in branches under the water. Nick decides not to go for the swamp at present:

‘He wished he had brought something to read. He felt like reading. He did not feel like going on into the swamp. […] It the swamp fishing was a tragic adventure. Nick did not want it. He didn’t want to go up the stream any further today.’

Nick cleans the trout and wraps it in his sack. He packs his things and wades back to the bank. For today, he is content and starts to head for his camp:

‘He looked back. The river just showed through the trees. There were plenty of days coming when he could fish the swamp.’

Analysis

Formal Features: The story relies on building up the atmosphere rather than developing outward action. It describes in minute detail each of Nick’s activities, from making the camp to cooking his breakfast. It dwells on descriptions of the scenery, the forest, the stream and trout. Nick’s fishing technique is described in great length, including very specific details and facts only known to lovers of the fishing sport. The protagonist Nick Adams recurs in many of Hemingway’s stories and is often regarded as a semi-autobiographical character. The story is nevertheless narrated in the third person.

Possible Interpretation: The protagonist deliberately withdraws from civilization to spend some time alone by camping and fishing. He seems to have suffered some kind of a negative, even frustrating experience, possibly war experience, with which he needs to come to terms. His mind seems to be haunted and in need of a rest which he seeks to find in solitude. The protagonist may be figuratively compared to the blackened grasshopper, both are negatively affected by their surroundings and need some time to recover. Nick enjoys the simple conditions of camping but he does all to make himself comfortable. His heavy backpack contains several blankets, canned food, even a wire grill. He finds pleasure in satisfying his basic needs: to eat when he is hungry, to sleep when he is tired. He is intent on not disturbing the soothing experience unless necessary: it is up to him to decide whether or not to fish the difficult swamp, and he is content to avoid it.

Works Cited