

ANALYSIS

“Alpine Idyll” (1926)

Ernest Hemingway

(1899-1961)

“In some of the hop-skip-and-jump critiques of Hemingway, the reader is likely to find ‘Alpine Idyll’ classified as a skiing story.... Chekhov-like ‘Alpine Idyll’ [is] an apparently simple tale in which two American sportsmen have gone skiing in Switzerland. On the way to a village inn in a Swiss valley, the Americans pass a cemetery where a burial has just taken place. When they reach the inn, they drink at one table; at another table, the village sexton splits a bottle of wine with a Swiss peasant from the lonely mountain-country up above. When the peasant leaves to go to another tavern down the street, the Americans hear the story behind the burial.

In the winter the peasant’s wife died. Since he could not bury her, he placed the body in his woodshed. There it froze stiff in the intense mountain cold. Whenever the peasant went to get wood to keep himself warm, he found that the body was in his way. So he stood it up against the wall. Later, since he often went for wood at night, carrying a lantern, and since the open jaws of the corpse provided a convenient high place, he took to hanging his lantern in his dead wife’s mouth. Evidently he thought nothing of it at the time. By spring, when he was able to bring the body to the valley for burial, the mouth had become noticeably ragged. This is the shocking anecdote under which the story is built.

Actually, however, the story is not ‘about’ the peasant. Its subject, several times emphasized early in the narrative, is ‘not ever doing anything too long.’ The Americans have been trying some spring skiing high in the Silvretta. Much as they love the sport, they have found it a queerly unpleasant experience. May is too late in the season to be up there. ‘I was a little tired of skiing,’ says one. ‘We had stayed too long.... I was glad to be down, away from the unnatural high mountain spring, into this May morning in the valley.’ When the story of the peasant and his wife is told, the idea of the ‘unnatural’ and the idea of ‘not ever doing anything too long’ are both driven home with a special twist of the knife.

For the peasant has lived too long in an unnatural situation; his sense of human dignity and decency has temporarily atrophied. When he gets down into the valley, where it is spring and people are living naturally and wholesomely, he sees how far he has strayed from the natural and the wholesome, and he is then deeply ashamed of himself. For spring in the valley has been established by the skier’s internal monologue as the ‘natural’ place. In the carefully wrought terms of the story, the valley stands in opposition to the unnatural high mountain spring. The arrival of this season in the area near his lonely hut has activated the peasant to bring his wife’s body down to the valley for burial.

But for him the descent has been especially meaningful—nothing less, in short, than a coming to judgment before the priest and the sexton. Here again, the point is made possible by careful previous preparation. One of the skiers has commented on the oppressiveness of the spring sun in the high Silvretta. ‘You could not get away from the sun.’ It is a factual and true statement of the skier’s feeling of acute discomfort when the open staring eye of the sun overheated him and spoiled the snow he wished to ski on. But it is also a crafty symbolic statement which can later be brought to bear on the unspoken shame of the peasant, who could not get away from the open staring eye of the ‘natural’ people who in a sense brought him to judgment. Like ‘Alpine Idyll,’ many of the stories deserve to be read with as much awareness, and as closely, as one would read a good modern poem.”

Carlos Baker
Hemingway: The Writer as Artist
(Princeton 1952-73) 119-21