

ANALYSIS

“The Battler” (1925)

Ernest Hemingway

(1899-1961)

“People who complain about the sordid nature of many of Hemingway’s stories seldom if ever cite this one, perhaps because the unpleasantness is more in the undertones and in things not said than in the outer events which, though not happy, are not entirely extraordinary in our time. But if the subtleties are drawn out and examined, ‘The Battler’ is as important as anything its author ever wrote.

It opens with an adolescent Nick who has left home and is out on his own for the first time. He has been ‘riding the rods’ and has just been knocked off a moving freight by a brakeman. He is limping up the tracks, heading for the next town on foot, when in crossing a bridge he sees below him in the darkness a campfire with a man sitting beside it. Nick, in answer to the man’s question, reveals that he got his black eye from the brakeman.... In the firelight Nick makes out the stranger’s face, which was queerly formed and mutilated.... The man notices how the boy is staring and obligingly exhibits one cauliflower ear and a stump where the other ear should have been. This makes the boy ‘a little sick.’ The small man reveals that he is Ad Francis, an ex-prizefighter Nick has heard of, and that he is ‘not quite right’ in the head, is ‘crazy.’ He also demonstrates that his heart thumps only forty times a minute. A Negro named Bugs then appears with some ham and eggs, which he fries in the fire. This is a very large Negro who is extremely soft-spoken and polite to his punch-drunk companion, and to Nick, whom he addresses with oppressive deference as ‘Mister Adams’...

The men and the boy are eating when suddenly the situation, which has been growing somewhat uneasy, becomes extremely uncomfortable. Ad, who has been sitting in complete silence for some time, starts without provocation to pick a fight with Nick....The battler approaches the boy and the situation all of a sudden is saved by the Negro, who creeps up behind Ad, sets himself, and taps him across the base of the skull with a cloth-wrapped blackjack. Bugs then tenderly treats the unconscious man with water until his eyes close; while he lies there still unconscious the boy and the Negro talk by the fire. This, Bugs explains smiling, is the way he has to ‘change’ Ad from time to time—‘he won’t remember nothing of it.’ As they drink coffee the Negro sketches in Ad’s past, the unpalatable decline of his career and intellect, and reveals that the two men met in jail, and have been together ever since, ‘seeing the country.’

After this conversation the story draws to a close. Bugs says that he should wake Ad now, and with a graceful apology he tells Nick that he’d better move along so that it won’t be necessary to tap Ad again. He gives the boy directions and another sandwich to take along—‘all this in a low, smooth, polite nigger voice.’ Nick walks out of the firelight and back to the tracks where he stops to listen.... The story ends with Nick starting away up the tracks. For the first time in the book we get an obvious word about what the *effect* of what he has seen, done and heard has had on him: Nick has been so stunned by this twosome that he walked quite a distance before he ‘found he had a ham sandwich in his hand and put it in his pocket.’

Clearly, like ‘Indian Camp,’ this is a story of a boy coming in contact with violence and evil, and here for a moment the force of the impression has been registered. The story is also, however, among the most suggestive of Hemingway’s; there is more that is sinister and unpleasant about this gentle, large, courteous and thoughtful black-jacking colored man than may at first meet the eye, and it can have only one very probable interpretation. The tender, motherly, male-nursing Bugs is too comfortable in the relationship with the little, demented ex-fighter. The companionship which started as a prison friendship and which is self-sufficient financially (the couple is sent money by Ad’s ex-manager and wife) seems self-sufficient in other ways. Although Nick understands no more than that something is very wrong here, the reader may get the never-stated but potently suggested notion that it is not only Ad who is queer. This theme, which crops up in five other stories, in all but one of the novels, and violently, obsessively, in his posthumously published recollections of Paris, is normally used by Hemingway as it is used here—a kind of ultimate in evil... This

atmosphere is added to the violence of getting punched off a moving train at night, and nearly being beaten by an ex-champion, and meeting a highly polished Negro hobo who habitually blackjacks his companion in sweet good humor and then nurses him back to consciousness with a love that was present even in the blow...

Hemingway surely had in mind Ad Wolgast, the 'Michigan Wildcat,' who became lightweight champion of the world in 1910 but lost most of his mind in the process, spent away a fortune and was declared legally incompetent in 1917. Blind but still shadow-boxing, he died in the psychopathic ward of the Stockton (California) State Hospital in 1955."

Philip Young
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"The black traveling with the 'battler'—Mr. Adolph 'Ad' Francis, former champion prizefighter now very much down on his luck—is known only as 'Bugs.' He is an ex-con, as is Ad. Indeed, it was in prison, Bugs tells us, that he first met Ad, looking him up on the outside after his own later release. He took to the little man, the beat-up fighter, liking him well enough to take over his care by becoming his companion in a world of drifters and marginal males. As he says to the young boy visiting this odd twosome in their temporary camp, 'right away I liked him and when I got out I looked him up. He likes to think I'm crazy and I don't mind. I like to be with him and I like seeing the country and I don't have to commit no larceny to do it. I like living like a gentleman.' Bugs has worked out what is a routine but mutually beneficial relationship with the brain-damaged ex-con.

What landed them in prison to begin with is of some importance. Ad was 'busting people all the time' after his wife had left him, while Bugs was 'in for cuttin' a man.' We learn nothing from Bugs about his reason for cutting the man, but we do learn from Bugs that Ad's marital problems might have had their source in certain bizarre circumstances stretching back to his time in the prize ring. The woman he married had been his manager, and it was always being 'written up in the papers all about brothers and sisters and how she loved her brother and how he loved his sister,' Bugs tells Nick, 'and then they got married in New York and that made a lot of unpleasantness.' Nick remembers this much. But what Bugs goes on to say is unexpected: 'Of course they wasn't brother and sister no more than a rabbit, but there was a lot of people didn't like it either way and they commenced to have disagreements, and one day she just went off and never come back.'

But then Bugs, who admits to having seen the woman a couple of times, slyly hints that there is a closeness in his relationship to Ad that might otherwise escape notice. 'She was an awful good looking woman,' he admits; then he adds: 'Looked enough like him to be twins. He wouldn't be bad looking without his face all busted.' And a bit later, having enjoyed making this revelation, Bugs repeats it in different words: 'She's a mighty fine woman.... She looks enough like him to be his own twin.' Besides revealing affection and personal feeling, perhaps, these observations suggest that there exists a strong physical attraction between the two partners in this home-making couple.

To put Bug's views of Ad's good looks into perspective, we need only recall that the narrative tells us that he has a 'mutilated face,' that in this 'misshapen[ed]' face, the 'nose was sunken,' the 'eyes were slits,' and the lips were 'queer shaped.' In fact, 'Nick did not perceive all this at once, he only saw the man's face was queerly formed and mutilated. It was like putty in color. Dead looking in the firelight.' There is no indication given that Nick sees any beauty in Ad, but obviously, as we subsequently learn, Bugs does. Nor does Ad's behavior serve to enhance his attractiveness, for even when he takes off his cap, he does so to call attention to the fact that he has 'only one ear. It was thickened and tight against the side of his head. Where the other ear should have been there was a stump.'

It is a subtle stroke on Hemingway's part when later, as Bugs checks to see that he has not hurt him badly by 'tapp[ing]' him with the blackjack, the narration tells us that Bugs 'splashed water with his hand on the man's face and pulled his ears gently. The eyes closed.' Note that Nick had seen that Ad had only 'one' ear, but Bugs, ministering to the unconscious Ad, pulls gently at his 'ears.' Bugs simply sees Ad differently and more attractively. Is it going too far to say that he seems him with a lover's eyes? After all,

he has just 'tapped' Ad 'across the base of the skull' with a 'cloth-wrapped blackjack' that Bugs seems to carry with him for just this purpose, explaining his actions to Nick: 'I didn't know how well you could take care yourself and, anyway, I didn't want you to hurt him or mark him up no more than he is.'

The received reading of 'The Battler' views Nick as the key to the story's motivation and purpose. Quite simply it is Nick's reaction to what happens to him that is of primary importance to the way the reader focuses on the narrative. In this sense, even though there is no direct description of the emotions that Nick feels or any statement as to how and what such an encounter finally means to Nick's emotional, psychological, or moral development, the reader is expected to acknowledge that some change has either occurred or, more likely, is occurring. Sent away from the warm fire in the clearing that belongs to Bugs and Ad, Nick climbs the embankment and starts up the tracks. That the whole experience has deeply impressed him we are to get from the simple statement that now follows—Nick 'found he had a ham sandwich in his hand and put it in his pocket.' 'Found,' of course, is the key word here, springing the larger meaning that the author wanted his tale to convey still another stage in Nick's education.

In 1925, shortly after he had written 'The Battler' to fill out his collection of stories for the publisher Horace Liveright, Hemingway boasted to John Dos Passos—employing the tough-guy parlance he so commonly affected—of his 'swell new Nick story about a pug and a coon.' He had invented the circumstances, he insisted. But the principals—Ad and Bugs—are based on real-life prototypes, argues Hemingway's biographer [Carlos Baker]: 'The battler was a punch-drunk prize-fighter named Ad Francis, whose personality was based on two real-life fighters known to Ernest: Ad Wolgast and Bat Nelson. Ad Francis's fictional companion, a polite and patient Negro named Bugs, was modeled on an actual Negro trainer who had looked after Wolgast in the period of his decline.' Perhaps Ad and Bugs were drawn from life, but I would look elsewhere for their prototypes. I would suggest the possibility that the principal sources of this powerful story are literary.

The withholding from the reader of the true nature of the relationship of two males—one white and the other black—played out before the eyes of a third male who is, either by age or temperament, an innocent, is the basic structure of that most trenchant American parable of white-black relations, Herman Melville's *Benito Cereno*. Recall that emblematic scene in which the great American naif, Amasa Delano, witnesses the black Babo's ministrations to his captain, Benito Cereno, as he shaves him with a straight razor.... Captain Delano notices that Benito Cereno is not completely in control of his emotions.... (Bugs, Mr. Francis' friend, it will be recalled, was also a 'barber' of sorts, having gone to prison for 'cuttin' a man,' that is to say, for drawing blood.) Only later does the good Captain Delano discover what the reader already knows: that the razor in Babo's hand is a weapon, used in that situation to intimidate the imprisoned captain. In short, the relationship between the captain and his slave Babo is just the opposite of what it appears to be to the American innocent, who sees it even as Melville's narrator does, even as is the relationship of Bugs to Ad—the expected relationship of black to white in America in the nineteenth century and well into the twentieth, in which the white dominates....

In conclusion let me return to Hemingway's narration at the point just after Bugs has assured himself that he has not hurt his friend, Mr. Francis, by once again striking him across the base of the skull. 'He's all right,' he said. 'There's nothing to worry about. I'm sorry, Mr. Adams.' 'It's all right.' Of course, the reader already knows, as Nick is just beginning to discover that there is something to worry about. That things are not all right. Then Nick looks down, sees the blackjack and picks it up. 'It had a flexible handle and was limber in his hand,' he notices. 'Worn black leather with a handkerchief wrapped around the heavy end. 'That's a whalebone handle,' the negro smiled. 'They don't make them any more.' That smile, I would venture, is Melvillian. It is the smile of a black who, too, would be seen as 'less a servant than a devoted companion'."

George Monteiro

"'This is My Pal Bugs': Ernest Hemingway's 'The Battler'"

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