

Old Man at the Bridge

An old man with steel -- rimmed spectacles and very dusty clothes sat by the side of the road. There was a pontoon bridge across the river and carts, trucks, men, women and children were crossing it. The mule-drawn carts staggered up the steep bank from the bridge with soldiers helping to push against the spokes of the wheels. The truck ground up and away heading out of it all. The peasants plodded along in the ankle-deep dust. But the old man sat there without moving. He was too tired to go any further.

It was my business to cross the bridge, explore the bridgehead beyond and find out to what point the enemy had advanced. I did this and returned over the bridge. There were not so many carts now and very few people on foot but the old man was still there.

‘Where do you come from ?’ I asked him.

‘From San Carlos,’ he said, and smiled.

That was his native town and so it gave him pleasure to mention it and he smiled.

‘I was taking care of animals,’ he explained.

‘Oh,’ I said, not quite understanding.

‘Yes,’ he said, ‘I stayed, you see, taking care of animals. I was the last one to leave the town of San Carlos.’

He did not look like a shepherd nor a herdsman and I looked at his black dusty clothes and his grey dusty face and his steel-rimmed spectacles and said, ‘What animals were they ?’

‘Various animals,’ he said, and shook his head. ‘I had to leave them.’

‘What animals were they ?’ I asked.

‘There were two goats and a cat and then there were four pairs of pigeons.’

‘And you had to leave them ?’ I asked.

‘Yes. Because of the artillery. The captain told me to go because of the artillery.’

‘And you have no family ?’ I asked, watching the far end of the bridge where a few last carts were hurrying down the slope of the bank.

‘No,’ he said, ‘only the animals. The cat, of course, will be all right. A cat can look out for itself, but I cannot think what will become of the others’.

‘What politics have you ?’ I asked.

'I am without politics,' he said. 'I am seventy-six years old. I have come twelve kilometres now and I think now I can go no farther.'

'This is not a good place to stop,' I said. 'If you can make it, there are trucks up the road where it forks for Tortosa.'

'I will wait a while,' he said, 'and then I will go. Where do the trucks go?'

'Towards Barcelona,' I told him.

'I know of no one in that direction,' he said, 'but thank you very much. Thank you again very much.'

He looked at me very blankly and tiredly, then said, having to share his worry with someone, 'The cat will be all right. I am sure. There is no need to be unquiet about the cat. But the others. Now what do you think about the others?'

'Why, they'll probably come through it all right.'

'You think so?'

'Why not?' I said, watching the far bank where now there were no carts.

'But what will they do under the artillery when I was told to leave because of the artillery?'

'Did you leave the dove cage unlocked?' I asked.

'Yes.'

'Then they'll fly.'

'Yes, certainly they'll fly. But the others. It's better not to think about the others,' he said.

'If you are rested I would go,' I urged, 'Get up and try to walk now.'

'Thank you', he said and got to his feet, swayed from side to side and then sat down backwards in the dust.

'I was only taking care of animals,' he said dully, but no longer to me. 'I was only taking care of animals.'

There was nothing to do about him. It was Easter Sunday and the Fascists were advancing towards the Ebro. It was a grey overcast day with a low ceiling so their planes were not up. That and the fact that cats know how to look after themselves was all the good luck that old man would ever have.

- ERNEST HEMINGWAY

About the Author :

Ernest Hemingway is an important name in modern American fiction. The appealing style of his novels and short stories has influenced the development of modern prose. His famous novel is “Farewell to Arms”. He was awarded Noble Prize for literature in 1954.

About the Story :

It is a touching story about refugees who were displaced during the Spanish civil war. It was fought between the Republicans and the Spanish Fascists. In this story, a soldier is at a bridge and notices an old man who is not moving, even though he had no wish to play a part in the war. The narrator feels sad about the old man’s fate and also of the other individuals who had to suffer during wars.

Glossary

pontoon bridge	-	river bridge supported by floating boats
staggered	-	stood or walked unsteadily
steep	-	rising or falling sharply
spokes	-	bars or wirerods that connect the hub of a wheel to its outer edge.
explore	-	find out
artillery	-	large guns mounted on wheels
forks	-	divides into two parts
urge	-	request someone earnestly
swayed	-	moved unsteadily
Easter Sunday	-	a Christian festival which falls on the third day after Good Friday.
overcast	-	darkened by clouds

COMPREHENSION

(A) Tick the correct alternative :

1. The old man with _____ spectacles.
- | | |
|-------------------|-------------------|
| (a) golden rimmed | (b) silver rimmed |
| (c) steel rimmed | (d) plastic |

2. The old man had to leave his animals because of _____.
 (a) heavy rainfall (b) disaster
 (c) earth-quake (d) artillery
3. The old man left the _____ unlocked.
 (a) house (b) office
 (c) dove cage (d) store room
4. Which animals did old man suppose to be alright?
 (a) goats (b) cat
 (c) pigeons (d) all of the above

(B) State whether the statements given below are True (T) or False (F) :

1. The old man's native town was Tortosa. []
2. The old man wore untidy clothes blackened with dust. []
3. The trucks were advancing towards Barcelona. []
4. The dove cage had been left unlocked. []
5. The narrator felt sad about the old man's fate. []

(C) Answer the following questions in 20-25 words each :

1. Where did the old man come from ?
2. Which animal could take care of itself ?
3. What was the age of the old man ?
4. On which day did the incident happen?
5. How can you say that the old man was the last person to leave the town ?

(D) Answer the following questions in 30-40 words each :

1. Why did the old man sit by the side of the road ?
2. Why could he not go any further ?
3. Why did the oldman have to leave his town ?
4. What did the old man say at the end ?

(E) Answer the following questions in 60-80 words each :

1. What activities were taking place on the pontoon bridge ?

2. What was the narrator's business at the bridge ?
3. How did the old man look like ?

ACTIVITY :

Imagine yourself as a companion of the old man. Analyse the problems faced by up-rooted people who became refugees as a result of the war. Narrate your experiences in the form of a diary entry.
