

## Love and War in the Pages of Mr Hemingway

by Percy Huchisson, review of *A Farewell To Arms*, *New York Times*, Sept 1929

AS IN 'The Sun Also Rises', Ernest Hemingway lays the scene of his new novel in Europe. But, unlike the earlier novel, he is not concerned with the aftermath of the war, but with certain years and phases of the war itself. Consequently, 'A Farewell to Arms', if it is to be given classification, belongs to the rapidly crowding shelf of war novels. Later literary historians will doubtless concern themselves with these novels as a group; will view them as a group phenomenon. They will dissect the several specimens, and point out differences and similarities. It is too early for this, and even if it could be of interest, it lies beyond the scope of contemporary review. Suffice it to say, however, that Mr Hemingway has concerned himself with a phase of the war not yet much used, the collapse of the Italian front in 1917, and that, in consequence, so far as his novel is to be regarded solely as a war book, it has the freshness of depiction in a new field.

Dramatic as are the pages dealing with the Caporetto debacle, the war, however, is but a background for the real story, and this in spite of the fact that this story is itself an outgrowth of the war. The love of Lieutenant Henry for the nurse Catherine Barkley, a love so great that Henry eventually deserts, as he puts it, 'declares separate peace', could only have come in the war and out of the war. The story of this attachment is poetic, idyllic, tragic. The part which will sit least comfortably with the reader is Henry's desertion. For, however humorous may be the Lieutenant's gloss, and how much he may have been justified in his own eyes by the shooting by the 'battle police' of officers who failed to hold their troops in line (assuming that this was done), nevertheless, so great a fetish is heroism, that, however often it may not be practiced in fact, one cringes slightly at an author's flouting it in fiction in which he had already focused the attention on a lyric relationship.

And yet perhaps with the mention of this as a debatable point one goes to the very core of what may be termed the Hemingway school. For this school admits the validity of no fetish, in life or in art. It prides itself on its cold reportorial aloofness. And men did desert during the war. Moreover, Lieutenant Henry was in the ambulance service, not a line officer. It is all one, therefore, with fiction's employment of Caesarian operations and the mention of obscure anatomical parts. It is the new art.

There is in 'A Farewell to Arms' no change from the narrative method of 'The Sun Also Rises' and 'Men Without Women.' Ernest Hemingway did not invent the method, which is chiefly to be characterized by the staccato nature of sentences (an effort at reproducing universal conversational habit), and its rigid exclusion of all but the most

necessary description. Yet if Hemingway was not the inventor of the method, tentative gropings toward such a manner having been made by many of his immediate predecessors, the author of 'A Farewell to Arms' has, in his several books, made it so strikingly his own that it may bear his name, and is likely to henceforward. The method has its advantages, and also its disadvantages.

The chief result is a sort of enamel lustre imparted to the story as a whole, not precisely an iridescence, but a white light, rather, that pales and flashes, but never warms. And because it never warms, or never seems to warm, the really human in Hemingway (and there is a great deal in Hemingway that is human) fails of its due. It is not impossible that Ernest Hemingway has developed his style to the extreme to which he carries it because in it he finds a sort of protective covering for a nature more sensitive than he would have one know. A Victorian telling the story of Henry and Catherine would have waxed sentimental; he would have sought the tears of his reader. And he would surely himself have shed tears as he wrote. We do not attempt to say how much Mr Hemingway may have been affected by his narrative; but it is certain he has no desire to see his readers weep. Mr Hemingway's manner does not seem to be quite an enduring thing, any more than was Victorian heaviness enduring. But the Hemingway manner is arresting purely as craftsmanship. And if its extreme naturalism borders dangerously on unnaturalism, for the reason that the effect of the printed pages must be, perforce, different from the effect of speech, then it behooves other craftsmen to find the proper modification. Yet it expresses the spirit of the moment admirably. In fact, seldom has a literary style so precisely jumped with the time.

The Caporetto retreat, which forms the background for an entire portion of the book, and furnishes the action, is a masterly piece of descriptive narration. Not static description (which Hemingway abhors), and not merely action, but a subtle weaving of description and narration, this has all the movement of the retreat, its confusion, its horrors, and also makes the reader see the retreat. It is the longest thing of its kind that Hemingway has done, although there is something resembling its craft in the bullfight pages of 'The Sun Also Arises'. The effect of the whole, the cumulative effect of the whole, with the devastating effect of the debacle on the minds and the morale of those engulfed by it, cannot be rendered by quotation. It is therefore only in the hope of suggesting something of the book's effectiveness here that quotation is attempted. This is but a fragment, of course:

*As we moved out through the town it was empty in the rain and the dark except for the columns of troops and guns that were going down the main street. There were many trucks, too, and some carts going on the other streets and converging on the main road. The troops, the motor trucks, the horse-drawn carts and the guns were in one wide slow-moving column. The truck ahead*

*stopped. The whole column was stopped. It started again and we went a little farther, then stopped.'*

They come to a river. There is still a bridge across, and over the bridge all move. And at the other end are the 'battle police', with their orders to shoot officers who had abandoned their troops.

*'At the far end of the bridge there were officers and carabinieri. I saw them silhouetted against the sky-line. The officers were scrutinizing every one in the column. They took some one out just as we came opposite. I saw the man. He was a Lieutenant Colonel. I saw the stars in the box on his sleeve as they flashed a light on him. His hair was gray.'*

The man, who had commanded troops in the advance of the Summer, and, when the Austrians, aided by German divisions, broke through, had been borne along in the rout, is questioned.

*'If you are going to shoot me,' the Lieutenant Colonel said, 'please shoot me at once. The questioning is stupid.'*

*'He made the sign of the cross. The officers spoke together. One wrote something on a pad of paper.'*

*'Abandoned his troops. Ordered to be shot,' he said.'*

There will be debate as to whether 'A Farewell to Arms' is a finer piece of work than 'The Sun Also Rises.' And there will be cogent arguments advanced on either side. On the surface, the newer story is more effective than the earlier novel. There is more drama, the movement is more nearly continuous and better sustained. And the story of the love between the English nurse and the American ambulance officer, as hapless as that of Romeo and Juliet, is a high achievement in what might be termed the new romanticism. And yet for the present reviewer 'The Sun Also Rises' touches a note which Hemingway caught once, and, in the very nature of the thing, cannot touch again. In the attachment of Lady Brett for her physically incapacitated lover there is a profound and genuine affection which has something of inspiration. And the pathos of Lady Brett, that she can maintain this only by derelictions, evidences psychology so subtle that it has hitherto evaded the literary worker, and been not always discernible to the scientifically schooled. Others could have done the Caporetto retreat, though perhaps not so dramatically; and others would have imagined the lyric love of 'A Farewell to Arms', although perhaps not carrying it through so poetically. 'The Sun Also Rises', as it seems to this writer, at least, is more nearly unique as a document and as a novel. Yet he would not wish to lose, therefore, 'The Farewell to Arms.' It is a moving and beautiful book.