

Review of The Green Hills Of Africa

by John Chamberlain,
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ERNEST HEMINGWAY went to Africa to shoot the bounding kudu and the ungainly rhinoceros and to reply to his critics. The result is 'Green Hills of Africa'.

'Truly, Mr Hemingway is the strangest literary controversialist on record. When Jules Romains, for example, wishes to answer those who have damned his latest novel or his style or his point of view, he writes a pamphlet. The method is too effete for Mr Hemingway, who cannot engage in dialectics without first sailing for Cape Town or chartering a fishing smack or hiring a guide to the caribou country. Once he has reached a sufficiently wild part of the world, he will sight along his gun barrel, pull the trigger, drop a hippopotamus at forty rods, and remark: 'Writers should work alone. They should see each other only after their work is done, and not too often then. Otherwise they become like writers in New York. All angleworms in a bottle, trying to derive knowledge and nourishment from their own contact and from the bottle'.

I am only slightly exaggerating. For Mr Hemingway's 'Green Hills of Africa' is pretty evenly divided between big game lore and salon controversy. His hunting companions are thirsty for two things: animals and lectures on the literary art. 'Tell me,' says one of the Hemingway safari as he draws a bead on a hartebeest or a coiling python, 'just what do you think of Melville?' 'Oh, Melville,' says Hemingway, as he empties his revolver into a whooping crane; 'we can discover from Melville some actual things, such as whales, but this knowledge is wrapped in the rhetoric like plums in a pudding. Occasionally it is there, alone, unwrapped in pudding, and it is good'.

Thus Mr Hemingway murders one whooping crane and the symbolism of 'Moby Dick' in the same motion, so to speak. But the bloody business does not stop here. Sometimes dispensing with grammar, Mr Hemingway decimates the fauna of Kenya, Tanganyika, Northern Rhodesia and the Belgian Congo along with Emerson, Hawthorne, Whittier and Thoreau. The carnage is frightful. 'Ping,' goes the bullet from Mr Hemingway's rifle and another black-maned lion bites the dust. 'Zingo,' goes an epigram from Mr Hemingway's mouth and the reputation of Thomas Wolfe curls up and dies.

As for the Hemingway taxidermy, it is ambidextrous. With one hand he tears out the entrails of a gazelle and strips the skin clean; with the other he rips the hide from Malcom Cowley or Waldo Frank.

It is the most literary hunting trip on record. A lecture agency could make a fortune out of the words which Hemingway addresses to the empty veldt. And the slaughter is not limited to animals and literary men. 'Doumi. Kubwa Sana,' Mr Hemingway shouts to his beaters in Swahili or Michiganese, 'let me tell you about the New Deal in America. It is

some sort of Y.M.C.A. show. Starry-eyed _____'s spending money that somebody will have to pay. Everybody in our town quit work to go on relief. Fishermen all turned carpenters. Reverse of the Bible'.

After reading 'Green Hills of Africa' one would like to have a look at Mr Hemingway's museum. One wonders how the mounted carcass of Franklin D. Roosevelt looks in the company of the mounted head of a kudu. Does the bull sable make as resplendent a specimen as the stuffed skin of the lady author who stole the Hemingway method of writing short stories? And the Hemingway zoo ought to be amusing. Hemingway doesn't tell what animals he brought back alive from Africa. But the only literary specimens that he captures on the hoof are John Dos Passos and Tolstoy and Joyce, whom he refuses to kill. Possibly he believes in observing the game laws.

'Green Hills of Africa' is not one of the major Hemingway works. Mr Hemingway has so simplified his method that all his characters talk the lingo perfected in 'The Sun Also Rises,' whether these characters are British, Austrian, Arabian, Ethiopian or Kikuyu. Pop, a professional guide who has been hunting ever since Theodore Roosevelt listened to Selous's first whopper, converses like a Chicago gunman. Karl, who risked all for the kudu, if not the kudon, babbles with the accent of Hemingway's Wyoming shepherds. Even M'Cola, the gunbearer, Droopy, the native guide, and Kamau, the driver, echo the Left Bank of Paris. But at length a great light dawns. Can it be that Hemingway has been writing pidgin English from the start?

There are some memorable passages in 'Green Hills of Africa'. For example, the one in which Hemingway draws the analogy between the Gulf Stream and the stream of human history. Or the passage about Tolstoy and the Russian countryside. Or the section on the skies of Spain, Italy and Northern Michigan. And doubtless the description of the African terrain is accurate. But I, for one, grow very weary of monosyllables about stalking the kudu. Hemingway has no natural love for the animal pageant; he is only interested in killing cleanly. He is not a W. H. Hudson or a Henry Williamson or a Brooks Atkinson; he is simply a bullfight aficionado looking for variations on death in the afternoon.

And this cult of blind action, this glorification of the dangerous life of hunting and fishing, is keeping Hemingway from deserving people, from writing about the life of his times. His animus against 'New York literary men' is part of a general animus against ideas. He is fretful when his contemporaries get interested in philosophical and moral problems. For all his talk about seeing things 'truly,' he is not really interested in the underlying aspects, the fundamental meaning, of the human comedy — or tragedy. His book is all attitude, all Byronic posturing.

Not that one objects to Mr Hemingway's diversions. He has just as much right to his hunting and fishing as New Yorkers have to dancing and ping pong. When he contributes a chapter on 'Marlin Off Cuba' to 'American Big Game Fishing' (Derrydale Press, \$25), which is a fascinating book, no one can cavil. But to offer 'Green Hills of Africa' as a profound philosophical experience is something else again. It is simply an overextended book about hunting, with a few incidental felicities and a number of literary wisecracks thrown in.