

## **Ernest Hemingway's Story of His African Safari**

**by C. G. Poore, New York Times, Oct 1935.**

AS THE Belmonte of his own hunting cuadrilla Ernest Hemingway has produced a fine book on death in the African afternoon. Incidentally, it is the best-written story of big-game hunting anywhere I have read. And more than that. It's a book about people in unacknowledged conflict and about the pleasures of travel and the pleasures of drinking and war and peace and writing. Particularly writing; pages and pages on the literary life. So even if you do not approve very strongly of men who go out and blast innocent rhinos into kingdom come you can still enjoy 'Green Hills of Africa' for many other things.

Africa is thoroughly in the book. The hyena, the kudu and that old lion, Simba, are all here. So are the more prominent literary lions, from Melville to Thomas Wolfe. Mr. Hemingway has something to say about all. The writing is the thing; that way he has of getting down with beautiful precision the exact way things look, smell, taste, feel, sound. And all the interrelations. If you do not take your attention off the page too often to ask him to write about things outside his experience you will see once more how well he can write about what he knows.

Hemingway's early manner of writing has passed pretty thoroughly into a large body of American prose. It has done great good there, keeping down the phony simile, the woolly clause. Who has not read ringing denunciation of him written in a style their writers did not have before they read 'The Sun Also Rises'? But it did not have enough range. So now he has left the old four-word sentence — each word containing four letters — to others. Some of his sentences in 'Green Hills of Africa' would make Henry James take a breath. There's one that starts on page 148, swings the length of 149 and lands on 150, forty lines or so from tip to tip. It's been a gradual development, but it shows at its best in this book.

It took less than ten years for that to happen. Once there was a day when every bar had its local Lady Brett in stock, home-brewed but true to the original label; Cook's guides put three asterisks after Pamplona and there was a search of Third Avenue speakeasies for places that sold grappa. Today second-growth practitioners have such independent standing that you may hear, for example, that such and such a book is written in imitation of James M. Cain's style, when it may really be an imitation of Mr. Cain's imitation of William Burnett's imitation of Hemingway's style. Thus are the old masters plowed under that the kingdom of letters may be enriched.

The old master won't stay buried, though. In 'Green Hills of Africa' his writing is better than ever, fuller, richer, deeper and only looking for something that can use its full power. There should soon be rousing calls demanding that he go to work on a novel of vast and striking scope instead of wasting time calling shots on the kudu. There's a lot in that. He should. Maybe he plans to. If so he's taking his time about it,

and spending part of that time wing-shooting some of the most eminent eagles (they were lions a minute ago) in the American literary sky.

He does that in the course of a monologue he unlimbers not far from the tired heart of Africa. Poe is polished off, then Melville, then Emerson, Hawthorne, Whittier and Company. This is all done for the benefit of a very literary and curious Austrian encountered on the road near a blind that the Wanderobo hunters had built.

The Austrian, sitting around the campfire, is fascinated. Europeans always listen with the politest attention when an American is telling them how terrible some Americans are. Thoreau, Mr. Hemingway says, is good, but he can't read him yet. Any one who has read any of these authors recently enough to have mature opinions is free to argue about them with Mr. Hemingway. 'Better have some beer, Papa,' says Mrs. Hemingway. 'What about the good writers?' the Austrian, who has been dreaming of modern literary life while running a sisal plantation for a British Indian, wants to know. 'The good writers,' Mr. Hemingway says, 'are Henry James, Stephen Crane and Mark Twain. That's not the order they're good in. There is no order for good writers.' And what's wrong with modern American writers is that 'at a certain age the men writers change into Old Mother Hubbard' and 'the women writers become Joan of Arc.'

It's all part of an anthology that some one may yet collect out of Hemingway's books, an anthology of his ideas on writers and writing. It would contain this, and the hilarious discussion about irony and pity from 'The Sun Also Rises,' and the dialogues with the Old Lady about T. S. Eliot and Faulkner and others in 'Death in the Afternoon,' and that buxom waitress in 'The Torrents of Spring' who wanted to tell people her anecdote about Henry James, and tons more. I don't remember whether there was any of it in 'A Farewell to Arms' or the books of short stories. But the conversation usually gets around to the merits of Dos Passos and those varlets in New York who live their literary lives like 'angleworms in a bottle.' No other contemporary writer except Somerset Maugham has written so much about writing in books about other things. And with both of them those passages are apt to be among the most bracing stuff in their books.

When the white hunter, Mr. J. P. or Pop is not being told about life and love among the authors — we're way past the Austrian, who looked 'like a caricature of Benchley in Tyrolean costume,' now — he is leading Mr. Hemingway to big game. Sometimes Mr. H. hits it, sometimes he misses it. Then they go back and have beer and discuss the next day's hunt and talk about revolutions in Cuba, France and Spain. There's fine dialogue between them in the Anglo-American language that the best Hemingway dialogue uses, always a great pleasure to read.

What Hemingway set out to do in this book was to write 'an absolutely true book to see whether the shape of a country and the pattern of a month's action can, if truly presented, compete with a work of the imagination.' He accomplishes that. And to please every one he adds handsomely that 'any one not finding sufficient love interest is at liberty, while reading it, to insert whatever love interest he or she may have at

the time.’ The honesty he uses in tracing the exact way he feels toward Karl, the ‘lucky hunter’ – jealous, admiring, angry, very friendly, according to the fortunes in their hunting rivalry – is the most skillful writing in the book. Karl plays Joselito to his Belmonte. That tension, and the dialogues, and the characters, black, white or brown, and the descriptions of country help to make the book compete successfully with many novels. But there’s not tension, development, conflict enough to make it compete successfully with the best novels. No one would say it was as good as ‘A Farewell to Arms.’ And, as a matter of fact, there’s no good reason for setting up any such standards of comparison. It’s the best trophy any writer has brought out of the big game country in many years.

He fuses his writing about the actual days of hunting and the nights in camp with his recollection of the world he has just come from. His description of the flow of the Gulf Stream past Cuba is one of the best things in the book. Another is an evocation of books he has read whose characters and scenes are more real than reality. Another is the riding over African country ‘so much like Aragon that I could not believe we were not in Spain.’ Another is the account of a lion hunt, and how they finally came up to the lion Hemingway had shot, ‘like a posse or a gang of Black and Tans.’ Another is an observation of Mr. J. P. after a heavy evening ‘walking in the dark as carefully as though he were an opened bottle.’ And there are a great many more as good, such as the time he was given a rusty gun and he could not speak about it because they were in the blind, but in two men’s looks ‘there had been indictment, evidence and condemnation without a word being spoken.’