

2. OLD MAN AT THE BRIDGE

About the author:

Ernest Hemingway (July 21, 1899 – July 2, 1961) was an American novelist, short story writer and a journalist too. In 1937, Hemingway agreed to report for North American Newspaper Alliance. He arrived in Spain during the Spanish Civil War and he was present at the Battle of the Ebro.

Summary:

The story is set up during the Spanish Civil war of 1938 fought in the vicinity of the Ebro river. It starts with the description of an old man sitting beside a road near a pontoon bridge across river Ebro. Carts, trucks, men women and children were crossing it. The soldiers were helping in the evacuation and everyone was crossing the bridge and climbing up on the other side. The narrator, an army scout was to cross the bridge and look out for the presence of the enemy and signal his people to move forward. When he returned after doing this, he noticed that the old man was still at the bridge. He engaged the old man in a conversation and found out that the old man had come from Saint Carlos, his native town. He informs the narrator that he was just taking care of the animals. He claims to be the last one to leave Saint Carlos and repeats that he was just taking care of his animals. He further says that there were three animals: two goats, a cat and four pairs of pigeons. He said he had to leave them because of the artillery. He was told by the captain to leave because of the artillery. He also informs the narrator that he has no family apart from these animals. The narrator wants to understand the political affiliation that the man has to which the man says that he has no politics. He then tells the narrator that he is seventy six years old and had walked twelve kilometers already and couldn't go further. The narrator warns the old man that it was not a safe place to be and he should walk further so that he can get a lift in a truck going towards Barcelona. The old man responds by saying that he doesn't know anyone there. He repeats his concern about the animals. The narrator tries to comfort him by saying that they would be safe and urges that he should move on. The man starts to walk but sits down in the dust again. At this point the narrator realises that he is a little disoriented and would not be able to save himself. The only good luck that could save the man that day was an overcast sky which would not allow the Fascist planes to fly and so the old man would be safe one more day.

Glossary:

rimmed	–	(here) frame of the spectacles
pontoon	–	a boat or some other floating structure used as one of the supports for a temporary bridge over a river
mule	–	offspring of a male donkey and a female horse
staggered	–	moved unsteadily

steep	–	(here) sharp
heading out	–	(here) to leave in the air
plodded	–	moved
bridgehead	–	a strong position secured by an army inside enemy territory from which to advance or attack
gray	–	(here) dull
artillery	–	class of large military weapons
forks	–	(here) separates
unquiet	–	restless
swayed	–	moved
ceiling	–	altitude of the lowest layer of clouds so that planes can't fly

Questions and answers:

1. Describe the old man and the place he was seen at. (4)

Ans: The old man was wearing dusty clothes and steel rimmed spectacles. He sat by the side of the road. He was seen near a pontoon bridge by the Ebro river. Though the other people were crossing the bridge and moving ahead, the old man sat there without moving and seemed too tired to walk any further.

2. What kind of bridge is being described here? What was the function it was being used for on this particular day? (3)

Ans: The bridge, described here, is a pontoon bridge. It is made on a floating structure like a flat bottomed boat. The purpose of the bridge is to facilitate carts, trucks, men, women and children to cross it.

3. Who is the narrator? What role was he given? (3)

Ans: The narrator seems to be an army scout. He was given the role to cross the bridge explore the bridgehead beyond and find out till what point the enemy had advanced. He was also supposed to return and signal safety to his contingent at the bridge.

4. What did the narrator notice about the old man? (3)

Ans: The narrator first noticed that an old man was sitting near the bridge and looked too tired to walk further. He thought that after a while he would himself walk and cross the bridge. But he noticed that most of the carts had crossed and so did the people on foot but the old man was still there.

5. Why did the narrator strike a conversation with the old man? How did he start it? (3)

Ans: The narrator was a little disconcerted to see the old man still at the bridge though most

of the people had already crossed it. He wanted to ensure that the old man reaches a safe haven. He started the conversation by asking where the old man was from.

6. How did the old man initially respond to the questions of the narrator? (3)

Ans: The old man said that he was from Saint Carlos. He said it with pleasure as it was his native town and smiled while saying it. He also added without being asked that he was just taking care of the animals.

7. What contrast did the narrator notice after his initial exchange with the old man?(2)

Ans: The old man had said that he was taking care of animals and was the last one to leave from Saint Carlos. The contrast that the narrator noticed was that he did not look like a shepherd or a herdsman.

8. What was the narrator looking at as he was talking to the old man? What were his thoughts? (3)

Ans: While the narrator was talking to the old man he was watching the bridge and the African looking country of the Ebro Delta. He was wondering how long would it be before they saw the enemy. He was also listening all the while for first noises that would signal the mysterious event called contact.

9. What response does the old man give when he is asked about the animals? (3)

Ans: Initially the old man says he was taking care of 'various animals'. When asked by the narrator what animals were there, the old man says that there were three animals in all. There were two goats and a cat and there were four pairs of pigeons.

10. Why did the old man leave Saint Carlos according to him? Who had advised him to do so? (2)

Ans: The old man claimed that he had left Saint Carlos because of the artillery. He was advised by the captain to leave.

11. Which animal was the old man not worried about? Why? (3)

Ans: The old man wasn't worried about the cat. He said that the cat knew how to take care of itself and would be safe. He perhaps believed in the proverb that a cat has nine lives.

12. What different question did the narrator ask the old man? Why do you think did he ask that question? (3)

Ans: The narrator asked the old man what politics he had. He asked the question as he probably got confused after seeing that the old man wasn't ready to budge from the

place and cross the bridge. He wanted to verify if the old man was siding with the fascist forces.

13. What reason does the old man give for waiting there and not crossing the bridge? (2)

Ans: The old man says that he is seventy-six years old. He had already walked twelve kilometers from Saint Carlos to the bridge and was tired. He could not go any further at least till some time.

14. What advice does the narrator give the old man for his safety? How does the old man respond to that advice? (4)

Ans: The narrator advises the old man to walk a bit further if he can. He could go till the junction from where the road forks to Tortosa. There are trucks up the road which are leaving for Barcelona. He could have a safe passage to Barcelona then. The old man assures the narrator that he would wait a while and then go.

15. Where were the trucks heading to? Why? What is the response of the old man to this information? (3)

Ans: The trucks were heading towards Barcelona. They were probably rescuing trucks taking the republican supporters to safety. Barcelona, then, was an area under Republican domination. When the old man is told this he responds by saying that he knew nobody in that direction.

16. How does the narrator react when the old man asks him about his opinion on the fate of the animals? (3)

Ans: When the old man asks the narrator if the animals would be safe he answers in the affirmative. He says that the animals would probably come out of the situation all right. The old man confirms it again and the narrator repeats confidently that they would be safe.

17. After the reassurance given by the narrator what doubt haunts the old man about the animals? Is there any merit in it? (3)

Ans: Even after the assurance is given by the narrator the old man still thinks that his animals are not safe. He wonders what the animals would do under the artillery when he was asked to leave from there. Yes, there is merit in the thinking as the animals would surely not be safe near the artillery.

18. What does the narrator ask the old man about the birds? What obvious difference is visible in the information given previously and the question asked now? What does the old man say about it? (3)

Ans: The narrator asks the old man if he had left the dove cage unlocked. There is an obvious difference here as the old man had spoken about leaving behind four pairs of pigeons. The old man says that he had left the cage unlocked.

19. What advice does the narrator finally give to the old man? What is the old man's response to it? (3)

Ans: The narrator finally tells the old man that he should get up and try to walk. The old man says a 'Thank you' and gets to his feet. He swayed side to side and then sat down backwards in the dust. Perhaps he did not have the strength to walk.

20. What does the narrator finally realise about the old man? What does he feel bad about? (3)

Ans: The narrator finally realises that there is nothing to be done about the old man. He thinks that the old man is disoriented and hence is not able to understand the gravity of the situation. He feels bad that he wouldn't be able to prevent the old man from dying.

21. Which day is being described as the day of this chance meeting with the old man? Who were the enemies? Till what point had they advanced? (3)

Ans: The narrator says that the chance meeting with the old man happened on Easter Sunday. The enemies were the fascists who had allied with the nationalists. They had advanced till beyond the Ebro river though the area was not heavily occupied yet by them.

22. Why was the old man safe on that day? (2)

Ans: The old man was safe on that day as it was a gray overcast day. The ceiling was very low and the Fascist planes were not up.

23. Which two things are called the only piece of luck for the old man that day? (4)

Ans: The narrator calls the old man lucky on that Easter Sunday. As it was a cloudy overcast day and the ceiling was low, the fascist planes were not up that day. So the old man would remain alive at least that day. Also the fact that the cats know how to look after themselves is also called by the narrator to be a lucky thing for the old man.

24. Mention the symbolism of Easter Sunday. (3)

Ans: Easter Sunday is the day of the resurrection of Jesus Christ. It is the third day after his crucifixion. Good Friday is the day that the innocent Christ sacrificed himself for humanity. Here the writer is juxtaposing the sacrifice of this old man on the day of Christ's resurrection.

25. Explain the symbolism of the animals and the people or situations they represent.

(4)

Ans: The animals used in the story are all symbolic. The old man is not worried about the cat as it can take care of itself and is supposed to have nine lives. The doves are supposed to be symbols of peace and are expected by the narrator to fly away which would be the case when war is on). The goats are the animals he is worried about. Goats are supposed to be symbols of sacrifice and in this case too they are being sacrificed without any fault. Like them the old man is being sacrificed too because of no fault.

26. What do you think are the feelings of the narrator as he deals with the old man? Are they the same or is there any difference in them as the story proceeds? (4)

Ans: At the very beginning of the story, we see that the narrator is genuinely concerned about the old man and his safety. He strikes a conversation with him and patiently waits at the bridge with the old man even as all others pass by. He tries to encourage him to walk further and take a truck to Barcelona. He even tries to give him a false assurance that the animals would be safe so that the old man can decide to go further. Here we see his feelings for the old man change as he finally understands that the old man is disoriented and nothing could be done about him. He feels bad for the old man as he would meet his impending death soon.

27. Justify the title.

(4)

Ans: The title 'Old man at the bridge' is apt indeed. At a physical level he has reached the bridge and is too tired to walk any further. In spite of a lot prodding from the narrator and a feeble attempt he cannot go further. But the bridge represents the transition that is forced upon the old man. After living all his life in Saint Carlos which was his native town and about which he was proud, the old man did perhaps not see any sense in crossing the bridge and going towards Barcelona in which direction he knew nobody. So he was at the bridge but not keen to cross over. Finally though the bridge proves to be symbolic in another sense too as it facilitates his transition from life to death.
