FEATURED IN
HEMINGWAY
A FILM BY KEN BURNS AND LYNN NOVICK
ON PBS

The OLD MAN and THE SEA

Ernest Hemingway

Ernest Hemingway

The Old Man and the Sea

Illustrations by C. F. Tunnicliffe and Raymond Sheppard

SCRIBNER CLASSICS

to Charlie Scribner
and
to Max Perkins

INTRODUCTION:
The Ripening of a Masterpiece

The April 1936 issue of *Esquire* contained an article entitled "On the Blue Water: A Gulf Stream Letter," written by the magazine's featured contributor Ernest Hemingway. It was a rambling little piece that began with a debate between the author and a friend on the relative thrills of deep-sea fishing and big-game hunting. After a page or so of badinage, Hemingway embarks on a passionate apologia for the joys and beauty of life on the Gulf Stream. That and the other great ocean currents are "the last wild country left." He goes on to describe his own fishing experiences, adding stories told to him by his Cuban mate Carlos. One of the latter was about a giant marlin:

> . . . an old man fishing alone in a skiff out of Cabañas hooked a great marlin that, on the heavy sashcord hand-line, pulled the skiff out to the sea. Two days later the old man was picked up by fisherman sixty miles to the eastward, the head and forward part of the marlin lashed alongside. What was left of the fish, less than half, weighed eight hundred pounds. The old man had stayed with him a day, a night, a day and another night while the fish swam deep and pulled the boat. When he had come up the old man had pulled the boat up on him and harpooned him. Lashed alongside the sharks had hit him and the old man had fought them out alone in the Gulf Stream in a skiff, clubbing them, stabbing at them, lunging at them with an oar until he was exhausted and the sharks had eaten all that they could hold. He was crying in the boat when the fishermen picked him up, half crazy from his loss, and the sharks were still circling the boat.

This is clearly an almost perfect short short-story. It is also an unforgettable one, not only because of the strangeness of the event but also because it conveys

an almost physical sensation to the reader.

I read it as a schoolboy of fifteen. In my boarding-school days, *Esquire* was frowned upon by our rector, Dr. Drury, on the grounds that it was "not manly." (I wonder how Hemingway might have responded to that criticism.) In any case, the story stuck in my mind ever after.

More important, it stuck in Hemingway's mind. Clearly he appreciated its value as the germ of a work of literature. Three years later, in a letter to his editor Max Perkins about a new book of short fiction he was planning to write, he mentioned

> one about the old commercial fisherman who fought the swordfish all alone in his skiff for 4 days and four nights and the sharks finally eating it after he had it alongside and could not get it to the boat. That's a wonderful story of the Cuban coast. I'm going out with old Carlos in his skiff so as to get it all right. Everything he does and everything he thinks in all that long fight with the boat out of sight of all the other boats all alone on the sea. It's a great story if I can get it right. One that would make the book.

But the collection that was to contain that story never got written because one of the stories about the Spanish Civil War "took off," and before he knew it Hemingway had written fifteen thousand words and found himself well into the novel that was published the following year under the title *For Whom the Bell Tolls*.

It was not until January 1951—fifteen years after its first appearance in *Esquire*—that Hemingway returned to the "Santiago story," as he called it. He was living then in his home in Cuba and able to devote himself to the work. The writing went unusually well, and Hemingway was overjoyed by this surging of creative powers.

As he had originally planned to do, Hemingway took the external details of the story and presented them from the point of view of the fisherman. He thus made it possible for the reader to participate imaginatively in the story. That effect was always Hemingway's primary aim as a writer.

The story's spiritual themes enhance its meaning and impact. In the thoughts of Santiago, the reader shares the beliefs of a simple fisherman whose pride in his endurance is combined with the fatalistic sense that he has "gone out too far," and whose efforts to kill his prey are combined with a reverence for life. It is impossible to read this story without believing that in many respects it represents Hemingway's own ideals of manhood.

For a time, it was his plan to publish the tale as part of a collection, but he accepted an unusual offer to have it appear in a single installment in *Life* magazine Its appearance in book form followed shortly.

The Old Man and the Sea was an immediate success throughout the world. It was specifically cited when the Nobel Prize for Literature was awarded to Hemingway in 1954. In fact, its success was so great that it lead to a broad revival of interest in all of Hemingway's works which has continued to the present day. It is a curious fact of literary history that a story which describes the loss of a gigantic prize provided the author with the greatest prize of his career.

—Charles Scribner Jr.

The Old Man and the Sea

He was an old man who fished alone in a skiff in the Gulf Stream and he had gone eighty-four days now without taking a fish. In the first forty days a boy had been with him. But after forty days without a fish the boy's parents had told him that the old man was now definitely and finally *salao*, which is the worst form of unlucky, and the boy had gone at their orders in another boat which caught three good fish the first week. It made the boy sad to see the old man come in each day with his skiff empty and he always went down to help him carry either the coiled lines or the gaff and harpoon and the sail that was furled around the mast. The sail was patched with flour sacks and, furled, it looked like the flag of permanent defeat.

The old man was thin and gaunt with deep wrinkles in the back of his neck. The brown blotches of the benevolent skin cancer the sun brings from its reflection on the tropic sea were on his cheeks. The blotches ran well down the sides of his face and his hands had the deep-creased scars from handling heavy fish on the cords. But none of these scars were fresh. They were as old as erosions in a fishless desert.

Everything about him was old except his eyes and they were the same color as the sea and were cheerful and undefeated.

"Santiago," the boy said to him as they climbed the bank from where the skiff was hauled up. "I could go with you again. We've made some money."

The old man had taught the boy to fish and the boy loved him.

"No," the old man said. "You're with a lucky boat. Stay with them."

"But remember how you went eighty-seven days without fish and then we caught big ones every day for three weeks."

"I remember," the old man said. "I know you did not leave me because you doubted."

"It was papa made me leave. I am a boy and I must obey him."

"I know," the old man said. "It is quite normal."

"He hasn't much faith."

"No," the old man said. "But we have. Haven't we?"

"Yes," the boy said. "Can I offer you a beer on the Terrace and then we'll take the stuff home."

"Why not?" the old man said. "Between fishermen."

They sat on the Terrace and many of the fishermen made fun of the old man and he was not angry. Others, of the older fishermen, looked at him and were sad. But they did not show it and they spoke politely about the current and the depths they had drifted their lines at and the steady good weather and of what they had seen. The successful fishermen of that day were already in and had butchered their marlin out and carried them laid full length across two planks, with two men staggering at the end of each plank, to the fish house where they waited for the ice truck to carry them to the market in Havana. Those who had caught sharks had taken them to the shark factory on the other side of the cove where they were hoisted on a block and tackle, their livers removed, their fins cut off and their hides skinned out and their flesh cut into strips for salting.

When the wind was in the east a smell came across the harbour from the shark factory; but today there was only the faint edge of the odour because the wind had backed into the north and then dropped off and it was pleasant and sunny on the Terrace.

"Santiago," the boy said.

"Yes," the old man said. He was holding his glass and thinking of many years ago.

"Can I go out to get sardines for you for tomorrow?"

"No. Go and play baseball. I can still row and Rogelio will throw the net."

"I would like to go. If I cannot fish with you, I would like to serve in some way."

"You bought me a beer," the old man said. "You are already a man."

"How old was I when you first took me in a boat?"

"Five and you nearly were killed when I brought the fish in too green and he nearly tore the boat to pieces. Can you remember?"

"I can remember the tail slapping and banging and the thwart breaking and the noise of the clubbing. I can remember you throwing me into the bow where the wet coiled lines were and feeling the whole boat shiver and the noise of you clubbing him like chopping a tree down and the sweet blood smell all over me."

"Can you really remember that or did I just tell it to you?"

"I remember everything from when we first went together."

The old man looked at him with his sun-burned, confident loving eyes.

"If you were my boy I'd take you out and gamble," he said. "But you are your father's and your mother's and you are in a lucky boat."

"May I get the sardines? I know where I can get four baits too."

"I have mine left from today. I put them in salt in the box."

"Let me get four fresh ones."

"One," the old man said. His hope and his confidence had never gone. But now they were freshening as when the breeze rises.

"Two," the boy said.

"Two," the old man agreed. "You didn't steal them?"

"I would," the boy said. "But I bought these."

"Thank you," the old man said. He was too simple to wonder when he had attained humility. But he knew he had attained it and he knew it was not disgraceful and it carried no loss of true pride.

"Tomorrow is going to be a good day with this current," he said.

"Where are you going?" the boy asked.

"Far out to come in when the wind shifts. I want to be out before it is light."

"I'll try to get him to work far out," the boy said. "Then if you hook something truly big we can come to your aid."

"He does not like to work too far out."

"No," the boy said. "But I will see something that he cannot see such as a bird working and get him to come out after dolphin."

"Are his eyes that bad?"

"He is almost blind."

"It is strange," the old man said. "He never went turtle-ing. That is what kills the eyes."

"But you went turtle-ing for years off the Mosquito Coast and your eyes are good."

"I am a strange old man."

"But are you strong enough now for a truly big fish?"

"I think so. And there are many tricks."

"Let us take the stuff home," the boy said. "So I can get the cast net and go after the sardines."

They picked up the gear from the boat. The old man carried the mast on his shoulder and the boy carried the wooden box with the coiled, hard-braided brown lines, the gaff and the harpoon with its shaft. The box with the baits was under the stern of the skiff along with the club that was used to subdue the big fish when they were brought alongside. No one would steal from the old man but it was better to take the sail and the heavy lines home as the dew was bad for them and, though he was quite sure no local people would steal from him, the old man thought that a gaff and a harpoon were needless temptations to leave in a boat.

They walked up the road together to the old man's shack and went in through its open door. The old man leaned the mast with its wrapped sail against the wall and the boy put the box and the other gear beside it. The mast was nearly as long as the one room of the shack. The shack was made of the tough budshields of the royal palm which are called *guano* and in it there was a bed, a table, one chair, and a place on the dirt floor to cook with charcoal. On the brown walls of the flattened, overlapping leaves of the sturdy fibered *guano* there was a picture in color of the Sacred Heart of Jesus and another of the Virgin of Cobre. These were relics of his wife. Once there had been a tinted

photograph of his wife on the wall but he had taken it down because it made him too lonely to see it and it was on the shelf in the corner under his clean shirt.