

**“The Old Man at the Bridge”**  
by Ernest Hemingway

An old man with steel rimmed spectacles and very dusty clothes sat by the side of the road. There was a pontoon bridge across the river and carts, trucks, and men, women and children were crossing it. The mule- drawn carts staggered up the steep bank from the bridge with soldiers helping push against the spokes of the wheels. The trucks ground up and away heading out of it all and the peasants plodded along in the ankle deep dust. But the old man sat there without moving. He was too tired to go any farther.

It was my business to cross the bridge, explore the bridgehead beyond and find out to what point the enemy had advanced. I did this and returned over the bridge. There were not so many carts now and very few people on foot, but the old man was still there.

"Where do you come from?" I asked him.

"From San Carlos," he said, and smiled.

That was his native town and so it gave him pleasure to mention it and he smiled.

"I was taking care of animals," he explained.

"Oh," I said, not quite understanding.

"Yes," he said, "I stayed, you see, taking care of animals. I was the last one to leave the town of San Carlos."

He did not look like a shepherd nor a herdsman and I looked at his black dusty clothes and his gray dusty face and his steel rimmed spectacles and said, "What animals were they?"

"Various animals," he said, and shook his head. "I had to leave them."

I was watching the bridge and the African looking country of the Ebro Delta and wondering how long now it would be before we would see the enemy, and listening all the while for the first noises that would signal that ever mysterious event called contact, and the old man still sat there.

"What animals were they?" I asked.

"There were three animals altogether," he explained. "There were two goats and a cat and then there were four pairs of pigeons."

And you had to leave them?" I asked.

"Yes. Because of the artillery. The captain told me to go because of the artillery."

"And you have no family?" I asked, watching the far end of the bridge where a few last carts were hurrying down the slope of the bank.

"No," he said, "only the animals I stated. The cat, of course, will be all right. A cat can look out for itself, but I cannot think what will become of the others."

"What politics have you?" I asked.

"I am without politics," he said. "I am seventy-six years old. I have come twelve kilometers now and I think now I can go no further."

"This is not a good place to stop," I said. "If you can make it, there are trucks up the road where it forks for Tortosa."

"I will wait a while," he said, "and then I will go. Where do the trucks go?"

"Towards Barcelona," I told him.

"I know no one in that direction," he said, "but thank you very much. Thank you again very much."

He looked at me very blankly and tiredly, and then said, having to share his worry with someone, "The cat will be all right, I am sure. There is no need to be unquiet about the cat. But the others. Now what do you think about the others?"

"Why they'll probably come through it all right."

"You think so?"

"Why not," I said, watching the far bank where now there were no carts.

"But what will they do under the artillery when I was told to leave because of the artillery?"

"Did you leave the dove cage unlocked?" I asked.

"Yes."

"Then they'll fly."

"Yes, certainly they'll fly. But the others. It's better not to think about the others," he said.

"If you are rested I would go," I urged. "Get up and try to walk now."

"Thank you," he said and got to his feet, swayed from side to side and then sat down backwards in the dust.

"I was taking care of animals," he said dully, but no longer to me. "I was only taking care of animals."

There was nothing to do about him. It was Easter Sunday and the Fascists were advancing toward the Ebro. It was a gray overcast day with a low ceiling so their planes were not up. That and the fact that cats know how to look after themselves was all the good luck that old man would ever have.

1. What was the old man doing in his native town?
  - a. taking care of animals
  - b. begging on the streets
  - c. helping the soldiers
  - d. talking care of children
2. What is special about the day the narrator encounters the old man?
  - a. It is Easter Sunday.
  - b. It is the last day of the war.
  - c. It is Thanksgiving.
  - d. It is Christmas Day.
3. Why does the old man leave the animals?
  - a. because the children are taking care of them
  - b. because he loses interest
  - c. because they all die
  - d. because of the artillery
4. Which animal is the old man least concerned about?
  - a. the goats
  - b. the pigeons
  - c. the cat
  - d. the dog
5. The trucks are crossing the bridge and going where?
  - a. Vera Cruz
  - b. Barcelona
  - c. San Carlos
  - d. Tortosa
6. What is the old man's native town?
  - a. Vera Cruz
  - b. Ebro Delta
  - c. Barcelona
  - d. San Carlos
7. What is the narrator's job?
  - a. He questions people before they cross the bridge.
  - b. He protects the people who cross the bridge.
  - c. He scouts ahead for the enemy's location.
  - d. He stops people from crossing the bridge.
8. Why does the old man stop and not go across the bridge?
  - a. He is asked not to cross the bridge.
  - b. He doesn't need to cross the bridge.
  - c. He is too tired to cross the bridge.
  - d. He isn't interested in crossing the bridge.
9. The old man is a symbol of what?
  - a. the causes of war
  - b. the patience of the soldiers
  - c. the civilian victims of war
  - d. the apathy of the civilians
10. How old is the old man?
  - a. ninety-four
  - b. sixty-six
  - c. eighty-four
  - d. seventy-six
11. Explain why the narrator takes so much time to converse with the old man. Use details from the story to support your answer.

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12. What statements from the story suggest that the old man is about to give up on life? Quote specific statements to back your answer.

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13. How is the narrator portrayed in the story? How does he treat the old man? Give examples from the story to back your answer.

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14. How does Hemmingway show that war is disrupting the lives of the peasants? Is this portrayal realistic? Why or why not?

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15. What is the setting of the story? Give details from the story to support your answer.

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17. What kind of life has the old man been leading? What keeps him going? Use details from the story to support your answer.

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