Under the Ridge, Ernest Hemingway

Under the Ridge

IN THE HEAT OF THE DAY WITH THE DUST blowing, we came back, dry-mouthed, nose-clogged and heavy-loaded, down out of the battle to the long ridge above the river where the Spanish troops lay in reserve.

I sat down with my back against the shallow trench, my shoulders and the back of my head against the earth, clear now from even stray bullets, and looked at what lay below us in the hollow. There was the tank reserve, the tanks covered with branches chopped from olive trees. To their left were the staff cars, mud-daubed and branch-covered, and between the two a long line of men carrying stretchers wound down through the gap to where, on the flat at the foot of the ridge, ambulances were loading. Commissary mules loaded with sacks of bread and kegs of wine, and a train of ammunition mules, led by their drivers, were coming up the gap in the ridge, and men with empty stretchers were walking slowly up the trail with the mules.

To the right, below the curve of the ridge, I could see the entrance to the cave where the brigade staff was working, and their signaling wires ran out of the top of the cave and curved on over the ridge in the shelter of which we lay.

Motorcyclists in leather suits and helmets came up and down the cut on their cycles or, where it was too steep, walking them, and leaving them beside the cut, walked over to the entrance to the cave and ducked inside. As I watched, a big Hungarian cyclist that I knew came out of the cave, tucked some papers in his leather wallet, walked over to his motorcycle and, pushing it up through the stream of mules and stretcher-bearers, threw a leg over the saddle and roared on over the ridge, his machine churning a storm of dust.

Below, across the flat where the ambulances were coming and going, was the green foliage that marked the line of the river. There was a large house with a red tile roof and there was a gray stone mill, and from the trees around the big house beyond the river came the flashes of our guns.

They were firing straight at us and there were the twin flashes, then the throaty, short bung-bung of the three-inch pieces and then the rising cry of the shells coming toward us and going on over our heads. As always, we were short of artillery. There were only four batteries down there, when there should have been forty, and they were firing only two guns at a time. The attack had failed before we came down.

“Are you Russians?” a Spanish soldier asked me.
“No, Americans,” I said. “Have you any water?”

“Yes, comrade.” He handed over a pigskin bag. These troops in reserve were soldiers only in name and from the fact that they were in uniform. They were not intended to be used in the attack, and they sprawled along this line under the crest of the ridge, huddled in groups, eating, drinking and talking, or simply sitting dumbly, waiting. The attack was being made by an International Brigade.

We both drank. The water tasted of asphalt and pig bristles.
“Wine is better,” the soldier said. “I will get wine.”
“Yes. But for the thirst, water.”

“There is no thirst like the thirst of battle. Even here, in reserve, I have much thirst.”
“That is fear,” said another soldier. “Thirst is fear.”

“No,” said another. “With fear there is thirst, always. But in battle there is much thirst even when there is no fear.”
“There is always fear in battle,” said the first soldier.

“For you,” said the second soldier.
“It is normal,” the first soldier said.
“For you.”
“Shut your dirty mouth,” said the first soldier. “I am simply a man who tells the truth.”

It was a bright April day and the wind was blowing wildly so that each mule that came up the gap raised a cloud of dust, and the two men at the ends of a stretcher each raised a cloud of dust that blew together and made one, and below, across the flat, long streams of dust moved out from the ambulances and blew away in the wind.

I felt quite sure I was not going to be killed on that day now, since we had done our work well in the morning, and twice during the early part of the attack we should have been killed and were not; and this had given me confidence. The first time had been when we had gone up with the tanks and picked a place from which to film the attack.

Later I had a sudden distrust for the place and we had moved the cameras about two hundred yards to the left. Just before leaving, I had marked the place in quite the oldest way there is of marking a place, and within ten minutes a six-inch shell had lit on the exact place where I had been and there was no trace of any human being ever having been there. Instead, there was a large and clearly blasted hole in the earth.

Then, two hours later, a Polish officer, recently detached from the batalion and attached to the staff, had offered to show us the positions the Poles had just captured and, coming from under the lee of a fold of hill, we had walked into machine-gun fire that we had to crawl out from under with our chins tight to the ground and dust in our noses, and at the same time made the sad discovery that the Poles had captured no positions at all that day but were a little further back than the place they had started from. And now, lying in the shelter of the trench, I was wet with sweat, hungry and thirsty and hollow inside from the now-finished danger of the attack.

“You are sure you are not Russians?” asked a soldier. “There are Russians here today.”
“Yes. But we are not Russians.”
“You have the face of a Russian.”

“No,” I said. “You are wrong, comrade. I have quite a funny face but it is not the face of a Russian.”
“He has the face of a Russian,” pointing at the other one of us who was working on a camera.
“Perhaps. But still he is not Russian. Where you from?”

“Extremadura,” he said proudly.
“Are there any Russians in Extremadura?” I asked.
“No,” he told me, even more proudly. “There are no Russians in Extremadura, and there are no Extremadurans in Russia.”
“What are your politics?”

“I hate all foreigners,” he said.
“That’s a broad political program.”
“I hate the Moors, the English, the French, the Italians, the Germans, the North Americans and the Russians.”

“You hate them in that order?”
“Yes. But perhaps I hate the Russians the most.”

“Man, you have very interesting ideas,” I said. “Are you a fascist?”
“No. I am an Extremaduran and I hate foreigners.”

“He has very rare ideas,” said another soldier. “Do not give him too much importance. Me, I like foreigners. I am from Valencia. Take another cup of wine, please.”
I reached up and took the cup, the other wine still brassy in my mouth. I looked at the Extremaduran. He was tall and thin. His face was haggard and unshaven, and his cheeks were sunken. He stood straight up in his rage, his blanket cape around his shoulders.

“Keep your head down,” I told him. “There are many lost bullets coming over.”
“I have no fear of bullets and I hate all foreigners,” he said fiercely.
“You don’t have to fear bullets,” I said, “but you should avoid them when you are in reserve. It is not intelligent to be wounded when it can be avoided.”
“I am not afraid of anything,” the Extremaduran said.
“You are very lucky, comrade.”

“It’s true,” the other, with the wine cup, said. “He has no fear, not even of the aviones.”
“He is crazy,” another soldier said. “Everyone fears planes. They kill little but make much fear.”
“I have no fear. Neither of planes nor of nothing,” the Extremaduran said. “And I hate every foreigner alive.”

Down the gap, walking beside two stretcher-bearers and seeming to pay no attention at all to where he was, came a tall man in International Brigade uniform with a blanket rolled over his shoulder and tied at his waist. His head was held high and he looked like a man walking in his sleep. He was middle-aged. He was not carrying a rifle and, from where I lay, he did not look wounded.

I watched him walking alone down out of the war. Before he came to the staff cars he turned to the left and his head still held high in that strange way, he walked over the edge of the ridge and out of sight.

The one who was with me, busy changing film in the hand cameras, had not noticed him.
A single shell came in over the ridge and fountained in the dirt and black smoke just short of the tank reserve.

Someone put his head out of the cave where brigade headquarters was and then disappeared inside. I thought it looked like a good place to go, but knew they would all be furious in there because the attack was a failure, and I did not want to face them. If an operation was successful they were happy to have motion pictures of it. But if it was a failure everyone was in such a rage there was always a chance of being sent back under arrest.

“They may shell us now,” I said.
“That makes no difference to me,” said the Extremaduran. I was beginning to be a little tired of the Extremaduran.
“Have you any more wine to spare?” I asked. My mouth was still dry.

“Yes, man. There are gallons of it,” the friendly soldier said. He was short, big-fisted and very dirty, with a stubble of beard about the same length as the hair on his cropped head. “Do you think they will shell us now?”
“They should,” I said. “But in this war you can never tell.”

“What is the matter with this war?” asked the Extremaduran angrily. “Don’t you like this war?”
“Shut up!” said the friendly soldier. “I command here, and these comrades are our guests.”
“Then let him not talk against our war,” said the Extremaduran. “No foreigners shall come here and talk against our war.”
“What town are you from, comrade?” I asked the Extremaduran.

“Badajoz,” he said. “I am from Badajoz. In Badajoz, we have been sacked and pillaged and our women violated by the English, the French and now the Moors. What the Moors have done now is no worse than what the English did under Wellington. You should read history. My great-grandmother was killed by the English. The house where my family lived was burned by the English.”
“I regret it,” I said. “Why do you hate the North Americans?”

“My father was killed by the North Americans in Cuba while he was there as a conscript.”
“I am sorry for that, too. Truly sorry. Believe me. And why do you hate the Russians?”
“Because they are the representatives of tyranny and I hate their faces. You have the face of a Russian.”

“Maybe we better get out of here,” I said to the one who was with me and who did not speak Spanish. “It seems I have the face of a Russian and it’s getting me into trouble.”
“I’m going to sleep,” he said. “This is a good place. Don’t talk so much and you won’t get into trouble.”
“There’s a comrade here that doesn’t like me. I think he’s an anarchist.”
“Well, watch out he doesn’t shoot you, then. I’m going to sleep.”

Just then two men in leather coats, one short and stocky, the other of medium height, both with civilian caps, flat, high-cheekboned faces, wooden-holstered Mauser pistols strapped to their legs, came out of the gap and headed toward us.

The taller of them spoke to me in French. “Have you seen a French comrade pass through here?” he asked. “A comrade with a blanket tied around his shoulders in the form of a bandoleer? A comrade of about forty-five or fifty years old? Have you seen such a comrade going in the direction away from the front?”

“No,” I said. “I have not seen such a comrade.”
He looked at me a moment and I noticed his eyes were a grayish-yellow and that they did not blink at all.
“Thank you, comrade,” he said, in his odd French, and then spoke rapidly to the other man with him in a language I did not understand. They went off and climbed the highest part of the ridge, from where they could see down all the gullies.
“There is the true face of Russians,” the Extremaduran said.

“Shut up!” I said. I was watching the two men in the leather coats. They were standing there, under considerable fire, looking carefully over all the broken country below the ridge and toward the river.

Suddenly one of them saw what he was looking for, and pointed. Then the two started to run like hunting dogs, one straight down over the ridge, the other at an angle as though to cut someone off. Before the second one went over the crest I could see him drawing his pistol and holding it ahead of him as he ran.
“And how do you like that?” asked the Extremaduran.

“No better than you,” I said.

Over the crest of the parallel ridge I heard the Mausers' jerky barking. They kept it up for more than a dozen shots. They must have opened fire at too long a range. After all the burst of shooting there was a pause and then a single shot.

The Extremaduran looked at me sullenly and said nothing. I thought it would be simpler if the shelling started. But it did not start.
The two in the leather coats and civilian caps came back over the ridge, walking together, and then down to the gap, walking downhill with that odd bent-kneed way of the two-legged animal coming down a steep slope. They turned up the gap as a tank came whirring and clanking down and moved to one side to let it pass.

The tanks had failed again that day, and the drivers coming down from the lines in their leather helmets, the tank turrets open now as they came into the shelter of the ridge, had the straight-ahead stare of football players who have been removed from a game for yellowness.
The two flat-faced men in the leather coats stood by us on the ridge to let the tank pass.
“Did you find the comrade you were looking for?” I asked the taller one of them in French.
“Yes, comrade. Thank you,” he said and looked me over very carefully.
“What does he say?” the Extremaduran asked.

“He says they found the comrade they were looking for,” I told him. The Extremaduran said nothing.
We had been all that morning in the place the middle-aged Frenchman had walked out of. We had been there in the dust, the smoke, the noise, the receiving of wounds, the death, the fear of death, the bravery, the cowardice, the insanity and failure of an unsuccessful attack. We had been there on that plowed field men could not cross and live. You dropped and lay flat; making a mound to shield your head; working your chin into the dirt; waiting for the order to go up that slope no man could go up and live.

We had been with those who lay there waiting for the tanks that did not come; waiting under the inrushing shriek and roaring crash of the shelling; the metal and the earth thrown like clods from a dirt fountain; and overhead the cracking, whispering fire like a curtain. We knew how those felt, waiting. They were as far forward as they could get. And men could not move further and live, when the order came to move ahead.

We had been there all morning in the place the middle-aged Frenchman had come walking away from. I understood how a man might suddenly, seeing clearly the stupidity of dying in an unsuccessful attack; or suddenly seeing it clearly, as you can see clearly and justly before you die; seeing its hopelessness, seeing its idiocy, seeing how it really was, simply get back and walk away from it as the Frenchman had done. He could walk out of it not from cowardice, but simply from seeing too clearly; knowing suddenly that he had to leave it; knowing there was no other thing to do.

The Frenchman had come walking out of the attack with great dignity and I understood him as a man. But, as a soldier, these other men who policed the battle had hunted him down, and the death he had walked away from had found him when he was just over the ridge, clear of the bullets and the shelling, and walking toward the river.

“And that,” the Extremaduran said to me, nodding toward the battle police.
“Is war,” I said. “In war, it is necessary to have discipline.”
“And to live under that sort of discipline we should die?”
“Without discipline everyone will die anyway.”

“There is one kind of discipline and another kind of discipline,” the Extremaduran said. “Listen to me. In February we were here where we are now and the fascists attacked. They drove us from the hills that you Internationals tried to take today and that you could not take. We fell back to here; to this ridge. Internationals came up and took the line ahead of us.”
“I know that,” I said.

“But you do not know this,” he went on angrily. “There was a boy from my province who became frightened during the bombardment, and he shot himself in the hand so that he could leave the line because he was afraid.”
The other soldiers were all listening now. Several nodded.

“Such people have their wounds dressed and are returned at once to the line,” the Extremaduran went on. “It is just.”
“Yes,” I said. “That is as it should be.”

“That is as it should be,” said the Extremaduran. “But this boy shot himself so badly that the bone was all smashed and there surged up an infection and his hand was amputated.”
Several soldiers nodded.
“Go on, tell him the rest,” said one.
“It might be better not to speak of it,” said the cropped-headed, bristly-faced man who said he was in command.
“It is my duty to speak,” the Extremaduran said.

The one in command shrugged his shoulders. “I did not like it either,” he said. “Go on, then. But I do not like to hear it spoken of either.”
“This boy remained in the hospital in the valley since February,” the Extremaduran said. “Some of us have seen him in the hospital. All say he was well liked in the hospital and made himself as useful as a man with one hand can be useful. Never was he under arrest. Never was there anything to prepare him.”

The man in command handed me the cup of wine again without saying anything. They were all listening; as men who cannot read or write listen to a story.

“Yesterday, at the close of day, before we knew there was to be an attack. Yesterday, before the sun set, when we thought today was to be as any other day, they brought him up the trail in the gap there from the flat. We were cooking the evening meal and they brought him up. There were only four of them. Him, the boy Paco, those two you have just seen in the leather coats and the caps, and an officer from the brigade. We saw the four of them climbing together up the gap, and we saw Pace’s hands were not tied, nor was he bound in any way.

“When we saw him we all crowded around and said, ‘Hello, Paco. How are you, Paco? How is everything, Paco, old boy, old Paco?’
“Then he said, ‘Everything’s all right. Everything is good except this’— and showed us the stump.

“Paco said, ‘That was a cowardly and foolish thing. I am sorry that I did that thing. But I try to be useful with one hand. I will do what I can with one hand for the Cause.’”
“Yes,” interrupted a soldier. “He said that. I heard him say that.”

“We spoke with him,” the Extremaduran said. “And he spoke with us. When such people with the leather coats and the pistols come it is always a bad omen in a war, as is the arrival of people with map cases and field glasses. Still we thought they had brought him for a visit, and all of us who had not been to the hospital were happy to see him, and as I say, it was the hour of the evening meal and the evening was clear and warm.”

“This wind only rose during the night,” a soldier said.

“Then,” the Extremaduran went on somberly, “one of them said to the officer in Spanish, ‘Where is the place?’
“‘Where is the place this Paco was wounded?’ asked the officer.”
“I answered him,” said the man in command. “I showed the place. It is a little further down than where you are.”
“Here is the place,” said a soldier. He pointed, and I could see it was the place. It showed clearly that it was the place.

“Then one of them led Paco by the arm to the place and held him there by the arm while the other spoke in Spanish. He spoke in Spanish, making many mistakes in the language. At first we wanted to laugh, and Paco started to smile. I could not understand all the speech, but it was that Paco must be punished as an example, in order that there would be no more self-inflicted wounds, and that all others would be punished in the same way.

“Then, while the one held Paco by the arm; Paco, looking very ashamed to be spoken of this way when he was already ashamed and sorry; the other took his pistol out and shot Paco in the back of the head without any word to Paco. Nor any word more.”
The soldiers all nodded.

“It was thus,” said one. “You can see the place. He fell with his mouth there. You can see it.”
I had seen the place clearly enough from where I lay.
“He had no warning and no chance to prepare himself,” the one in command said. “It was very brutal.”

“It is for this that I now hate Russians as well as all other foreigners,” said the Extremaduran. “We can give ourselves no illusions about foreigners. If you are a foreigner, I am sorry. But for myself, now, I can make no exceptions. You have eaten bread and drunk wine with us. Now I think you should go.”

“Do not speak in that way,” the man in command said to the Extremaduran. “It is necessary to be formal.”
“I think we had better go,” I said.
“You are not angry?” the man in command said. “You can stay in this shelter as long as you wish. Are you thirsty? Do you wish more wine?”
“Thank you very much,” I said. “I think we had better go.”

“You understand my hatred?” asked the Extremaduran.
“I understand your hatred,” I said.
“Good,” he said and put out his hand. “I do not refuse to shake hands. And that you, personally, have much luck.”
“Equally to you,” I said. “Personally, and as a Spaniard.”

I woke the one who took the pictures and we started down the ridge toward brigade headquarters. The tanks were all coming back now and you could hardly hear yourself talk for the noise.
“Were you talking all that time?”
“Listening.”
“Hear anything interesting?”
“Plenty.”

“What do you want to do now?”
“Get back to Madrid.”
“We should see the general.”
“Yes,” I said. “We must.”

The general was coldly furious. He had been ordered to make the attack as a surprise with one brigade only, bringing everything up before daylight. It should have been made by at least a division. He had used three battalions and held one in reserve. The French tank commander had got drunk to be brave for the attack and finally was too drunk to function. He was to be shot when he sobered up.

The tanks had not come up in time and finally had refused to advance, and two of the battalions had failed to attain their objectives. The third had taken theirs, but it formed an untenable salient. The only real result had been a few prisoners, and these had been confided to the tank men to bring back and the tank men had killed them. The general had only failure to show, and they had killed his prisoners.

“What can I write on it?” I asked.
“Nothing that is not in the official communiqué. Have you any whisky in that long flask?”
“Yes.”

He took a drink and licked his lips carefully. He had once been a captain of Hungarian Hussars, and he had once captured a gold train in Siberia when he was a leader of irregular cavalry with the Red Army and held it all one winter when the thermometer went down to forty below zero. We were good friends and he loved whisky, and he is now dead.

“Get out of here now,” he said. “Have you transport?”
“Yes.”
“Did you get any pictures?”
“Some. The tanks.”

“The tanks,” he said bitterly. “The swine. The cowards. Watch out you don’t get killed,” he said. “You are supposed to be a writer.”
“I can’t write now.”
“Write it afterwards. You can write it all afterwards. And don’t get killed. Especially, don’t get killed. Now, get out of here.”

He could not take his own advice because he was killed two months later. But the oddest thing about that day was how marvelously the pictures we took of the tanks came out. On the screen they advanced over the hill irresistibly, mounting the crests like great ships, to crawl clanking on toward the illusion of victory we screened.

The nearest any man was to victory that day was probably the Frenchman who came, with his head held high, walking out of the battle. But his victory only lasted until he had walked halfway down the ridge. We saw him lying stretched out there on the slope of the ridge, still wearing his blanket, as we came walking down the cut to get into the staff car that would take us to Madrid.

The End