

last time I was to see Ernest Hemingway, and years would roll by before I saw Agnes again.

In spring of 1962 I was tracked down at my home in Switzerland by Carlos Baker, who was beginning his definitive biography of Hemingway. He had learned of my wartime association with the Red Cross and asked to be supplied with such details as I could remember. In turn I asked him if he knew whatever had become of Agnes, and he responded by sending me her address in Key West, where she was living with her husband, a retired hotel manager named William C. Stanfield, Jr. I decided then and there to try to bridge the formidable gap in time by writing her a letter, enclosing a few snapshots from those long-gone days, including one taken of us together on our carriage drive in the park before dinner.

"What a delightful surprise to hear from you after so many years," she replied warmly.

My, Italy and the First World War seem so far away, and there have been so many changes since, that I can't understand how you even remembered me. And the pictures were a big help—there were so many nice boys in our Milan hospital. . . . We came here in 1951, and at first were just here for the winter, as my husband was operating a hotel in Virginia Beach at the time. At first we thought we were "retired," but, first Bill got busy helping a friend of his out, and I—in a reckless moment—volunteered to help at the new Public Library here 2 years and more ago, and found myself on the payroll ever since, as cataloger.

I had asked what happened to her after the war, whether she had stayed with the Red Cross or ever seen the now celebrated Hemingway again. Let her tell it in her own words:

The year after my return from Italy, I joined up again in the Red Cross, and was sent to Roumania; spent nearly 2 years there, doing visiting nursing, and Junior Red Cross work. Then, after a few years in N.Y., I again asked for assignment, and the Red

That satisfied my curiosity and brought me up to date. Still, a lot of questions remained. How did her relationship with Hemingway come to an end? What was her impression of *A Farewell to Arms*, published more than a decade after the events it described had taken place? I had read it, with an interest born of shared experience, while serving as vice-consul at Teheran, in what was then Persia. How did she feel about the common assumption that she was the model for Catherine Barkley of the novel? The answers would have to wait until we could talk over those days in person.

"Do you ever come back to the States?" she had inquired in the course of a sporadic correspondence over the ensuing years, implying that I would be welcome if I should call. Eventually, I was able to plan a trip to Florida for the winter of 1976. "Please forgive my slow reply to your nice letter," she wrote on September 21, 1975, from a new home at Gulfport, near St. Petersburg. "Truth is that I've slowed down lots since I last saw you. I did some digging and found a few old letters, but, it became too long for a letter. Would it be possible to give it all to you when you look us up this winter. . . . I certainly hope you go ahead . . . and look us up here. I am really looking forward to that."

Life seemed to have come full circle when she answered my ring at her apartment early one Florida afternoon the following March. More than half a century had elapsed since the night we had met at the hospital door in Milan, and it would be fatuous to pretend that we hadn't both changed. Alas, Agnes at eighty-four was no longer the blithe spirit her patients had known. Not in the best of health, she was nonetheless tall and straight as ever and the old charm came through as she ushered me into the parlor of the comfortable Stanfield home. Bill, her staunch, considerate husband, let us spend the rest of the day undisturbed and the years dissolved in a flood of reminiscences.

Of course, the talk turned quickly to Hemingway and the hospital, as it inevitably would between two veterans of that tight little world apart on the Via Cesare Cantù. Our discussion was frank and to the point. Ernest had been very serious about wanting to marry her, no doubt about that; he had done his best to persuade her. She, on the other hand, had "liked" him without being "in love" with him;

she had found him "interesting" but he was "impulsive, hasty, not to say impetuous." "He didn't really know what he wanted." He "hadn't thought out anything clearly." In short, he was just too young and immature for a girl seven years older, as she was, to fall truly in love with him. She had been afraid that he was going to turn into an aimless wanderer after the war, an expatriate, without roots, as he had shown signs of doing. She had put him off, advising him, perhaps in the manner of an older sister, to return to America after hostilities ended. He had departed in January 1919, and when she ultimately broke with him that spring she had simply "put him out of" her mind. Admittedly, they had had what she chose to call a "flirtation," but the relationship, she said firmly, had never gone beyond that. I had no reason to think otherwise, knowing her as I did.

But, Agnes confessed, there was another reason for her cooling off. She had become enamored of an irresistibly attractive Italian artillery officer, Domenico Caracciolo, scion of an old Neapolitan family, jealous to a fault. He had forced her to burn all of Hemingway's letters. "I was pretty fickle in those days," she said quizzically, and I remembered that she was reported to have been involved with a doctor in New York whom she had dropped abruptly after leaving for Italy. She was convinced that Domenico's intentions were "completely sincere," that if it hadn't been for his mother they would "most certainly" have been married. But the mother was strenuously opposed to letting the friendship of her son for an unknown American girl, probably an adventuress, turn into an engagement. The last time she had seen him they had passed her in a carriage in Naples: he had stood up and looked back and she would never forget the expression in his eyes. There was no such sentiment in her recollection of Hemingway.

As for her reaction to *Farewell*, one thing was clear: Agnes thoroughly resented being taken for "the alter ego of the complaisant Catherine Barkley" and thus indirectly the mistress of the man who wrote the book. I thought of a passage from the novel:

"Is there anything I do you don't like? Can I do anything to please you? Would you like me to take down my hair? Do you want to play?"

"Yes and come to bed."

"All right. I'll go and see the patients first" [p. 121].

"Let's get it straight—please," she insisted. "I wasn't *that* kind of girl." So strongly did she object to the insinuation that she and Ernest were lovers in the fullest sense of the word, that she and her husband had decided to move away from Key West, where the tourist guide at Hemingway's former home, turned into a museum in 1962, persisted in referring to her as "Hemingway's girl." Catherine was "an arrant fantasy" created by the writer in the same way he had produced a "macho" image of himself as the virile, resourceful ambulance driver, Frederic Henry. "Ernest never conceived the story while he was in the hospital," she went on. "He was much too busy enjoying the attention of friends and well-wishers to think about the plot of a novel; he invented the myth years later—built out of his frustration in love. The liaison was all made up out of whole cloth," wishful thinking, if you will. Never, in all her experience, had she heard it suggested that an affair of this kind could run its course in a bedridden patient's quarters. "It was totally implausible," and in this I could well concur, given the restricted logistics of the Ospedale Americana. Surely, no more improbable environment could have been devised for a clandestine love affair that culminated in the woman's pregnancy than the two upper floors of a building converted into sanitized, vigilantly supervised hospital premises by the American Red Cross.

On the other hand, the borderline between fact and fiction can be a thin one and fleeting moments for a "flirtation" certainly were there, after hours, for example, when the other patients were asleep and Aggie could pay more visits to Ernie's room than were strictly necessary. By her own admission, she did not mind night duty:

She looked toward the door, saw there was no one, then she sat on the side of the bed and leaned over and kissed me. I pulled her down and kissed her and felt her heart beating. . . .

"You mustn't," she said. "You're not well enough."

"Yes, I am. Come on."

"No. You're not strong enough."

*Red Cross Driver in Italy*

"Yes. I am. Yes. Please."

"You do love me?"

"I really love you. I'm crazy about you. Come on please."

"All right but only for a minute" [pp. 95-96].

I asked Agnes whether any of the patients had tried to "get fresh" with her. No, they were all "nice boys." None of them gave her trouble, with a single exception: a naval aviator, who used to ring for her in the middle of the night and order her to come close to his bed. The remedy for that was to switch on the light and turn her back on his advances.

Rather to my surprise, Agnes indulged in some disparaging remarks about Ernie. The medal of valor awarded to him by the Italian government had been won at an outpost "where he had no business to be," a place "where he had been expressly told not to go." He was "completely spoiled" at the hospital. Contrary to his oft-quoted line "there are no heroes in this war," Hemingway thought of himself in heroic terms. He "thrived on adulation" and "learned to play on the sympathy he received." As time went on and he was able to get around on crutches, "all decked out with his wound stripes and medals," he became "vainglorious." With his cane and emblazoned uniform, he was the "laughing stock" of American soldiers when he paid her a visit at Torre di Mosta near Treviso, where she had been sent to help combat the influenza epidemic: "It was just too much for them to take."

The real cause of his problems in later life, she said with conviction, lay in the way he viewed himself. Everyone at the hospital indulged him. This completely changed his fresh, boyish character and laid the foundation for a self-centeredness that saw himself in every action and led in turn to the paranoia from which he couldn't escape at the end. From my own observation of what went on at the hospital, I couldn't help feeling that Agnes had put her finger on the underlying reason for Hemingway's behaving as he did as an adult. "It was a messy way to die," she added, shaking her head, "but what he did was understandable, considering that his mind was impaired, that

his powers as a man and a writer were failing. The whole world knew that he had been undergoing psychiatric treatment."

Notwithstanding her attempt to play down the affair, there is no question in my mind that Agnes was strongly drawn to Hemingway, as her numerous extant letters attest, and that he thought, in the inexperience of youth, he was going to marry her after the war. Anyone less in love might have been more conscious of the difference in their ages, but in light of the evidence the conclusion is inescapable that she led him on, whether or not she realized what she was doing.

Ernie took his dismissal very hard. Bill Horne, who became his bosom friend and confidant, wrote me years later that "it was a tremendous blow" and resulted in Ernie's writing him "the most heart-broken, heartrending letter" Bill had ever received. To Elsie MacDonald, Hemingway wrote bitterly that he had hoped Agnes would stumble and break all her front teeth when she stepped off the boat in New York. And when the first movie version of *Farewell* appeared in 1932, starring Helen Hayes and Gary Cooper in the saccharine Hollywood manner, an angered Hemingway was said to have told a reporter for the *Arkansas Democrat*: "I did not intend a happy ending." To an impressionable young man, who had never loved before, the shock of being rejected by the girl he believed was his must have been exceptionally severe and may well have conditioned his future attitude toward women.

There was one last point to discuss: just how much was Hemingway influenced by his remembrance of her in composing the imaginary person of Catherine? Agnes was reluctant to speak of herself in this connection. She had informed the Red Cross of her own belief that a tall, blond nurse named Elsie Jessup, who had been with her on duty in Florence and who subsequently went to Milan, was the pattern for much of the characterization of Catherine. But I had no doubt that the major contribution was that made by Agnes herself. Agnes might not have been her precise counterpart, but without Agnes there would have been no Catherine. In no other work did Hemingway describe his heroine in terms of such passionate tenderness; so many of his women appear tough or cynical in comparison. There is not one iota of cynicism in the story of Catherine; surely, the

tale had its wellspring in something wholly unfeigned by the writer. And the fact that Ernie had in his possession three of her letters until the day of his death showed that he had not forgotten.

Agnes did not feel like going out in the evenings, but I took her to lunch at her favorite restaurant, the Sand Dollar, the next day. "You are a sentimental man," she said with a smile when I kissed her goodbye. Yet it could only have been for sentiment's sake that she presented me with her passport picture and some photographs of herself torn from a battered album.<sup>10</sup>

We kept in touch, regularly exchanging cards at Christmas. Nor was sentiment lacking in some of the greetings she chose: "When thoughts go wandering, / The best thing they can do, / Is take a sentimental journey, / Across the miles to you." "I am still around," she appended to her last message, "tho' very lazy and not able to be very active. Hope you are in good shape."

Then one day came a letter signed by both Agnes and Bill. Her advancing years had led Agnes to apply for eventual interment in the Soldiers' Home National Cemetery at Arlington, Virginia, in the same plot as her distinguished grandparent Quartermaster General Holabird, her grandmother, and her parents. The regulations were inflexible: permission would not be granted. A plea that exception be made was mired in a mass of bureaucratic red tape. Could I, as a retired ambassador of the United States, be of any possible assistance? I did not see how I could exert any influence, but I made as strong a case as I could in her behalf, stressing her wartime patriotism in volunteering for duty overseas. In January of 1983 I was rewarded by word from Lt. General George H. McKee, President of the Board of Commissioners of the United States Soldiers' and Airmens' Home, that after "careful, thorough and compassionate consideration," and in keeping with her "exemplary dedication to the nation," the Board had finally approved her request. What is more, it had extended the authority to her spouse as well. "Your efforts . . . paid off handsomely," wrote a delighted couple, and again in June of 1984, "we shall always be grateful."

Agnes's memory was fast failing, but she was "hanging on" without pain or medication. Bill had hopes she would make it to her