



For Whom the Bell Tolls

by Ernest Hemingway (1899 - 1961)

Type of Work:

Romantic war novel

Setting

Spain; 1937

Principal Characters

Robert Jordan, an American fighting with Spanish Loyalists

Maria, Jordan's lover

Anselmo, Jordan's elderly guerilla guide

Pablo, a drunken guerilla leader

Pilar, Pablo's strong and commanding wife

El Sordo, another guerilla leader

Rafael, a gypsy member of Pablo's band

Story Overview

Robert Jordan, the young American, could think of nothing but the bridge as he and his seasoned guide Anselmo hiked through the mountains behind Fascist lines. Golz, one of many Russians also working for the Loyalist forces in their civil war with the Fascists for control of Spain, explained the importance of Jordan's mission. Golz was organizing a major offensive against the enemy. To protect his troops from reinforcements sent up after the attack commenced, Golz needed the strategic bridge destroyed: "[Do it] as soon as the attack has started and not before. I must know that bridge is gone."

Jordan and Anselmo worked their way up the mountains where the bridge was located. The plan was for Jordan to make contact with a guerilla band led by Pablo and his devoted, fierce, and swarthy wife, Pilar. After taking a few days to examine the bridge and organize the attack, he would wait for the proper moment to blow it up.

Though he had destroyed other bridges, and trains as well, Jordan was apprehensive about this mission. He felt even worse when he made contact with Pablo's band. The guerilla leader was surly and insecure; he demanded to know what Jordan intended to do: "If it is in this territory, it is my business." Jordan quickly changed the subject.

That night Jordan stayed at the guerrilla's cave hideout with Pilar, Rafael the gypsy, six other guerrillas, and Maria, a young girl who had been rescued from the Fascists. Jordan asked Pilar if more guerrillas could be rounded up for the attack on the heavily guarded bridge. She said that she would enlist the help of a band of six or seven mountain men, led by the reclusive but proficient El Sordo. However, the attack would be very dangerous, and afterwards the entire band would have to abandon their mountain camps.

Pablo was drunk earlier than usual that evening. He criticized Jordan's plans and told everyone in the cave that the mission would fail. But Pilar stepped in and ushered Jordan outside for a breath of air. The gypsy, Rafael, quickly followed. "Three or four times we waited for you to kill him. Pablo has no friends," Rafael declared. Although the idea of killing Pablo had in fact flashed across Jordan's mind, he had restrained himself: "For a stranger to kill where he must work with the people afterwards is very bad."

For weeks all of Jordan's thoughts had centered on his mission. Now, however, all throughout the evening's tension-filled dinner, it was not Pablo or the bridge that occupied his mind, but Maria. The two flirted, sneaking glances and sly touches back and forth. Later, when Jordan bedded down outside beneath the stars - along with the dynamite, which no one wanted in the cave - Maria came to him, torn between hope and reluctance. Among the Fascists she had been subjected to starvation, torture and rape, and she believed that no one could love a defiled woman. But Jordan persuaded her to slide into his sleeping bag next to him, and they became lovers. And Jordan, who had lived until then mainly for the ceremony of risking his life, now knew that, though he would still fight for the cause, he no longer wished to court death; he wanted to live - for Maria.

The next day, Pilar, Jordan and Maria paid a visit to El Sordo's camp. Along the way Pilar spoke of how the war had begun in her native village. Pablo had led the attack on the local, "civilian guardia," trapped in their barracks. After killing the soldiers, Pablo and his rebels gathered Fascist party members into the town hall. There, one by one, they were forced to run through a gauntlet formed by the townspeople, who beat them with shovels and rakes. To Robert Jordan, it was a horrible, disgusting story.

At the camp, El Sordo agreed to help with the mission to blow up the bridge, and assured that he could secure horses for the ensuing escape. It was snowing heavily when they returned to their own camp. The snow was a bad omen. Jordan grimly acknowledged that it could ruin the entire mission. Pablo, on the other hand, was elated. He baited Jordan: "With this thy offensive goes, Ingles." But Jordan walked away from the guerilla's taunting. He couldn't risk muddling the mission with internal violence.

Earlier that day, Pablo had sent Anselmo down near the bridge to watch the road and spy out the sentry positions. The storm was now in full force and Anselmo had not returned, so Jordan trekked to the bridge. There he found the old man at his post, still waiting and watching.

When Jordan and Anselmo returned to the cave, they found Pablo, "bleary-eyed drunk." While they ate, Pablo again tried to provoke Jordan into a fight. One of the other men punched Pablo in the face, but Pablo only laughed.

In the early light of morning, Jordan spied, and shot, an approaching Fascist cavalryman. Quickly he directed Pablo to lead the dead man's horse away from the camp while another man quickly hid the body. Next he ordered a large machine gun to be placed and camouflaged above the camp. Jordan figured the horseman must be part of a patrol searching for El Sordo, who had stolen horses the night before.

After a short time, four more cavalrymen passed - unmolested - below. "We could have killed all four," the gunner protested. "But with the firing who knows what might have come?" Jordan replied. And as he had surmised, twenty more soldiers soon followed in their wake. Later, when they heard the attack on El Sordo's camp, some of Pablo's men wanted to go to their aid. But Jordan said it would be useless. And no matter what the cost, the bridge had to come first.

Again, Jordan was right. For hours El Sordo's men fought valiantly. But when the Fascist bombers arrived, El Sordo and his band were slaughtered, and the Fascist officer ordered all the dead guerrillas beheaded to serve as a warning to other rebels.

Now, without El Sordo's men, Jordan knew the attack on the bridge would be almost impossible. Still, they watched the roads, as Fascist tanks, troops and trucks crossed over the bridge.

That night as Jordan slept, Pablo stole and destroyed the exploder, detonator and blasting caps from Jordan's pack, then disappeared. When Pilar woke Jordan to tell him this news, his stomach felt "hollow." They would now have to set off the dynamite using grenades - a much more dangerous method.

Before dawn Jordan and the others prepared for the operation. Most would divide and attack two Fascist flank posts, while Jordan and Anselmo killed the guards on the bridge and set the dynamite. Just as all was readied, Pablo appeared with five other men to join them. Jordan had mixed feelings about Pablo's return, but decided that any reinforcements were better than nothing.

Everything was set; everyone was in position. Now they must wait for the aerial bombardment to signal the beginning of the offensive. To Jordan it seemed that it would never come, "that nothing could happen on such a lovely late May morning." Suddenly they heard "clustered, thudding of the bombs," and Jordan and Anselmo opened fire on the two guards. As Jordan wired the bridge, the few minutes seemed like an eternity. Finally he was able to pull the pins and the bridge was blown high into the air. But in the explosion, Anselmo, a sensitive man who had always hated killing, was killed himself by a steel fragment. Jordan tearfully cursed Pablo; the old man might still be alive had Pablo not stolen the blasting caps.

Jordan raced to the designated meeting place to regroup. Crouched in the pines, he found only Pablo, Pilar, Maria and two other gypsy insurgents. Pablo was leading a dozen horses. Though Pablo claimed at first that the other guerrillas had been killed by Fascists, Jordan forced Pablo to admit that he himself had slaughtered them to get their horses.

The survivors were now hemmed in by Fascist troops and tanks. They needed to cross a road that led to safety, knowing full well that the Fascists would strafe the road with bullets once they were alerted. Jordan chose to cross last. As he made his move, a tank fired a shell, trapping him beneath his wounded horse. The others dragged him out of the line of fire, but Jordan knew his leg was hopelessly crushed. Maria knelt near him and sobbed. Jordan voiced his love for her, and though she begged to stay with him, he assured her that as long as she was alive, he would live too. Finally the others wrestled her away from him so they could leave.

Jordan gripped his submachine gun and waited. He pondered the events that had brought him there to die. He would not, however, die in vain. The fight of the common people was his fight; someday they would win, and hopefully struggle for peace as tenaciously as they strained for freedom. Jordan smiled, took aim at the leading Fascist officer who had come into view, and squeezed the trigger.

Commentary

Hemingway once worked as a reporter covering the Spanish Civil War. *For Whom the Bell Tolls* was the most famous book to come out of that war, which served as a prelude to the devastation of World War II in which the free world united against Fascism. Perhaps overly romanticized, at the same time the novel illustrates humanity's great capacity for either hope or despair, as shown by the contrast between the devoted Anselmo and the brutish Pablo.

Written as though translated from formal Spanish, the novel evokes a realistic mood. The title was taken from a quote by John Donne: "... Any man's death diminishes me, because I am involved in Mankind; And therefore never send to know for whom the bell tolls; It tolls for thee."