

Sparring in the Dark: Hemingway, Strater and *The Old Man and the Sea*

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In 1934 Hemingway purchased a thirty-eight foot cabin cruiser and named it *Pilar* after his pet name for his wife Pauline. Living in Key West, the author was aware of the wonderful marlin fishing to be found around Bimini, and he planned to use the *Pilar* for fishing expeditions. In early 1935 Hemingway invited his good friend Henry "Mike" Strater to join him in Key West for the long awaited trip to Bimini. The artist, who lived in Ogunquit, Maine, was spending the winter in West Palm Beach painting and fishing. An experienced fisherman, Strater had launched the sport of tuna fishing on rod and reel in the New England coastal waters, landing sixteen giant tuna in the summer of 1933. Strater recalled, "Hem talked me into going with him to Bimini, fishing and sharing the expenses of running the *Pilar*. The deal was that I would fish one side of the boat and Hem the other. We fished for black marlin off Bimini for almost a month, and didn't even get a strike. Then one day we decided to troll at a faster speed and I snagged a big one."¹ Little did Strater realize he and the giant marlin he hooked would serve as models for Hemingway's 1952 Pulitzer Prize-winning novel, *OMS*.² Neither did the painter imagine that what began as a pleasurable fishing trip would end in the dissolution of his close thirteen-year friendship with Hemingway.³

Strater arrived at Hemingway's Key

West home the first week of April 1935. The days before their departure for Bimini were taken up with preparations for the extended trip, and the evenings were a time for drinking and conversation. Strater met one of Hemingway's old friends Esther Chambers and enjoyed seeing mutual friends John and Katy Dos Passos who were to be shipmates on the voyage to Bimini. The night before they were to leave for the Bahamas, Chambers took Strater aside and asked, "Mike, do you think it is wise for you to go to Bimini with Ernest?" Surprised at the question, Strater asked why he shouldn't go. Chambers replied, "Well, you wouldn't go to Africa with him, "suggesting the author was still angry with Strater for missing the 1933 trip."⁴

Henry remembered that on an earlier fishing trip with Hemingway, and Dos Passos, Ernest started a tirade against Archibald MacLeish for his refusal to join the African safari. Strater said, "Hem, Dos and I were bedding down in the cabin of the boat when Hem began talking to Dos about MacLeish saying, 'I hate MacLeish. He wouldn't go to Africa with me. And when I was in the auto accident in Wyoming and he came to see me, I could see it in his face that he was waiting for me to die and was there to get a last interview.'

"Still speaking to Dos, but knowing that I was lying there listening, Hem continued, 'If I had MacLeish here now, I would get him down on the floor and hold an ax over him and tell him that I was going to kill him, and let him look at

the ax before I did it.'

"So I knew," said Strater, "that he felt the same way about me." Consequently, the painter took Chambers' warning seriously, notifying his family that if anything happened to him on the Bimini trip for them to "check into it."

On April 7, 1935, Hemingway, Strater, John and Katy Dos Passos, and the *Pilar's* captain and cook sailed for Bimini. While enroute the fishing party trolled the waters and Ernest hooked a large shark. Trying to kill the fish with a Colt Woodsman twenty-two automatic kept aboard for such occasions, Hemingway shot himself in the legs. Strater recalled there was "a lot of blood"; however, the writer's wounds were not serious because the bullets had bounded off the cockpit's brass combing before striking Hemingway. The *Pilar* returned immediately to Key West where Ernest could get quick medical attention. On the return voyage Hemingway drank an entire bottle of scotch, arriving at the hospital "roaring drunk and making a big deal" of the wounds.⁵ After examining the bloody fisherman Strater heard one of the doctor's say, "My God, I thought it was serious." Hemingway later wrote an article for *Esquire* entitled "On Being Shot Again." Once Hemingway had been treated at the hospital it was decided to postpone the trip for at least a week. During the lay-over Strater returned to West Palm Beach, promising to meet Ernest in Bimini the first week of May.

When Strater arrived in Bimini the tiny island was already filled with fishermen determined to land a world's record black marlin. Most of the contenders were famous sportsmen with large, well-equipped boats and expensive guides.

Strater said, "And there we were, an artist and a writer trying to compete with the elite of fishing. They ridiculed Hem and me, and it didn't go down with either of us because we were both very competitive. So we set out to prove we were every bit as good as the more experienced fishermen." Hemingway fished with wobblers, a wooden plug with no hooks that imitated the movement of fish. When the marlin came up to the plug, Ernest would drop in his hooked line baited with bonefish. Strater fished from an outrigger he had brought to Key West and installed on the *Pilar*. The outrigger was a long pole extending out about twenty feet from the side of the boat, allowing a fisherman to drop his baited hook out away from the wake of the boat.

For nearly a month Hemingway and Strater trolled the dark blue waters around Bimini. Fishing out of wooden holders, each man kept two rods in the water. Ernest made fun of Strater's use of the outrigger and continued to fish from the stern. Eventually the two men decided it was time to try something different. They instructed the *Pilar's* captain, Albert "Bread" Pinder, to troll at a faster speed. Soon, Strater hooked a giant black marlin. He proudly remembered, "As soon as I hooked him I knew it was a big one. Then he came out of the water walking on his tail, and it was just like a metallic-blue express train bursting out of the ocean. Hem and I were both excited because it was the first one we hooked; the first big marlin anyone in Bimini had snagged, and we wanted very badly to land him."

While Hemingway and Strater had fished together off the coast of Florida prior to this 1935 trip, this was their first

attempt at black marlin. Both men realized, however, that the recurring problem for sportsmen fishing the waters of Bimini was sharks. For when large marlin were snagged the usual procedure was to play the fish slowly, allowing it to tire (and keep from tiring the fisherman), and preventing the hook from being torn from the fish's mouth. By playing the fish slowly, however, the constant and prolonged thrashing of the marlin, and the subsequent blood in the water, attracted sharks. As a result, landing a record-setting marlin without losing a large portion of it to sharks was almost impossible. Strater had already decided that if he hooked a marlin he would play it fast, hoping to tire the fish quickly and eliminate shark attacks. Aware of Strater's plan, Hemingway and Pinder rushed to assist him with the landing.

With much luck, energy, and most of his strength, Strater was able to bring the powerful black marlin to the side of the *Pilar*, ready to gaff, in under one hour. Once alongside the boat Pinder leaned over and prepared to take hold of the twelve-foot leader. With the leader in hand, Pinder would then guide the fish to a landing ladder equipped with rollers. At that point it was Hemingway's job to gaff the fish, and then it could be pulled aboard.

Just as Pinder was about to grab the leader, instead of going for the gaff, Hemingway ran into the cabin and grabbed a sawed-off Krag army rifle loaded with 220 grain bullets.⁶ Hemingway bolted from the cabin with the gun and stood directly behind Strater in the rocking boat. Strater said, "Bread and I were still occupied with the marlin when suddenly Hem begins to fire the

gun off right behind us screaming, 'Sharks, sharks.' We could hear the bullets going past our heads. Bread, who was being paid by the week and not paid at all to get shot at, ran immediately to the other end of the boat. If I hadn't had a record fish on my line, I would have run too."

Strater was now in the unenviable position of trying to single-handedly keep the thousand-pound fish from escaping while at the same time attempting to avoid having his head blown off. The artist turned to Hemingway and yelled, "Stop that damn shooting, Hem. Stop the shooting." Hemingway then laughed out loud, "Oh, he can't take muzzle blasts. He can't take muzzle blasts."

Strater explained, "The truth is that Ernest was overcome with jealousy because I had a world's record marlin hooked and had brought it up in record time. Hem didn't want me to be the one to catch the first big fish. In fact the fish was never in danger from the sharks because I had already brought it to gaff with no damage whatsoever.⁷ Except for gaffing the fish, it was caught." After the author started firing, however, Strater had no alternative but to give the marlin free spool. The action saved Strater from being shot and kept Hemingway from putting a bullet in the fish and disqualifying it from consideration as a record catch.

With the fish free in the water and the shooting stopped, calm returned to the *Pilar*. Although Strater was exhausted from the battle with the marlin, and angry at his friend's actions, he still had to concentrate on saving his catch. Given free spool, the fish had gone straight down. Strater began an hour-long

struggle pulling the fish up six inches and then losing six inches to the powerful marlin. By now Ernest realized his ego had gotten the better of him. By ruining his friend's opportunity with the fish, he had also wrecked his own chance to better the other fishermen in Bimini. Now instead of "fouling things up," Strater said that Hemingway did everything possible to help. Ernest went into the cabin and got Strater a better shoulder harness and helped him on with it. At one point when Strater's knee popped out of joint, Hemingway helped him jam it back into place. The writer's earlier actions, however, could not be reversed. Hemingway's indiscriminate firing into the water had served to attract and agitate the nearby sharks, creating a feeding frenzy. Strater could feel the repeated sharp hits of the swarming sharks as he pulled in the marlin. Ernest watched as the water filled with blood. Describing the shark attack on Santiago's marlin in *OMS*, the author wrote:

The shark closed fast astern and when he hit the fish the old man saw his mouth open and his strange eyes and the clicking chop of his teeth as he drove forward in the meat just above the tail. The shark's head was out of the water and his back was coming out and the old man could hear the noise of skin and flesh ripping on the big fish. . . (112)

By the time Strater managed to bring the fish up again almost four hundred pounds of meat had been taken by the sharks. Henry and Ernest saw the beautiful fish stripped of its flesh from mid-length to its tail. The painter's black marlin was dead at gaff. Hemingway wrote of Santiago:

He did not like to look at the fish anymore since

he had been mutilated. When the fish had been hit it was though he himself were hit. (113)

While a third of Strater's marlin was exposed bone, the rest remained unharmed. Even more surprising to the fishermen, the entire skeleton had survived intact (as would Santiago's fish). At this point Hemingway's jealousy was gone and he became efficient and careful with the landing of the fish. Together, Hemingway, Strater, and Bread succeeded in loading the fourteen foot, four inch marlin onboard without damaging the skeleton. By the time they secured the fish Henry was in a state of collapse and was in no shape to continue fishing. It was early and obviously a good fishing day, so Hemingway decided to stay out. The author used Strater's rods in addition to his own, and soon caught a marlin weighing one hundred and fifty pounds. Later Ernest snagged a second black marlin weighing a respectable three hundred and fifty pounds, and then decided it was time to quit.

Strater remembered that after landing his second marlin Hemingway "hoisted every signal flag he had onboard" and sailed for Bimini. As the *Pilar* entered the harbor it seemed to Henry that everyone on the tiny island had turned out to see their catch. The crew of the *Pilar* carefully removed the big fish from the boat, and to loud applause hoisted it up without breaking its backbone. Many people wanted photos of the huge marlin and the proud fisherman. Strater stood next to the fish with rod in hand, indicating he had caught the fish. Hemingway stood nearby, taking bows as boat captain. Strater proudly recalled, "We were both getting a big laugh on everyone of those

goddamn shitasses who had make fun of an artist and a writer who believed they could compete with the pros.”

Finally, after more than an hour of snapshots, someone in the crowd yelled, “Can’t we please get one shot of the angler and the fish?”

Hemingway said, “Oh, certainly,” in a very embarrassed way and got out of the picture.

“But you know,” said Strater, “In the fifty-odd years since I caught that fish, I’ve never seen a photo of me and the fish without Hemingway. In fact, some years later one of these pictures appeared in *Time* magazine. The caption said something about this being the fish that Hemingway caught which inspired him to write *The Old Man and the Sea*. At that time some of my fishing pals said that I should demand a correction from *Time*, but I was more interested in seeing whether Hem would send in a correction. He didn’t.”

Besting the competitive Hemingway that day in Bimini served only to intensify the writer’s grudge against Strater. After the photo session on the docks, during which time Ernest’s two marlins were virtually ignored, everyone went to a local bar to celebrate. It seemed to Strater that everyone wanted to shake his hand and buy him a drink. The artist did not discourage his admirers, drinking champagne chased by scotch and sodas and “getting him blind drunk” in the process. Late night turned into early morning and eventually only Hemingway, Strater and the bartender were left to close the bar. Strater grimly remembered, “Hem and I were standing at the bar and suddenly he hauled off and hit me as hard as he could in the solar plexus. I

just looked at him and said, ‘Hem you’re getting weak. Can’t you hit any harder than that?’ And, oh God, he slugged me even harder. But I was so drunk that it didn’t bother me.”

Then Hemingway said, “Come outside for a minute, there’s something I want to tell you.”

“Well, I was so loaded that I got up and tried to stagger out the door. Now if I had been sober, or even half sober, I wouldn’t have gone with him because I knew he loved to knock out drunks—especially if he had a grudge against them. Hem would go drinking with people he disliked, tongue the bottle and let the other guy get roaring drunk, then take him outside and knock him cold. He did that with several people. This time I had drunk so much that I was going to be his next victim, but then I passed out.”

The next thing Strater remembered after walking out of the bar with Hemingway was waking up onboard the *Pilar*. It was broad daylight, and Strater was lying on the seats in the open end of the boat. He realized immediately what had happened and went below to check his face in the mirror—anticipating at the very least a black eye. There was not a mark on him. Later that day Strater visited the bar and learned from the bartender that he and Hemingway had carried the unconscious painter back to the *Pilar*. Strater said, “I think the bartender saved me from sparring in the dark with Hem.”

Not only did Hemingway ruin Strater’s opportunity to land intact the record marlin, but also the author later added insult to injury with an uncomplimentary July 1935 *Esquire* article based on the fishing incident.⁸ Strater said of “The

President Vanquishes.” “That was a pretty cheesy thing Hem wrote about me in *Esquire*. He wrote that I pooped out on the fish, making no reference to the fact it was his fault we hadn’t gotten the fish earlier. Hem was a fine sportsman, but in this case too competitive. Oh, he was very alive and more fun to be with than anybody I ever knew, but he could be a real S. O. B. In 1935 he was an S. O. B. because I had refused to go with him to Africa.”

Strater left Bimini in early June soon after the marlin incident, never returning to the island again. The artist said, “That fish was over fourteen feet long and would have weighed a thousand pounds (five hundred and sixty pounds survived). It would have been the first really big marlin caught in Bimini. Hemingway knew I was upset about catching that fish and then losing it to the sharks. Hem was a fisherman and understood what I was experiencing. Before I left for Florida he took me aside and said, ‘You have a broken heart.’ And I did.” In *OMS* (138) Santiago expresses his sorrow over the loss of the fish by telling the boy:

In the night I spat something strange and felt something in my chest was broken.

The marlin and bar incidents together with the *Esquire* article chilled the friendship between Strater and Hemingway. They would continue to exchange letters every few years (the last four months before the writer’s death), but the two men drifted apart after Bimini. When Strater learned of his friend’s suicide he wrote a warm remembrance of the author for *Art in America Magazine*

saying:

Because he was a perfectionist, he was not easy to get along with at times; but he had such overpowering charm and aliveness that one was always glad to see him again the next time. (9)

Even in his late eighties when speaking of Hemingway’s death Strater would say, “Nobody felt more upset than I did. I really miss him.”

Notes

¹ All Strater quotes are taken from interviews with the artist which took place between 1981 and his death in 1987. Most of those interviews were tape recorded by the author.

² According to Carlos Baker’s biography of the writer, *Ernest Hemingway: A Life Story* (502), Baker reminded Hemingway in 1952 that the novelist had said to Max Perkins that Carlos Gutierrez was “one distant prototype of Santiago.” Gutierrez, a Cuban commercial fisherman who was well known for his success with marlins, was introduced to Hemingway in 1932. In Baker’s biography (604), Baker says that in 1935 Gutierrez told Hemingway about catching a 450 pound tuna that pulled his skiff a long distance before succumbing to exhaustion. It appears that *OMS* is founded upon a combination of the Gutierrez story, and the actual events of the Strater-Hemingway Bimini trip of 1935.

³ Strater and Hemingway met in Paris in 1922 while attending one of Ezra Pound’s “open houses.” Strater became a widely exhibited painter whose works are represented in collections such as the Philadelphia Museum of Art; the Art Institute of Chicago; the Hirshhorn Collection; and the Butler Institute of American Art. Strater founded the Museum of Art of Ogunquit, Maine in 1952.

⁴ In April of 1930 Hemingway proposed that Strater accompany him on an African safari. In May Strater bought a gun for the trip and began practicing with the weapon. In September Hemingway informed Strater that Archibald MacLeish would join them in Africa. On November 1, Hemingway suffered a badly broken arm in an auto accident and the trip was postponed. The African journey was then re-scheduled for late 1932. In June of 1932, however, Hemingway once again put off the trip for another year citing “eye

problems." In fact, Ernest probably postponed the long-awaited safari to accommodate a period during which his writing was going so well that he feared an interruption. Strater was bitterly disappointed about the second delay, expressing his displeasure to Hemingway by saying that the postponements had fouled up his painting schedule. When Ernest finally sailed for Africa in November of 1933, only Charles Thompson accompanied him. Both Strater and MacLeish declined to participate. Strater said, "Hem wanted MacLeish and me along as a cheering section. He got material for a couple of books out of the trip and was receiving money from *Esquire* for articles. MacLeish and I wouldn't have gotten anything."

⁵ While Strater down played the seriousness of his friend's wounds, Baker (272) says that when Hemingway's legs were initially treated with anti-septic aboard the *Pilar* the pain caused the author to "vomit into a bucket." It seems that Hemingway's drunken conduct after the shooting abolished any sympathy Strater might have otherwise felt for Ernest's injury. Baker says that Katy Dos Passos shared Strater's feelings, and was "so mad she would hardly speak to [Hemingway]." Additionally, Strater's disdain for Hemingway's "pain" resulted from the fact that Strater himself had also received several small shrapnel wounds during the shooting. Strater said, "One of my legs was peppered with bullet fragments. There was some blood, but I never mentioned it. As we sailed back to Key West I dug them out with a pen knife."

⁶ Baker (273) asserts that Hemingway fired at the sharks with a "tommy gun." Strater denied that, saying that Baker was incorrect about the "machine gun;" insisting that the weapon in question was a "sawed-off .30/40 Krag Army rifle." The Krag was the standard U. S. Army rifle from 1892 until it was replaced in 1903 by the Springfield rifle. After 1903, many of the U. S.-made Krags (manufactured in Springfield, Massachusetts) which survived military service were sold. Strater said that Abercrombie and Fitch converted Krags, selling them as spear-guns. Strater purchased one of these Krag spear-guns but found that it was not powerful enough, the spear consistently deflected by the water. Although Strater considered himself as knowledgeable about weapons as EH, his was actually a superficial familiarity. EH spoke disparagingly of the painter's expertise with firearms, telling Archibald MacLeish, "Don't let Mike [Strater] tell you anything about guns. Everything he has written me about guns is utter nonsense" (Baker,

Ernest Hemingway, Selected Letters, 330). Recognizing that Strater was more knowledgeable about fishing than shooting, it may be prudent to take his description of the weapon involved with a grain of salt.

⁷ Strater denied Baker's version of the marlin incident (273) which had the sharks "zeroing in" on Strater's fish after the first hour of battle.

⁸ Baker (273) incorrectly writes: "He [Strater] made no mention of his [Hemingway's] ill-timed intrusion with the tommy-gun. Strater pretended to like the article ['The President Vanquishes'], but was in fact enraged." Strater was in fact mad enough to sarcastically write to Hemingway shortly after the article appeared that he would be glad to write *Esquire* "a letter any time." This was a not-so subtle threat by the painter to publish potentially unfavorable memoirs of Hemingway.

⁹ Henry Strater, "Hemingway," *Art in America* Vol. 49, No. 4, 1961, 84.

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