

Summary: <http://www.enotes.com/topics/a-farewell-to-arms>

Frederic Henry, the protagonist in *A Farewell to Arms*, is a young American in Italy serving, as Hemingway did, as an ambulance driver during World War I. He meets Catherine Barkley, newly arrived with a group of British nurses who are to set up a hospital near the front. Frederic likes Catherine, whom he visits as often as he can between ambulance trips to evacuate the wounded.

Catherine, who has recently lost her fiancé in combat, is vulnerable. Probably she feels more emotion for Frederic than he feels for her. He is about to leave for the front, where an assault is being mounted. She gives him a Saint Anthony medal, but it does not assure him the protection she hopes it will. A mortar shell explodes above Frederic's dugout, and he is wounded, much as Hemingway himself had been. He is evacuated to a hospital in Milan.

Frederic is not the perfect patient. He keeps wine under his bed and drinks as much of it as he can get away with. By the time Catherine comes to the hospital to see him, it is he who is vulnerable, and he finds that he is in love with her. She stays with him through the surgery that his wounds necessitate; he has a happy recuperation, which Catherine nurses him through. They find restaurants that are off Milan's beaten path and take carriage rides into the surrounding countryside. Catherine often comes to Frederic's hospital room at night. He already knows that she is pregnant from a hotel-room encounter before he left for the front.

Frederic recovers quickly, and by October, a few months after he was first injured, he is ready to go on convalescent leave with Catherine in tow. His plans are scuttled, however, when he develops jaundice, a condition the head nurse blames on his surreptitious drinking, accusing him of doing this to avoid further service at the front. When Frederic returns to his post, his unit is ordered to take its ambulances and equipment south to the Po Valley. The Allies, hard pressed by Austrian shelling and by the knowledge that German reinforcements are joining the Austrians, are pessimistic and disheartened. Hemingway shows the unglorious aspects of war in realistic detail.

Hard-pressed by the enemy, the Americans retreat, Frederic driving an ambulance south along roads cluttered with evacuees. Rain is falling, and the whole plain along which the retreat is driving becomes a quagmire. Frederic, with two Italian sergeants he has picked up, begins to drive across open country, hoping to reach Udine at the Austrian border by that route. When his ambulance becomes stuck in the mud, Frederic tries to get the Italians to help him extricate it, but they want to flee. Frederic shoots one of them, wounding him. An Italian corpsman finishes the sergeant off, putting a bullet into his head; life is cheap when people are under this sort of pressure.

When Frederic and his friends set out on foot for Udine, they see German motorcycles ahead of them. Chaos reigns as officers pull off their insignias and people try to flee in every direction. Those whom the Germans capture are given kangaroo trials and are summarily executed. Frederic is detained, and his fate seems sealed. Under cover of night, however, he escapes and jumps into a river, where he holds onto a log. He crosses the plain on foot until he can hop a freight train for Milan, where he tries to find Catherine. Learning that the contingent of British nurses has been sent to Stresa, he makes his way there, now dressed in civilian clothing. He and Catherine reunite. Learning that the authorities plan to arrest him for desertion, Frederic borrows a rowboat, and he and Catherine use it to row all night to neutral Switzerland, where they are arrested but soon released, their passports in order and Frederic's pockets bulging with money.

They wait out the fall in Montreux in the Swiss mountains, living happily in a small inn as Catherine's pregnancy advances. Their situation is idyllic. When it is finally time for Catherine to deliver the baby, she has a difficult time. The child is stillborn. Frederic, exhausted, goes out to get them something to eat; when he returns, he learns that Catherine has suffered a hemorrhage. He rushes to her and stays at her side, but she dies. He walks back to his hotel room in the rain.

The love story around which the book revolves has been compared with that of William Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* (1595-1596), to which it bears the affinity of having an unhappy outcome that results not from any weakness within the characters themselves but from circumstances over which they have no control. They are pawns in a large chess game that they neither understand nor can control.