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By Mary Braggiotti

»A freak. One of those lovely accidents. I've dismissed it. It was not. It is better that way. Otherwise I would always be in the shadow of that book. Like a first love – nothing could ever match it.«

So Erich Maria Remarque's resonant, almost rumbling voice relegates »that« book, »All Quiet on the Western Front,« to a former self. It has dogged his footsteps for more than 16 years, but he has never let it trip him up. And now, after what may be called a long interim of moderately, but steadily, successful writing, he has turned up with »Arch of Triumph,« a story of refugees in Paris, which some critics hail as his best book. The February Book-of-the-Month Club choice, it's his first book since »All Quiet« to pass that august board.

Cocktail Party English Helps Him Get Along

Remarque has been in the U. S. since 1939 and expects to be an American citizen soon. He wants to make New York his headquarters. His apartment in the Ambassador Hotel already looks permanently Remarque, its walls hung with his Van Goghs, Renoirs, Degas and Cezannes, its tables laden with his papers, periodicals, books and hundreds of phonograph records.

By mingling mostly with Americans, he has proudly supplemented the slow, serious English he could speak on arrival with what he calls »cocktail party English.«

But, American as he is becoming, the handsome, strongly-built ex-German soldier doesn't believe he will ever write about Americans in America.

»It is not easy for a writer who has lost his country to know what to write about,« he said recently in a fact-facing mood. »I don't agree with the theory that no writer can write anything good outside his country. But I don't know any piece of good writing that is not about the writer's country or his country-town. Take Hemingway. He has written books about the European scene, but his leading characters have been Americans.

»I can't write about the Nazis; hatred is not a good medium for one's life work. I have already written two books about refugees, and the subject is exhausted for me.« Remarque shrugged his shoulders meaningfully. »One must be practical. I shall write about problems of an international aspect.«

Remarque's writing is dramatic, and so is his personality. He can't tell an anecdote without acting each role with its full quota of gestures, grimaces and asides – and he holds his listeners enrapt. But he is practical, too. Throughout the last war (he was in it at 16), its dreadful aftermath in Germany, the short though complicated peace and World War II, he seems to have kept his perspective clearer than most people.

This perspective and his experience as a school teacher right after the last war, when, young as he was, he worked closely with the German Ministry of Education, prompted the Office of

Strategic Services two years ago to ask him for a report, recommending ways to convert German thinking from Nazi to democratic channels.

Played Piano Violin – Organist in Catholic Church

Remarque's first strong interest in life was music, particularly composition. Born in Osnabrueck, Hanover, he learned to play the piano and violin when he was a boy and passed his examination as organist for the Catholic church. Although he was wounded in the arm during the war, he doesn't blame the wound for giving up music. He never seriously considered it as a profession.

Nor did he plan to follow in the footsteps of his adventurous father, a Navy man who participated in Germany's smaller wars in Africa, went on German expeditions to China and New Guinea and exploration trips to Africa. After the war Remarque Sr., used his influence to try to get his son on an English ship that was going on a five-year excursion to the Antarctic to observe whales – a prospect the author still shudders to think about. Instead, he took a six months' schoolteaching course offered to veterans, thinking that teaching in a quiet village would be a nice peaceful way to come to himself after the awfulness of war.

He could bear only a few months of the »peace and silence.« As an antidote, he took a job as a test driver for a tire company. It was the time when high pressure tires were being replaced by the balloon type.

»I hit my head a few times, when my cars turned over,« he said with a grin, »and started to write afterwards. But first there was a short interval in my life that was very sinister. I became a partner in the tombstone business.«

He wrote »All Quiet« in five weeks, working on it for a few hours each evening after he finished his daily chores as editor of a small publication in Berlin. When his publisher realized the quality of the young author's book, he bought up all the copies of a previous Remarque novel (about a painter he had known in Osnabrueck) and burned them.

That book was so bad, he says, that he won't even tell its title. Long before he left Germany permanently in 1933 he had the honor of having his second novel banned for just the opposite reason. It was too good and on too strong a subject for Hitler to trust it in the hands and minds of the German people.

Except for considerable time passed in France, Remarque lived and wrote in his villa on Lago Maggiore, Switzerland, until he left Europe. He spent two years in Beverly Hills, California, before coming to New York. Part of these years he lived under California's curfew laws for enemy aliens. It is typical of his objective way of looking at things that he never once applied for a permit to break those laws. He simply understood the situation and didn't want to ask for special privileges.

Remarque swears that he took up writing so he wouldn't have to get up early in the morning. Because it isn't necessary he often arises as early as he could, but he uses his mornings to get in »tune with the world« all by himself.

He stays up late and, being a man of many sides, his wee hours may be spent equally happily drinking brandy at a bar or coffee with a learned professor over a philosophical question. He can't understand why many of his friends can't understand this versatility of his.

He works almost any time longhand in pencil, often to the strains of »music that doesn't mean anything.«

»It takes the place of the lake, or of rain on the flat roof of my house in November. I'm restless when I write, I get up and read every now and then, or go out in the streets and look at people's faces and listen to bits of conversation. Or I go to the museum. I think I know every piece in the Metropolitan.

»But I really don't believe in all those stimulants. I believe you can write under any circumstances.«