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Providence Kept Watch Over Remarque And Brought Him Luck All During War

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Among the Authors

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By Carolyn Coggins

Usually Erich Maria Remarque rests a year or two between completing one book and beginning the next. When his »Arch of Triumph,« comes out next week it will be his first novel in five years, and this time he is already working on another.

All over the world, of course, he is known for his »All Quiet on the Western Front,« and that book must have registered pretty well in heaven as well, because its author was watched over by fate in such a way back in 1939 as to suggest God had His eye on the gentleman. In the summer of that year he was one of several thousand people in France who thought it might be a good idea to be somewhere else. The logical place was the United States, especially since he had a little girl in his care whose parents were here.

Phone connections on the Riviera were off so that fiends could not even call neighbors. Knowing this, but thinking he must make an effort, he hopelessly put through a call to the Paris steamship office. He was connected in less than 10 minutes, was told that two people were just walking away who had canceled on the Queen Mary, and that their two tickets would be held for Remarque and his charge.

The Queen Mary's Last Trip.

He could hardly believe such luck. Now the problem was to reach Paris, some 700 miles away, in a car with a missing part which definitely operated on only two cylinders. Sputtering the whole way, it faithfully delivered him to a spot in mid-Paris and there stopped dead. He rushed by other means to get those tickets, secured them and boarded the ship. That was the last trip the Queen Mary made to the United States with passengers, for war was declared a day later.

This was how I happened to be visiting him six years later in his suite at the Ambassador in New York. It was a cold, snowy evening. When offered a drink, I asked for coffee and he went off, whistling a tune to himself, to make me a fresh pot in his little kitchenette. I consumed my coffee alone as he talked.

More Good Luck.

The paintings on his walls – a Cezanne was nearest me – were obviously his own, and I wondered how he happened to have them here. That, too, was coincidence. He had been sitting in

his Switzerland home one day, when he was approached by an agitated maid. She held a little paper in her hand, one of those things that predict the future, and from it she had learned that there was soon to be a war. What was to be done with his pictures? Although he assured her that there was to be no war and explained why, he agreed that she could ship the pictures to his dealer in England for safekeeping. This she did with dispatch, and when the blitz soon afterward made England unsafe, the dealer sent them on to America.

There were stacks of records in one corner of the enormous room where we sat talking and the tables were piled high with papers and books. I mentioned envying him his talent with languages, for some of the latter were in French and German. He speaks English very well, although he learned it only since coming here, and oddly enough, speaks it with a French accent. However, most of his 47 years were spent in Germany.

Shortly after his first book came out he went to Switzerland to live and stayed there 10 years. A picture of his Swiss home by the lake stands beside the deepest chair, but he will not live there again for soon he will be an American citizen. He will return to Switzerland to sell or rent his place, or somehow restore it, and the maid who still presides over it, to more active usefulness.

Will Make New York His Home.

In Hollywood, where he was during his first three years in this country, he was charmed by having a little house with a swimming pool. When he realized he was becoming Hollywood-minded he came to New York. He intends to make it his home.

When he was a boy he wanted to be a musician, perhaps a painter. Instead the First World War made him a restless young man, unsure of what he liked most. He was a teacher, a test driver, a sports writer, even a dramatic critic. He lived by these varied means for 10 years, and eventually his thoughts about why the young men of his age were so different from their parents resolved themselves into a story. He had already acquired the art of writing a great speed and carefully pruning his copy. The result was that he wrote his first book, »All Quiet on the Western Front,« in six weeks.

He did not think of it as a war story. The first publisher in Germany who saw it said it was good, but that there is no »business« in it. Its eventual »business« in Germany alone was about 1,500,000 copies, and perhaps 5,000,000 or 6,000,000 copies in around 30 other countries where it had been printed. Its great success made Remarque self-conscious, so that he believes he overwrote in the next book.

His Formula for Good Writing.

»You either do that after a big success or else your head is turned so that you are sloppy,« he explained.

»A bad book doesn't matter,« he continued, »because an author who only wrote good books would be a freak. The idea is to write better books as often as possible and to edit one's writing with care, to not be a sloppy writer.«

He spends as much or more time with Americans than with his own countrymen, believing that only in that way can he come to know the United States. He thinks there are many more good writers here than in Europe. Here people have to know what they are writing about. In Europe too many begin to write the minute they are through studying or else write in an atmosphere of cafe thinking, in either case without experience, even though equipped with intelligence and writing facility. But in the United States if you write about a banker, for instan-

ce, the character must be sufficiently like bankers to remind the reader of some banker he knows. Not so in Europe. There the banker may turn out to just be an odd sort of fellow serving the writer's purpose of telling a story and not real at all.

Speaking of German writers, Remarque laughed heartily over the eminent playwright Gerhart Hauptmann, whom he greatly admires.

»He has been celebrating his birthday for 40 years, you know,« he told me.

Birthdays to Order.

It seems that many champagne parties were given for Hauptmann when he was 50 at week-long productions of his plays in various places. By the time every one had honored him with their celebrations he had another birthday, and then another, and so it has gone on for all the years since. He is now in his 80s.

I asked Mr. Remarque if he wasn't glad to be one person coming here at the beginning of the war who had expressed his views so early that the whole world knew where he stood, He agreed that the circumstance was fortunate.

»The Arch of Triumph« was expected to be a fall book. When the Book-of-the-Month Club wanted it for February distribution, the novel was delayed until the third week in January. Its sale will probably be well over a half million its first week out, and that only the beginning.

Remarque is »all quiet« himself. He is a husky man with well-modeled features, blue eyes and a soft voice. I found him easy company, a relaxed and knowing conversationalist. I also think he makes excellent coffee.