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Erich Remarque at Home. The Author of All Quiet As He Is Today

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Erich Remarque at Home.

The Author of All Quiet As He Is Today.

(An interview with the famous German author by Cecil F. Melville, diplomatic correspondent of the Referee, London.)

After a great deal of supplication on my part, and thanks to the good offices of Dr. Leo Lania, the author and dramatist, Herr Erich Maria Remarque, the author of All Quiet on the Western Front, finally consented to receive me.

For months past both the German Press and the foreign correspondents in Berlin had been endeavouring to get into touch with him, but without avail, as he dislikes publicity and invariably refuses to be interviewed. He was good enough to make an exception in my case.

So it came about that I found myself one morning, in the company of Dr. Lania, climbing the five flights of stairs which lead to Herr Remarque's flat. For although a luxurious car stood at the entrance to the block of flats, – a present to him from the great Ulstein Press, – Herr Remarque continues to inhabit the modest, skyward flat he lived in before All Quiet brought him fame and fortune.

I was ushered into a little sitting-room overlooking the roof-tops of Berlin's West End, a little den bestrewn with statuettes, books, papers and gramophone records. Herr Remarque and his friend, Herr Klement, the theatrical publisher, came forward to greet Dr. Lania and myself.

First Impressions.

Young, slim, with sensitive features and contemplative eyes Herr Remarque is as I imagined him to be from reading his book. He is the typical contemplative, the philosopher-type remote from the stress and turmoil of the world because the world has made him suffer, and, therefore, the better able to express the very things from which he has withdrawn himself.

Rather shyly, I thought, and with a whimsical smile, turning the corners of a rather sad and sensitive mouth, Herr Remarque asked me how All Quiet had been received in England. The book had just been banned to the Italian and Austrian armies; it still had its political reverberations in Germany, and so, what of England?

I said I thought that, while the soldiers appreciated it, the civilians were shocked. He received my reply with a shrug of the shoulders indicative of »I thought as much.« My answer seemed to please him. Since my return to London from Berlin I have been told that the truth is exactly the opposite to the reply I gave Herr Remarque. I wonder?

Faith and Religion.

The conversation turned towards the subject of faith and religion. Like some of the characters in his book, I said, many of us had lost our direction because of the War. How to find a new direction?

Herr Remarque said that he could not answer that question, as he was still trying to resolve the problem for himself.

He considered we were all still under the influence of the War; we had not yet got away from it entirely.

All these years mankind had been groping, was still groping, towards some new direction, some new faith, new religion which will not be denominational, but humanitarian... Every big human event since the War was a manifestation of this seeking of humanity for a new faith.

Even upheavals, like the Russian Revolution, for instance constituted such a manifestation. The Russian Revolution was not a complete thing, nor in itself a particularly good thing, but it was one of many half efforts indicative of the eternal search.

Mankind, he averred, would go on groping, seeking, working in the direction of that broader and more humanistic religion of the future which would transcend religions as we know them today.

A Message of Despair?

Some of Herr Remarque's English critics have said, accusingly, that his book was a message of despair, and neurotic. I think the foregoing eliminates that charge. In *All Quiet* the temporary despair of frustrated youth in the shambles found expression; but life goes on, and the book expressed that, too. That is not neurosis. And the view of human endeavour after the War expressed by Herr Remarque to me that memorable morning in Berlin, conveys a message not of despair, but of hope, and faith in the destiny of the human race.

Fame and wealth have not changed Herr Remarque in any way, – at least, not in the usual way. If anything, he is even more aloof from the material prizes of life now than before.

When success, and the financial advantages brought by success, first came to him, he dallied for a moment with the idea of enjoying more fully the social and material pleasures. But he found that this was not for him. And so he has come to look upon the financial success of his book as something to value not for material things which money can buy, but for the release it has brought him from the more urgent needs of material struggle, a release which has given him a greater freedom to indulge that contemplation of life which is his true bent.

The Happiness of Loneliness.

Perhaps it may be said that Herr Remarque is the lonelier for his success? Perhaps there is sadness in loneliness? And yet I think not only does he accept this situation, but that he recognises, in his case, its inevitability. In the »ivory tower« of the contemplative life there is also happiness.

There were many other things I would have liked to ask Herr Remarque, but they were forbidden by the conditions upon which he agreed to receive me.

Herr Remarque's vision of mankind seeking for some new, humanistic religion of the future is not only an illuminating insight into the mind of one of the most interesting literary personalities of modern Germany, but also a contribution to a problem which now, more than ever, is exercising the minds and moving the souls of the peoples of today.

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