

The Talk of the Town

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1918

Erich Maria Remarque, the German novelist, who is in process of becoming an American citizen, told us last Sunday what it was like in Germany as the rumors of defeat and the revolution began to spread in 1918. He was twenty years old then, an infantryman, and had been wounded in the trenches and sent to a hospital to Düsseldorf. Early in November he was dismissed as cured, he reported to his garrison headquarters in the Westphalian town of Minden, and he was ordered to rejoin his company, which was in Belgium. This was by no means simple, since many battered German outfits had been thrown together and no longer had their old names. The streets of Minden were full of soldiers who had overstayed their leave and who, in view of the news of approaching defeat and the mutiny at Kiel, said they had no intention of going back. The trains coming from the front were full of deserters, but those going in the other direction were full, too. The men going up to the front talked about the food shortage, which was so severe that a potato was regarded as delicacy, and about the rumors of defeat, which many were inclined to pooh-pooh. It took Remarque four and a half days to find his company, which had been withdrawn from the front lines. He was just in time to hear his commanding officer making a farewell speech: »Let us not forget those who are dead,« he concluded. »The war is finished. Goodbye.« Remarque can't recall whether this was on the twelfth or thirteenth of November.

Remarque does recall that most of the members of the company tried to stay together to return to their garrison headquarters, where they were to receive their discharge papers, but that they had to break up into small groups because of the overburdened trains. Some didn't bother to go back, and a quaint sidelight on German minor efficiency during disaster is the fact that they got their papers two weeks later per mail. Most of the soldiers were apathetic about the defeat but enraged by the flight of the Kaiser. It set off a wave of anti-officer feeling, but generally the only violence done the officers was ripping off their epaulettes. Remarque and six of his friends hung around in the local railroad station for several days after their discharge before they finally got on a train headed for Germany. Somebody had set up a soup kitchen in the station, so they managed to get enough to eat. The train had some wounded men on it, several of whom died during the trip. Also, several stowaways on top of the coaches were swept off and killed when the train passed through a low tunnel. Most of the soldiers were in poor spirits, but as they crossed the border into Germany, they began to sing. Remarque remembered that one of the songs was a dreary little number about a prostitute who longed for her home in Hamburg.

At the first stop inside Germany, Remarque recalls, the local *Bürgermeister* met the train and made a speech saying that the soldiers had fought well and that Germany was proud of them. As the train continued into Germany they were forcibly reminded that they had indeed fought well: there was almost no damage to be seen – no dead animals, no devastated villages, no bomb craters. »As far as the soldiers were concerned, theirs didn't look like a defeated country,« Remarque said. »France and Belgium to them were the defeated countries. There they had seen plenty of destruction. Germany hadn't lost any more soldiers than the Allies had. The German soldiers came back – and there was Germany. It looked like the country that had *won* the war.« Inside of a year, books and pamphlets began to appear claiming that Germany would have won the war if she'd fought for another three months, and so on. However, Remarque didn't have to wait a year before bumping into this point of view. On the day he got back to his home town, as he was walking from the railroad station to his parent's house, he ran into a hundred townspeople who were having a vigorous little street riot. It had started in a beer *Stube*, an innocent bystander told him; a group of unreconstructed nationalists had asked the pianist to play »Deutschland über Alles« and then had attacked some other patrons who wouldn't join in the singing. »The whole damn business was starting all over again, right there in my home town, while the armistice was still news,« Remarque said, plainly still appalled. »Six weeks later I was in Berlin, at the Eden Hotel. There in the lobby were some of my old officers, and there on their tunics were the epaulettes that had been ripped off. Pretty soon even the little ex-lieutenants – reserve officers, mind you – were putting their old rank in the Wehrmacht on their calling cards.«

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