

»All Quiet on the Western Front«

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»All Quiet on the Western Front«

Why it was Written. Interview with Erich Maria Remarque. Youth and War. »The Great Adventure.« A New World and New Men.

(From Our Own Correspondent.)

Berlin, October 10.

»No, I have not seen ›Journey's End‹, and I don't think I am going to see it. I was asked at the time to adapt it for the German stage, or, at least, to write something about it when it appeared in German. I read it and felt it agreed completely with my own attitude.

But I don't want to be identified with the War, and the books and plays the War has brought about. I can't escape from my book, ›All Quiet on the Western Front‹. I had to leave Berlin once before for a change because my friends saw that this kind of publicity was affecting me, and I shall have to do so again. I am letting somebody else attend to all the businesses in connection with that book and with the thousand and one requests that keep pouring in by letter and telegram and telephone. People ask, ›Will I lecture?‹ I cannot lecture.

I wrote ›All Quiet‹ to escape from something that was oppressing me, and when I had finished it I felt free of the dreadful weight of those experiences. But now this new terror is hanging over me. I cannot escape from this interest in my own person. People – manuscripts – the postman – everybody I meet, everywhere I go. In regard to the film of ›All Quiet‹, I only saw Carl Laemmle once, and have left everything to him.

I want to collect myself for my new book, but I do not want to talk about it except to say that it will deal with the experiences of somebody finding his way back to ordinary life after the war. I do not feel like an author at all. There's so much else I would like to do. But I must get away from the feeling of only having written ›All Quiet‹. Anybody might have written it. It's no special credit to my own person.«

»I should like to disappear.«

Erich Maria Remarque looks out of the window of the new block of flats in the West End of Berlin at the car standing outside, and smiles for the first time.

»I spend my free time trying out cars. That's something I do understand. Cars and dogs and fish. That little aquarium I've got in my living room is a happy memory of childhood days. You know I never thought of writing books, and after this second book I don't think I shall write again. One should never write unless the urge to do so is there. One can't have that kind of feeling as a career. I think I should like to disappear, grow a beard, and begin a new kind of existence altogether.

After the war I just lived anyhow, without wanting anything particularly. I've been everything more or less. For some time I peddled shawls and dress lengths among the peasant women in the country. When a gendarme appeared I had to vanish because I never had a pedlar's permit to trade. Then I was an agent for a monumental mason, and organist in a lunatic asylum. I wanted a musical career at one time, but a wound in the hand during the war put an end to the hope. I was an elementary school teacher – I've got my certificate for that. That was a jolly time; the children liked me and I liked them, but the life struck me as too cramped for my twenty-one years or thereabouts.

Then I began my career writing advertisements, actually in verse some of them. As people know, I was a sporting journalist, and in the evening I tried my hand at writing a book. I'd attempted verse as a boy and tried a novel before, but this time what I was writing took hold of me and wouldn't let me stop. I was as though I was possessed with something which pursued me till I had finished. The same kind of restlessness is coming over me again. But then I thought it would interest nobody.«

The Hunger for Life.

»Do I read or care about the attacks on ›All Quiet‹? I read very little of them. But I think I wanted to show how we were a group of ordinary young men who by rights should have been left to grow and rejoice in life just as naturally as the grass grows, and how we were thrust into a chaos of death and the terrors that surround death. And how the life in us struggled up in desperation, in natural selfdefence while the shells exploded, or in the raw brutality of an attack. It manifested itself in the unsentimental quality of our egotism and our comradeship., in our precociously drastic type of humour and in the moments of our animal appetites – hunger for life itself at all costs. I wanted to show the struggle of life against the death that threatened us. I wanted to demonstrate no religious or political standpoint – merely this hunger for life itself.

Perhaps I wanted to show the victory of life just as much as its destruction. The war seems to me to have changed the world, not only those who were soldiers. It did not destroy everything, but it altered or modified. It affected all those who were of an age to be standing on the threshold of life. But afterwards – that was the worst. I was wounded and sent home from the Front. My mother had died, my best friend, too. I didn't know what to do, so I went out again as a volunteer to get away from the hopelessness I felt. That was in September, 1918, and it didn't last long«

The Boy's Point of View.

»I've been told I ought not have let Paul Bäumer die. But then people might have said: ›What an interesting time this young Bäumer had!‹ Don't you think schoolboys might have thought he was having grand adventures all the while they were still being bored on the sixth-form benches? That would have made war seem a grand adventure. And war really is a great adventure – when one comes back again. I'm reproached with being too much of a civilian, lacking the proper warlike spirit. Well, that's what we were, the majority of those who fought, even though we were wearing uniforms. I feel that the success my book has had with the general public justifies my attitude, and among all the letters I have had one in particular does so. That was from a blind man of my own age, which tells me that he only overcame the feeling of bitterness at his own destiny when he had had the book read to him.

I know nothing of politics, and I can only say that the atmosphere of political recriminations which is that of Germany today is hateful to me. Real, living patriotism lies in the deep unspoken love of one's own country. It is no good asking me how I should feel and act if we had another war today; I have no doctrine on the subject at all. I only wanted to relate how the ideals of myself and my companions were destroyed by a reality for which we were by no means equipped.

The details of my book are real experiences, in spite of all the rumours spread to the contrary, which I will not take the trouble to contradict. I was at the Front long enough to have experienced personally just nearly all I have described. I was wounded twice. As for Himmelstoss, he's a postman today, hale and hearty. He is so little a creature of the imagination that I've had several inquiries from old comrades as to why I've treated him so mildly, and entirely omitted the worst of his heroic deeds.«

Heroism and its Price

»The letter of the League of German Officers to the Nobel Peace Prize Committee in protest against an eventual suggestion of my ever being nominated for that prize makes it difficult for me to imagine how any German officer can really have read into my book an accusation against the heroic spirit Germany showed. The war certainly gave us enough heroes, and the only officer I mention is a splendid one, who sacrificed his life for his men. But the heroism let loose by the war was too dearly bought. There's enough heroism in every-day life. Nor did I ever want to speak in the name of everybody who fought. My writing is purely subjective. Others had different feelings – more religious and more patriotic.

As for my early self – we were really romantic in those days. I grew up in a little town in Westphalia, where my parents were Catholics, and I myself sang in the choir as a boy. One was intended for the post-office, the school-house, or the chemist's shop. I found little enough sympathy for my dreams either at home or at school. I read all sorts of books without any plan at all until I began to realize the difference between trash and literature. This came when I discovered Gottfried Keller's ›Grüne Heinrich‹. I learnt pages of that by heart. I read ›The Sufferings of Werther‹ on our balcony in the top storey of a block of flats on moonlight evenings. I bought a bottle of wine for eighteen pence, filled a glass, and drank to the moon. Only one gulp, indeed, for wine cost money, and I poured the rest back for future occasions. So romantic was I ...«

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