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Erich Maria Remarque Lays Down Some Rules for the Novelist

By ROBERT van GELDER

»My father told me,« said Erich Maria Remarque, the author of »All Quiet on the Western Front«, »The Road Back«, »Three Comrades«, »Flotsam«, and the newly published »Arch of Triumph«, »my father, a good man, told me, ›Erich, never lose your ignorance; you cannot replace it but you always can become refined.‹ I have longed,« Remarque continued, giving himself another treatment of liqueur (to ease the pains of »this arthritis that hits me here in the neck and goes tot the top of my head«), »for a normal, simple life. My friends say, ›Erich, you are so at ease; you know how to accept what comes,‹ which is, of course, not true, though I try to make it seem true, as who does not? Naturally, I make the best of my life, following certain rules.«

»What kind of rules?« I asked.

»Sound, solid rules,« said Remarque. »As an example, after I wrote ›All Quiet‹ – well, you know how fantastic that was. A success – clippings this high in my publishers' office – and for me a completely unexpected success. There are two ways of accepting such fantastic success, such luck. One way is to hoard the windfall, to use it to build on, to use it as a means to bring in yet more money, to base security on it. The other way is to waste it. Of course, that is what I did.

That is what a windfall is for. When it comes one should meet it happily and happily toss it about. What kind of person wants to put out luck at interest?« asked Remarque, smiling and gently shaking his head. »If you met a beautiful woman, a charming girl, the girl you had dreamed about as you sat in bars and walked in the streets and hoped all your life that some day you might meet – what would you do with such a girl? Would you say, ›Come, come home with me and cool my meals?‹ Oh, no, oh, no, not if you could get some one else to cook, not if you could take her to a fine restaurant, with good service, good wines, good coffee. Neither do you ask luck to cook for you, to supply your daily bread. You waste your luck, you toss it about. There is an old story that life is like a woman, loving a waster and despising a provider. Perhaps it is so.«

He treated his arthritis with a sip. Remarque is a rather hardy, durable looking man in his late forties, his face alive and bright when he is talking with enjoyment. He does not want to go back to Germany. Knows no one who does. Soon he will become an American citizen. He lives and works in a corner suite at the Hotel Ambassador, Van Gogh's »Steel Bridge,« above the fireplace, other of Remarque's excellent collection of paintings about the walls. Phonograph records are piled high on one large table, books are piled almost everywhere else. Only the big desk at which he writes is kept fairly clear. He has been a refugee since

Hitler came to power in 1933, and among his rules are some for refugee living: have a phonograph and books if possible; take a room as near the center of a great city as you can get; be on friendly terms with a large number of people who are not refugees and who do not speak your native language; avoid the temptation to write an autobiography.

At his work Remarque is stubborn; when a novel is actually progressing he takes little time out. Formerly he did a great deal of rewriting, but Franz Werfel once told him that it is useless to write anything more than twice and he considers this advice sound.

»No, no, I never re-read what I have written until I have finished a draft; that is fatal. Nothing seems any good until it has been finished for some time; if you read it when it is unfinished you want to burn it and start all over, and then if you read the new version while it is still warm you want to burn that and start again. In that way one soon becomes a novelist without a novel – a pitiful state, and one that makes it difficult to pay one's bills. To write a bad novel is not good, but it is better to write a bad novel than to try to write a perfect one – and not to write it. If for some reason I stay away from a piece of work for a long time and cannot remember the names of some of the characters, even so I don't re-read to find out. I know better than that. I give the characters new names. Such matters can be corrected at the second writing, but at least I have what I have done – I have not burned it up.«

When he is stuck at some scene or situation he goes for long walks through the city. »I look at the faces. That is very important, to look at the faces, to try to guess what man or woman is behind the face. At parties I do that too, sometimes. I'm not interested, of course, in whether my guesses hit the truth. Precision of observation is of value to a policeman but not to me, for all that I require is the guess and if that seems to me true, and interesting, then it has served its purpose. There is no city like New York for faces, for you have faces from every continent, every country, many tribes, in endless variety, and at any hour of the day or night. And, of course, there are more beautiful and handsome faces here than anywhere else in the world. Oh, I am sure of it. And that is very pleasant, very, to see beautiful faces all about.«

Remarque lived in Hollywood for several years before coming here. He said that he'd go out for walks and break them off and hurry back to his hotel and go to the bar and have a drink. »There always was some one in the bar, but the streets out there are deserted. No one walks. You know, that's ugly. In the country I take it for granted that I won't meet any one but there are animals, the life of the country. But to walk in a city where there are rows upon rows of buildings and sidewalks extending for miles and people nowhere to be seen, only buildings and automobiles – ah, ghastly. Hollywood is ghastly anyway. I had nothing to do with pictures, never went near a studio, but the ghastliness of it crept into me and I had to come away.«

Remarque considers that he was late in finding himself as a writer: »I was so hungry for life, I was starved for it, and sitting alone, writing, was almost a waste of life, as it seemed to me.« He went into the German Army as a boy fresh from school, fought through the First World War, then lived by odd jobs, taking up sports reporting simply because he found it easy and comparatively agreeable work. He kept trying to write and got nowhere with it until finally he took a few weeks off and worked very hard on a novel. »It was really simple a collection of the best stories that I told and my friends told as we sat over drinks and relived the war.«

He took his novel, »All Quiet on the Western Front,« to a publisher, who wanted him to change the ending in which the hero dies. The publisher wanted the hero to live so that he could go on and be the hero of a sequel. Remarque refused. »Naturally the reader identifies himself with the main character, and if that character lived then the story would be simply an adventure yarn. It is a truth about life that those periods that are the most difficult to live through become the basis of our thoughts, our interests, if we survive, and had the hero lived each chapter would have been just a good yarn of the death of others, of hard, difficult experiences, ending in the triumph of survival. His death gave the whole thing meaning, made it an anti-war novel. So, of course, I refused.«

The book was a best seller through much of the world: »I used the money to grab at life.«

Remarque believes that he avoided any tendency by success, »to go overboard.« »I saw the danger that my life might take the form of a peak, a sharp rise followed by a swift decline. The writer who makes slower progress so that much of his career is a moderately ascending line can have a more solid satisfaction. But for me there are always extremes. I never have wanted to be eunuch,« he said, and it was not until he had used the word »eunuch« several times that I realized that he intended to say »unique.« »I never have wanted to be eunuch – I do not think it good for a writer to travel too much, to be cut off for any long periods from what is usual and normal. Could I have had my way I should have lived in a house that my family had lived in for five hundred years, and in the house next door there would have been a girl. I'd have heard her playing on the other side of the hedge and would have stood on a chair to look over at her and talk to her. Years later we would have met for the first time in front of our houses and she would have been disappointed seeing me – because I was not so tall without the chair. But we'd have married. Well, I never had that kind of life.«

The Nazi recognized »All Quiet« as a force working against them. Remarque's agent found him one morning at about four o'clock and urged him to go to Switzerland and start work on a new book that he had contracted to write. »There was fantastic luck again,« said Remarque. »I considered, should I order another drink and then go home to bed, or should I order another drink, get into my car and drive to Switzerland. I decided that it would be better if I woke in Switzerland the next day and started work at once than if I slept in Germany and drove to Switzerland the next day. That is why I was in Switzerland when the Nazis came to hunt for me.«

The Nazis would have better served themselves, Remarque says, had they followed him into Switzerland and killed him. It is his hope that he can write a novel that can live for some time and in living cause readers too long remember that attainments, progress and aims of the Nazis. He is convinced that nazism is far from wiped out in Germany and that many of its ideas still sweep through the world.

»The difficulty is, you see,« he said, »that our imaginations cannot count. When I say five million died – the figure is blank. Five million deaths does not equal one death. Five thousand dead in a concentrations camp – there is that same difficulty. The figure is blank. but if I say five died, then perhaps. And if I say one died – a man I have made you know and understand – he lived so, this is what he thought, this is what he hoped, this was his faith, these were his difficulties, these his triumphs and than he – in this manner, on this day, at an

hour when it rained and the room was stuffy – was killed, after torture, then perhaps I have told you something that you should know about the Nazis.

The novel that I am working on is dated, it is dated now. The scene is a concentrations camp – can you imagine anything more dated? But if it is a good book it will be widely read and through it some people who did not understand before may be made to understand what the Nazis were like and what they did and what their kind will try to do again. It is so dated, do you suppose any one will read it?«