

Erich Remarque Talks About All Quiet

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How Greatest Book on the War Came to be Written

Planned As Personal Safety-Valve, But Set The World Talking

Erich Remarque Talks About All Quiet

A High-Powered touring car was racing westward down the Bismarck Strasse out of Berlin; at the wheel sat a fair, bronzed young man, strongly built, with a handsome smiling face, who looked at least six years younger than his thirty-two years. In appearance he might have been an American or an English rowing-man.

He was Erich Maria Remarque, the German writer whose book, *All Quiet on the Western Front*, has seized the imagination of the civilised world.

»Coming back to Germany after the war,« he said, »was a terrible experience for every one of us. After the strain and hardships and horror of the war, we returned to find the country in a state of disintegration, everywhere hunger, depression, and bereavement.

»My own homecoming was overshadowed by the loss of my mother, which was a great blow to me.

»I had entered the army as a mere boy and was not one of the few lucky ones with a job to come back to, so I had to turn my hand to whatever offered – school teacher, hand-worker, journalist. I could not settle down to anything, there was a continual restlessness and dissatisfaction that drove me from one job to another.«

The War Obsession

He stopped for a moment, his lips grim and tight.

»The truth was,« he went on, »there was something on my mind – the weight of horror and suffering I had seen during the war years. It was still there, unexpressed and chaotic, robbing one of peace of mind, making it impossible to settle down to the ordinary avocations of civilian life. At last – I was on the editorial staff of a Berlin illustrated weekly at the time – I realized that I had to get these things straight in my own mind, to get them into focus once for all.«

»The idea of my book came as a sort of safety valve. I came home one night from my work and started to write it. For obvious reasons I adopted the fiction form, but what I put down was the truth. I was not writing for any wide audience; my object was to see clearly the experiences I had been through, and therefore I wrote with the utmost simplicity and integrity, as though I were telling the story to an intimate friend.

»I avoided all panegyric and let the terrible facts speak for themselves. In six weeks, the book was finished – I had written itself – and I called it ›Im Westen nichts Neues‹ – ›All Quiet on the Western Front.«

»A superb piece of irony.«

»When my readers have finished the book,« he agreed, »they close it and read the title again – »All Quiet« – such were the things that was happening when officially all was quiet!«
»Ho does it feel,« I asked, »to be the author of the world's best seller?«

Dog-breeding Preferred

The smile vanished from his face.

»As far as possible,« he said, »I avoid feeling it at all. I don't think I have read a review since the first two or three notices of the German edition. As for what they call fame, I don't want it. It comes between a man and reality. As soon as you became a celebrity you lose touch with humanity, with life. That is why I live so quietly and keep out of the limelight. I must keep in touch. Otherwise I cannot write simple and directly, for the minds and hearts of ordinary men and women. I like to keep close to natural things, trees and flowers. I want to have a little place in the country and breed dogs.«

»But you like Berlin?« I asked.

»I like Berlin. But not the literary and social functions. I find what I want when I talk to the ordinary folk in the streets and cafes, the simple people who are doing the world's work, and not theorising about it. Do you know what gives me the greatest pleasure? – the letters I get from common soldiers, men whom my book has helped to get the war into focus, to see the thing again as it was. In my future work my aim is to go on helping the ordinary men to face and solve the problems of life, and for that a man must try to live truly and simply.«

Turning to more general matters, I asked him: »What do you consider the great positive result of the war?«

»An immense increase in world-will towards peace. Every one realises today that war is a horror and an anachronism that must be avoided wherever humanly possible. This realisation is not the monopoly of any political section; it is common to all classes, even to the soldiers themselves, and with this realisation humanity must and will find methods by which war can be avoided.«

»What do Britain and America stand for in the world today?« I asked him Herr Remarque hesitated.

Powers for Peace

»You must realise,« he said, »that I make no claim to be a politician. I can merely give you my personal views for what they are worth. Britain and America are foremost among the progressive nations of the world. Their faces are set toward progress, social, industrial, and commercial. But the war proved that military disputes involve inevitably the destruction of all those cultural values for which the progressive mind is striving. Therefore, the tendency of all progressive countries must be away from the old complex of ideas, in which war appeared natural and necessary, toward a new world conception from which war is excluded. For this reason, quite apart from specific anti-war movements in Britain and America, the two great English-speaking peoples are a power making for peace.«

»And Germany?«

»Germany has been through a period of terrific upheavals; it needs much more than ten years before the face of the new Germany can be truly seen. Almost the entire adult population has lived under two completely different sets of circumstances – pre-war and post-war. The new poor cannot find their bearings. They cannot forget the fact that once they were well off; they cannot accept hard work. Hence our violent political differences. But the young men

and women have accepted the new conditions. They love work and orderly progress and, therefore, they love peace, for without peace progress is impossible. Only the coming generations will show the true face of Germany, but my hopes for the moral and cultural future of my country are very high.«

I asked his opinion of the idea, revived by M. Briand, of the United States of Europe.

A Beautiful Dream

»Everything that makes for peace and understanding,« said Herr Remarque, »is good; but there must be no coercion. As a German, I see the difficulty of getting the separate States of the German Reich, where every one speaks the same language, to agree among themselves. Ho much greater must be the difficulty of bringing the heterogeneous elements of modern Europe into any sort of lasting unity? It is an old dream and a beautiful one, but it seems to me that much must happen before Europe is ripe for its realisation.«

He steered the car between the broad white gates of a lakeside restaurant. Far out across the water the floating sails of yachts stood out dove-grey against the orange light of the evening sky. As we passed between the crowded tables the diners turned their heads and looked up at my companion. But whether they were admiring the well-built, bronzed young man with his handsome, eager face, or the young author who has stirred the mind and conscience of the world, I could not tell.