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My Heart's in the Homeland

By Kyle Crichton

Although Mr. Remarque has been exiled and his books have been burned by the Nazis, he maintains, »Germany is still my home«. He means, of course, the Germany he fought and bled for during the World War. Here is the dramatic story of an outcast hero's career

Beginning next week the new and epic novel of a tragic decade by
Erich Maria Remarque
As eloquent and moving as his *All Quiet on the Western Front* and *The Road Back*

»*Flotsam*«

is the stirring and vivid story of courageous men and women deprived of the means to live, who can laugh and love and refuse to die

Erich Maria Remarque is a blond, blue-eyed German who looks like a halfback on an American football team and might have posed for a statue of Stover of Yale. After the worldwide success of *All Quiet on the Western Front*, he threw up his job with a newspaper, built himself a house on the shores of Lago Maggiore in southern Switzerland and went into retreat.

On the face of it this was a singular performance for Remarque, who had hitherto been a bouncy young gentlemen with a terrific yen for high-powered motorcars and a miraculous ability to tear down a motor and throw it together again without having stray parts left sticking to his fingers. At one time or another he had traipsed all over Germany, but after his book appeared he found he couldn't stick his head out his front door without being welcomed by his devoted admirers in a way to knock him loose from his molars. So he hunted out to Maggiore spot, built the house in 1932, and settled down in peace and quiet to gaze at the snow-covered peak of St. Gotthard, which reared up at one end of the lake.

Remarque had never been interested in politics and paid little attention when Hitler took over power in Germany in 1933, but gradually it began to dawn on him that his hideout was no longer as exclusive as he had imagined. He knew he had been damned by the Nazis as a »pacifist« and that his books had been burned along with other »subversive« literature, but the meaning of change became apparent to him when old friends began showing up at Largo Maggiore to ask his advice and help. Among them were other pacifists, liberals, Jews, Catholics and radicals – all refugees from the Nazi regime.

But the real shock came last year in the shape of a telephone call from London. A newspaperman was calling to tell him that they had just received a dispatch from Berlin stating that Remarque's citizenship had been revoked.

»What have you to say about it?« asked the London reporter.

»If you'll pardon me ... nothing,« answered Remarque and held the receiver a moment in stunned silence and then hung up.

What Nobody Can Take Away

For he realized that he was a refugee now himself, one of that vast, pitiful legion who roam the globe like lost souls, dependent on the kindness of some friendly nations for a little slip of paper that will afford them a few months or years of peace. By no means does it allow them to remain in a country indefinitely and in no case does it permit them to get a job.

Although he is one of the most fortunate of all the refugees because of his world fame as a writer, Remarque is no less a man without a country. As one who traces his pure »Aryan« blood back centuries and was reared in a devout Catholic household in Osnabrueck, Westphalia, Prussia, he is no longer a German in the eyes of the Nazis. But he repudiates this doctrine:

»They have taken my citizenship away, but that is nothing but a piece of paper. They can't take away what is part of me, the fact that I was born in Germany and am a German no matter what any person or group of people says. It won't always be this way. Then I can go back home.«

His latest book, *Flotsam*, which you may begin to read in next week's *Collier's* and on which he started work almost immediately after the phone call from London, is the story of the refugees. When Remarque arrived in March for his first visit to America, it was rumored that he was traveling on a passport issued to him by the government of Panama as a distinguished man of letters, but Remarque insists that he is here on a card of identification from Switzerland.

The point is important because the struggle for any sort of passport security is a part of Remarque's highly dramatic novel. The refugees are shunted from border to border; one country smuggles them across at night to be rid of them; the other fights to keep them out. They may neither stay nor leave. Among all the dramas of our time there is nothing more stirring and tragic than the courageous struggle of these wandering legions.

The story of Remarque as a refugee becomes more ironical when it is known that he selected Switzerland because of a weak lung condition that had been aggravated by his service as a private in the German army during the World War. After finishing the gymnasium (high school) in Osnabrueck at the age of eighteen, he was drafted, sent to the front and was wounded five times while fighting in Flanders. The earlier wounds were slight but he was almost finished off in 1917 when a bullet slashed through his kneecap and plowed into his leg. Released from the base hospital in October, 1918, after a year of recuperation, he started back for the front.

»They didn't require me to go back but I didn't know what else to do,« he says. »I hated war but there was no sense in going home when all my friends were at the front. So I started back.«

The Post-War Years

But the Allies broke through, the Germans retreated, the Armistice was signed and the war was over before he got back into the trenches. Like most young men who were in the war, he was at loose ends when it ended and took advantage of a government effort to rehabilitate the returned soldier and went through a six-months course as a school-teacher.

He taught for a while in Klein-Berssen, a little town on the German-Dutch border. But he tired of this and the following year he was back in his home town polishing and chiseling gravestones in a marble yard. That doleful existence evidently drove him to the opposite extreme, for he next embarked on tour with a gypsy caravan, one wagon being owned by a wartime comrade.

»That was a great life,« says Remarque, nostalgically. »Went all over Germany and didn't have to worry about anything. After the stress of the war, it was like paradise. Soft, peaceful, sitting around the campfires at night singing songs, telling wonderful lies and romantic tales ...«

The gypsy life was carefree and happy but it finally collided with another supreme interest in Remarque's life: the love of motors. A pal of his offered him a job as test driver for the Continental Tire Company in Berlin and he couldn't resist it, because he never had been able to resist any kind of machinery.

He and other youngsters drove the cars, testing tires over all sorts of roads and in all kinds of weather. The work was made to order for him – continually seeing new places, meeting new people, and always having a new car roaring under his hand. It was during this period that he began writing, selling little articles and squibs to a Swiss motor magazine. After a year of test driving, he got a chance to work in the advertising department of the company and eventually became an excellent copy writer.

He was contributing to the company magazine and keeping up with the Swiss motor paper, so it was only a question of time till he quit to work on papers. From that he became assistant editor of a weekly sports periodical, the *Sportbild*.

Because he was definitely in the writing business now, his mind turned to a story that had been stewing around in his head for years. It was about his war experiences and Remarque set aside two hours every night for work on the book. Writing with a pencil on ruled white paper, he turned out *All Quiet on the Western Front* in a little over four weeks, an amazing performance. Once he had it down he did very little additional work on it, offering it to the firm of Samuel Fischer, which in those days, before refugees were known, was the publisher for Thomas Mann and other important German writers.

»No, we're sorry,« said the editors, »but who wants another war book? Everybody is sick of reading about the war.«

Remarque took it back and, without changing a word, submitted it to the Ullstein corporation, publishers of books, magazines and a string of newspapers. They wanted it primarily as a serial and were as surprised as anybody else when it became an overnight sensation, selling 1,200,000 copies in Germany alone the first year, 1929.

Success was overwhelming, but all Remarque got out of it, aside from the money, was a large pain. He found that fame was a nuisance.

»One day I was nobody and could go where I pleased and do what I wanted,« he says. »But suddenly I was famous. I hadn't changed, but my friends started looking at me as if I

were something that had just been invented. They treated me with awe, most of them, and when I talked to them that book was always there between us.«

This was serious business for Remarque because in ordinary circumstances he is a big, bubbly guy, who likes to eat and drink, slap backs and bust out laughing when something strikes him right. The somewhat Mephistophelean austerity of his publicity photographs is also a part of him – the serious side that comes out when he is deeply moved – but he is obviously not a person who would take much delight in being toasted by stuffed shirts.

What he did in his first attempt to escape was get in his automobile and drive aimlessly over Europe. At each stopping place he signed a new name on the blotter, often identifying himself as a dog breeder, which he happens to be. After the motor tour, he settled in Switzerland.

His love for dogs runs a close race with his love for cars, and the number of them around the house varies according to the number of visitors that arrive. A favorite Remarques habit is to give a dog to anybody whom he happens to like.

Remarque is curious about everything and hopes he can retain that outlook until his death.

»Every child is an artist,« he says, »and would continue being one if he could keep that first fresh point of view toward every blade of grass, every bird, every living thing.«

He is still nonpolitical even though he has given away much of his money to his friends, most of them Jews who are now outlawed by Germany. The rest of his wealth is tied up in Germany and he will probably never get it out. But even if his new books were not popular, he could probably continue living quietly in Switzerland on the sales of *All Quiet*, which still run between 8,000 and 9,000 copies a year.

He has a valuable collection of Cézannes and Van Goghs, as well as of oriental rugs. he gets excited if anybody steps on one of his rugs; they are just to feast one's eyes on; but he never says a word if a dog goes to sleep on his finest Persian.

He was married thirteen years ago and divorced in 1932. Just to show you what sort of man he is, he remarried his former wife last year.

Although he is as much the victim of Hitler and the Nazis as any of his fellow refugees, he refuses to say anything about it. He helps those who are in need and for the rest keeps quiet.

»No one should abuse his homeland,« he says, »Germany is still my home.«

So he is over here on his identification certificate from Switzerland, arranging for the publication of »Flotsam.« It will appear in *Collier's* as a serial, will appear between covers and be made into a movie at M-G-M. Recently he has been in Hollywood visiting his friends, Marlene Dietrich and Josef von Sternberg and the other German members of the film colony.

When he returns, all may be well in Switzerland and all may go very badly. The refugees who felt they were safe in Czechoslovakia are now either dead, in concentration camps or again wandering through a distressed world. Having fled from Germany to Austria and then to Prague, they are again on the march – the most tragic and heroic group of people in history. Remarque writes most powerfully about subjects that are close to him and he is as inevitably bound into the refugee problem as the poorest exiled worker.

»Afraid?« he asks. »Yes, I'm afraid. All of us are afraid. But I have no more fear that a man must have to live. What if a man didn't have fear? He'd be a robot, a mechanical man. Having no hopes, he would have no fears. I wouldn't call that living.«

The Real Hope of Germany

His father and two married sisters still live in Osnabrueck and Remarque was there last in January, 1933, to see his mother, who had been desperately ill. When she died several years ago, he didn't dare return. As a final ironical twist, his father is a bookbinder. Remarque's books are no longer allowed to be published in Germany and copies confiscated are burned; but his father may bind other and more proper volumes.

The great book-burning of 1933 took place in front of the Opera in Berlin, under the personal supervision of Dr. Goebbels and not far from the office of Otto Clement, who is now Remarque's personal literary representative. That May morning two Storm Troopers presented themselves at Mr. Clement's office and announced that they had been assigned to see that no harm came to him during the sacred ceremony. Presently, they became bored and asked if they could borrow something to read from the library. He invited them to help themselves. One selected *All Quiet on the Western Front*; the other took Remarque's *The Road Back*.

»They sat reading them,« says Mr. Clement, »blissfully unaware that the government was burning those books only a stone's throw away.«

Remarque smiled a bit ruefully when Mr. Clement told this, as if it somehow gave him hope. But suddenly his face took on the austere look it bears when he is thoughtful and, without anything being said, it seemed plain that he was thinking of other things besides hope, thinking, perhaps, of the people he now knew best, the refugees who struggled and made love and raised families and fought the elements and hoped for a future that might bring them security. Just at this moment, they seemed to be the Germans worth worrying about, the real hope of Germany.