

Cyrus Brooks

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German Soldier Who Wrote a Most Vivid War Book Says He Tried Only to Focus His Personal Experiences

By Cyrus Brooks.

Berlin.

High-powered touring car racing westward down the Bismarck Strasse out of Berlin; at the wheel 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, an English rowing-man, or a member of any one of the blond races of Northern Europe. He was Erich Maria Remarque, the German writer whose book »All Quiet on the Western Front« has seized the imagination of the civilized world.

Nearly abreast of the Funkturm, the Berlin version of the Eiffel Tower, we turned sharp to the left and brought up at the entrance to Herr Stinnes's private motoring track, on which for a small fee the speed man can try the paces of his car. In front was a big racer containing two boys in berets.

»We'll see how they can drive,« said Herr Remarque, with a mischievous flash of his teeth.

The racer was speeding away in front of us when Remarque opened the throttle of his car and she roared like a bomber airplane taking off. The speedometer needle spun round, 100, 120 kilometers, and remained glued to the end of the dial. Inside of two minutes the boys with the berets were behind us. On Herr Remarque's face was a happy, intent smile. He is a devotee of speed.

»Do you ever go in for racing?« I asked.

»Later on,« he said with a twinkle in his eyes, »when I've finished with literature.« Which meant, I take it, never.

At the further end of the Automobile Strasse, we turned out into the scented pine-woods of Gr newald. On that hot evening half Berlin seemed to have come out to the woods and lakes. The bright little wayside caf s were thronged and the winding road was thick with pedestrians. The pace was slow enough for talk and I asked the inevitable first question:

»How did you come to write your book?«

He looked at me. Apart from his eyes, Herr Remarque might be any one of tens of thousands of healthy young men to be found in the capitals of Europe; but his eyes have an alertness, a power, a penetration which reveal the mind and character behind them.

»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, handworker, journalist. I could not settle down to anything, there was a continual restlessness and dissatisfaction that drove me from one job to another.«

He stopped and 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 out of peace of mind, making it impossible to settle down to the ordinary avocations of civilian life. At least – 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 – it had written itself – and I called it ›Im Westen nichts Neues‹ – ›All Quiet on the Western Front‹.«

»A superb piece of irony,« I said.

»When my readers have finished the book,« he agreed, »they close it and read the title again – ›All Quiet‹ – such were the things that were happening when officially all was quiet!«

»And of course, the publishers jumped at it?«

»No. Two publishers read it and turned it down. They admired it, but said it would never sell. Then a friend of mine went and talked to one firm and they made me an offer. Fifteen minutes after the contract was signed the second firm telephoned to say they had reversed their decision.«

»How does it feel,« I asked, »to be the author of the world's bestseller?«

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 become 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 simply 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.«

I thought of the third-floor flat in a quiet street in Wilmersdorf where I had found Herr Remarque the day before. It is a flat he reserves as his workshop and even there amid piles of books and papers he had introduced a reminder of the quiet countryside – a reminder that at first sight appeared bizarre – a large glass tank where little fish were swimming among water plants.

»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 ordinary folk in the streets and cafés, the simple people who are doing the world's work and not theorizing 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 man to face and solve the problems of life, and for that a man must try to live truly and simply.«

There was no pose in Herr Remarque's modesty. He spoke in a low voice, slightly embarrassed by his self-revelation. He was not pleased when I called him modest. Indeed, it is difficult to get him to talk of himself. He is possessed by a passion to help. He desires to use his gifts of mind and heart for the removal of the misery, stupidity and cruelty which still exists, active or latent, in this post-war world. Success is welcome as a proof that men's ears are open to the words he speaks to them.

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 toward peace. Every one realizes today that war is a horror and an anachronism that must be avoided wherever humanly possible. This realization is not the monopoly of any political section; it is common to all classes, even to the soldiers themselves, and with this realization 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.

»You must realize,« 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 destructions of all these 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.

»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. How 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 realization.«

The pine wood had now given place to rows of handsome villas. We passed Wannsee Station, disgorging a crowd of young people on their way to bathe in the Freibad. Between the

trees the lake glittered like silver. We reverted to the subject of books, and I asked Herr Re-marque his opinion of contemporary British and American writers.

»Don't think that I speak as a literary expert,« he said. »First of all, my English is not good enough to read your writers in the original and therefore I have to judge by translations, which are not always what they should be. But apart from that, I am not a *littérateur* and can only give you my personal preferences.

»Shaw, of course – every German knows and loves Shaw. But I am also very fond of H. G. Wells, whose ideas interest me immensely, and of Galsworthy and Arnold Bennett. Edgar Wallace is a great favorite over here, but I find his African tales more entertaining than his detective stories.« He thought for a moment. »On the whole I think the English writer I love best is Robert Louis Stevenson.«

»And the Americans?«

»The two Americans who have made the deepest impression on me are Theodore Dreiser, with his ›American Tragedy‹, and Upton Sinclair. Sinclair Lewis's ›Martin Arrowsmith‹ is a fine book, too. I also have a great liking for Jack London's stories – they are so vigorous and stimulating. The work being done in Britain and America at present is of very great importance and I am polishing up my English in order to make its acquaintance in first hand.«

I told him that other German writers were also having a considerable vogue in English translation and asked him whom he considered the most interesting and significant of the younger German novelists.

»In my opinion, Leonhard Frank,« he said promptly. »His ›Karl und Anna‹ is certainly one of the loveliest stories that post-war Germany has produced.«

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-gray 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.