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BOOKS

Erich Maria Remarque, Violent Author . . .

Erich Maria Remarque, a cordial, gentle-mannered man of 60, came to the U.S. in 1939 and became a citizen in 1947. He lives in a small apartment high above New York's 57th Street, with a superb view straight down Manhattan Island. He writes in longhand at a desk where he can see the view or, when he chooses, a framed letter of Goethe. In the room are his spinet-style piano and a number of small and choice works of art, including a Degas and a bevy of exquisite Chinese bronzes. He still keeps a house on Lake Maggiore in Switzerland, and goes there for a few months at a time. Despite this peregrinating between two continents, he says:

"I now think of New York as my home. It is an unbelievable city. There is virtually everything here. I am very happy to have become an American. I have met exceedingly cultivated people in America. Americans have an innate sense of freedom, whether they realize it or not. They act toward each other that way. It is so easy to mix with others. This freedom is something it is very hard for a European, who has not observed it, to conceive of.

"I had been thinking about writing 'The Black Obelisk,' about treating that early part of my life, for years (see review



Remarque: Tombstones and poetry and a girl named Genevieve

below). But there were so many difficulties. I wanted to write about Genevieve, the girl in the asylum. I thought I might do a novel just about her, but it seemed to me it would have been too static, with not enough interest. Then I gradu-

ally came to feel that I wanted to write about all the other things at the same time—the tombstone business and so on—and that Genevieve could be part of the whole. Scenes with her could be worked in among others, and the whole

. . . Quiet Man

thing might be moving. I hope it is. "Once I had seen my way, it came easily. Ten years after the first war many things had come together for me and I suddenly wrote 'All Quiet on the Western Front' in just four weeks. 'The Black Obelisk' took a year. I don't know what ever happened to Genevieve."

Remarque, who is noted for his hatred of war and Nazism, is anything but violent in temperament. Markedly reflective, he also has a fastidious enthusiasm for food and drink and wit, for the small and fast Italian sports cars, and for American women and comic strips. Among his chief admirations in modern American writing are the earlier works of Thornton Wilder and Ernest Hemingway. Among modern Europeans, one of his preferences is André Malraux. Remarque's philosophical interest has carried him far outside Western philosophy into such areas as Zen Buddhism.

But in his conversation there is repeatedly heard the veteran of Europe's disasters. "You know," he says, "I am in a curious position. Most writers at some time or another want to go back to their roots, to revisit actually or in imagination their home towns. But if I want to go back, it just isn't there. It's obliterated. Bombed out."