

Verbundkatalog Kalliope

Karel Capek.

Mann, Klaus

New York, 1940-02-00

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I believe I am right in saying that you, U. N., and K. C. will
Yes, Prof. Frédéric Karel Capek.

I knew him for many years, and he was ^{now} the most friendly terms
with my family. He was charming.

He was much more than just charming as he possessed the authentic
dignity of a man, who spiritually represents his nation, and thoroughly
realizes the responsibility and high significance of such a position.
For Karel Capek really was representing - inside his own country as
well as abroad - the ancient and, at the same time, youthful culture
of Czecho-Slovakia. / His work and personality meant for ^{the} Czech literature
what Anatole France may have meant for France, Maxim Gorki for Russia -
and what Thomas Masaryk meant for the political life of his country.
It was Capek who has given us the clearest, most convincing, most human
picture of the great statesman and thinker, : his "Conversations with
Masaryk" are the most moving and most lasting literary monument of
the "President-Liberator", beside his own writings.

I should like to recall and to re-construct the conversations I
used to have, in my turn, with Karel Capek - if I would only be gifted
with his talent of observing - and remembering. / ~~Had I foreseen that~~
~~we should lose him so soon, I would have written down every word he~~
~~told us.~~ Yet I still can hear his delicate and winged voice, his elegant
and witty eloquence, / ~~that was trained in the high school of French~~
~~conversation.~~ And I can still see his fine and intelligent face,
marked with melancholy and spirit. It had Slavish features, his face.
and this very mixture and productive blending of West-European and
Slavish elements was characteristic for his personality and for his
work - as it is characteristic for the Czech people, its peculiar
race, its genius. / ~~The city of Prague owes its original and fascinating~~
~~charm to this specific compound of Western and Eastern qualities and~~
~~trends.~~ In the personal case of Karel Capek, however, the Western
elements were predominant - notwithstanding the Slavish form of

his cheek-bones. He was a brilliant writer in the French ~~sense~~ ^{sense} of the word; a real homme de lettres - not solemn at all, but clever, versatile, flexible, always full of ideas, sometimes almost journalistic, sometimes lyrical, never boring. ~~He did not have the haughty and detached attitude of the German poet who escapes from the hardships of life into the splendid isolation of his own dreams and meditations. Capek was more courageous and more realistic.~~ He realized that literature, even poetry, is a social function - and, consequently, has to deal with social problems. Besides, he was social and fundamentally cheerful by nature. He enjoyed having people around: his house was a center of the artistic and intellectual circles in Prague; his wife, the celebrated Czech actress Olga Scheinpflugova, was a perfect hostess. I remember with pleasure those afternoons when the Capek home was opened to the younger artists and writers, and all the rooms were full of youthful, intelligent voices, eagerly discussing Benesh's policy, or a new Russian film, the latest literary sensation in Paris, or a recent work by our talkative and friendly host, Karel Capek...

All this seems so very far away - a dream-like picture, belonging to a better and sounder world. It was an endangered world, even then - to be sure; yet it was not a hopeless one. It still seemed worthwhile to fight - and that is ~~is~~ ^{did} what Capek, during the last years of his rich and productive life: he kept on fighting, with elegance, wit, determination, and often with very daring aggressiveness. He fought for liberty and culture - and for the ~~national~~ independence of his homeland which he loved so much - ; for the freedom, the dignity, the national existence of Czecho-Slovakia.

He remained active and optimistic until the end - or almost until the end. It was the catastrophe of Munich, in the fall of 1938, which killed him. The disease which actually - or rather, seemingly -

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incidental

caused his death, was only ~~accidental~~. The truth is that he wanted to die. Grief and disappointment, bitterness and despair had become overwhelmingly strong - stronger, indeed, than his will of life.

He realized that he could not go on living in his own country, once it had become a province of Hitler's Third Reich. On the other hand, he could not face ~~the~~ exile, life in some foreign land. ~~his wife tried her best to persuade him~~ He considered moving to America, and his wife tried her best to persuade him. But he ~~was~~ ^{was} already too tired. His friends kept on assuring him / that he had many friends and admirers, over there, on the other side of the Atlantic. But all he had to reply was a languid, hopeless "Perhaps..."

His ~~we~~ eyes and ~~his~~ voice, however, had another expression, and got vivid, once more, when he begged us:

"Seek friends, active friends, for us - across the Sea! And when I am no longer here, tell the Americans that Czecho-Slovakia should ^{not} be allowed to perish."

Klaus Mann,

New York,

February, 1940



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