Captain Rupert Hughes Calls Authors to War

In a Talk About the Work Done by Men Who Write Country's Popular Books He Praises the New York National Guard

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RUPERT HUGHES—that is to say, Captain Hughes, Assistant to the Adjutant General, has an interesting and novel plan by which authors may assist the United States in the present crisis. The plan is this:

The author of "What Would I Say?" and "I Can't Have Everything," and other popular novels of contemporary American life in New York, has been appointed an Adjutant to the National Guard. He has interrupted his work long enough to be interviewed, but he said little about the subject concerning which he is probably better informed than any other American author—the participation of our nation and especially of New York State in the war. He said, quite simply, that the war is the duty of every author of proper age to enlist, without waiting for conscription. And he spoke of certain literary problems directly related to the war. But for the most part he talked as Rupert Hughes, novelist, rather than as Captain Rupert Hughes of the Sixty-ninth.

What Rupert Hughes said about the war's effect on literature had to do with the tendency to make writers, as well as other people, more keenly aware of the great primitive emotions. "War destroys generalizations," he said. "War brings things down to cases and gives writers a sense of actuality. It is hard to say just what this white effect will be. It has given us Rupert Brook's stories and "Mr. Erlich Sees It Through," but it hasn't hurt Cheston Chaplin. I think he helps us chiefly by sweeping away foolishness and giving us a concrete pride in something definite."

"The purpose is interesting. A mother gives up her son—this act is observed and celebrated by the popular song-writer. The resulting 'mother-song' is trite and banal, and only buffoons sing it. Then suddenly it comes to us that what the song says is really important—that the tears of mothers and the cries of the wounded are tremendous things, and the stuff of literature. The things that the 'mother-song' says ought to be a lie, the trouble is with the way in which they are said in the song. We see that the writer's task is to find a new way of saying these things. We see that writers have been afraid to be heroic, but that now they must be heroic, must write of the great elemental and immortal passion."

Rupert Hughes takes his subject from the life around him and has little respect for the theory that a writer should deal with periods which he can regard with the advantage of perspective. "What is perspective?" he asked. "Is it not an artificial distortion of things in order to make them graphic? And what business has a novelist with artificial distortion? A novelist's concern is with the truth. Perspective makes a railroad track look like a triangle."

"A novelist must keep the rails of the track parallel. I want to do human life as Anthony did birds, I put it before the color fades and changes to other forms entirely. When I have finished my series of novels on contemporary life, I know that whatever it may be, it will give us a truthful picture of the background of this country as I can make it."

Here, Mr. Hughes, because Captain Hughes to attend to some official business—talk to some men who cannot offer their services in some branch of the mobilization of the resources of the state. This brought the conversation around to the subject of the war again. "Many authors and publishers," he said, "are making great sacrifices to serve the country. Adjutant General Hughes is building up a wonderful organization for mobilizing the entire military resources of New York. Mr. Means of Appleton is chief of our Division of Information. He is giving up to this work all his time except two days a week which he keeps for his business. The Vigilance, a society of writers and artists, is doing good work."

"The hard thing is to get men who will shoulder a rifle. Many people spend their time making excuses for the man for being unprepared, but they are unwilling to do their obvious duty in preparing—that is, enlist. We have cut uncomplimentary to war; we are uncomplimentary to uniforms. Our officers and enlisted men only wear a uniform when absolutely necessary. It is because we are uncomplimentary to war that conscription is necessary."

"The first thing for any one to do who wishes to help in the war is to enlist, of course. We need all sorts of civilian aid, but we chiefly need men to carry rifles. But now that conscription is coming, this matter will be settled for us. One thing seems to be sure now—the National Guard will be recalled up to war strength. Governor Whitman obtained the power to draft a year ago. It is interesting to see that New York State has taken two steps ahead of the rest of the country in preparedness along the border. The New York National Guard had the largest division in the army under the command of one American officer. For a regular army officer to have command of a whole regiment is exceptional. And a man must have a large body of men to drill in order to know how to do it. A man who has been drilling a hundred men will not be at his ease with a hundred thousand men. The field order for moving a brigade is a piece of literature itself."

"They make fun of the National Guard, but we can return the compliment. The National Guard is the guardian of American business men against unpreparedness. Of course, the National Guard isn't the ideal military organization. The man in civilian clothes carrying a Loomis in the ideal policeman. But the man in civilian dress carrying a broomstick is a good deal better policeman than the man in pajamas not carrying anything. So if I have any message for authors who want to help their country, it is, enlist in the National Guard!"