

THE
ENORMOUS
ROOM

CUMMINGS



**THE
ENORMOUS
ROOM**

**BY
E. E. CUMMINGS**

**WITH AN INTRODUCTION
BY THE AUTHOR**

**THE
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NEW YORK**



INTRODUCTION

Don't be afraid.

—But I've never seen a picture you painted or read
a word you wrote—

So what?

So you're thirty-eight?

Correct.

And have only just finished your second novel?

Socalled.

Entitled ee-eye-em-eye?

Right.

And pronounced?

"A" as in a, "me" as in me; accent on the "me".

Signifying?

Am.

How does Am compare with The Enormous Room?

Favorably.

They're not at all similar, are they?

When The Enormous Room was published, some people wanted a war book; they were disappointed. When Eimi was published, some people wanted Another Enormous Room; they were disappointed.

Doesn't The Enormous Room really concern war?

It actually uses war: to explore an inconceivable vastness which is so unbelievably far away that it appears microscopic.

When you wrote this book, you were looking through war at something very big and very far away?

When this book wrote itself, I was observing a negligible portion of something incredibly more distant than any sun; something more unimaginably huge than the most prodigious of all universes—

Namely?

The individual.

Well! And what about Am?

Some people had decided that *The Enormous Room* wasn't a just-war book and was a class-war book, when along came Eimi—aha! said some people; here's another dirty dig at capitalism.

And they were disappointed.

Sic.

Do you think these disappointed people really hated capitalism?

I feel these disappointed people unreally hated themselves—

And you really hated Russia.

Russia, I felt, was more deadly than war; when nationalists hate, they hate by merely killing and maiming human beings; when internationalists hate, they hate by categorizing and pigeonholing human beings.

So both your novels were what people didn't expect.

Eimi is the individual again; a more complex individual, a more enormous room.

By a—what do you call yourself? painter? poet? playwright? satirist? essayist? novelist?

Artist.

But not a successful artist, in the popular sense?

Don't be silly.

Yet you probably consider your art of vital consequence—

Improbably.

—To the world?

To myself.

What about the world, Mr. Cummings?

I live in so many: which one do you mean?

I mean the everyday humdrum world, which includes me and you and millions upon millions of men and women.

So?

Did it ever occur to you that people in this so-called world of ours are not interested in art?

Da da.

Isn't that too bad!

How?

If people were interested in art, you as an artist would receive wider recognition—

Wider?

Of course.

Not deeper.

Deeper?

Love, for example, is deeper than flattery.

Ah—but (now that you mention it) isn't love just a trifle oldfashioned?

I dare say.

And aren't you supposed to be ultramodernistic?

I dare say.

But I dare say you don't dare say precisely why you consider your art of vital consequence—

Thanks to I dare say my art I am able to become myself.

Well well! Doesn't that sound as if people who weren't artists couldn't become themselves?

Does it?

What do you think happens to people who aren't artists? What do you think people who aren't artists become?

I feel they don't become: I feel nothing happens to them; I feel negation becomes of them.

Negation?

You paraphrased it a few moments ago.

How?

"This socalled world of ours."

Labouring under the childish delusion that economic forces don't exist, eh?

I am labouring.

Answer one question: do economic forces exist or do they not?

Do you believe in ghosts?

I said economic forces.

So what?

Well well well! Where ignorance is bliss . . . Listen, Mr. Lowercase Highbrow—

Shoot.

—I'm afraid you've never been hungry.

Don't be afraid.

E. E. CUMMINGS

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FOREWORD (1922)

'FOR THIS MY SON WAS DEAD, AND IS ALIVE
AGAIN; HE WAS LOST AND IS FOUND.'

He was lost by the Norton-Harjes Ambulance Corps.
He was officially dead as a result of official misinformation.

He was entombed by the French Government.

It took the better part of three months to find him
and bring him back to life with the help of powerful and
willing friends on both sides of the Atlantic. The fol-
lowing documents tell the story.

104 IRVING STREET,
CAMBRIDGE, *December 8, 1917.*

President Woodrow Wilson,
White House,
Washington, D.C.

MR. PRESIDENT:

It seems criminal to ask for a single moment of your
time. But I am strongly advised that it would be more
criminal to delay any longer calling to your attention a
crime against American citizenship in which the French
Government has persisted for many weeks—in spite of
constant appeals made to the American Minister at Paris;
and in spite of subsequent action taken by the State De-
partment at Washington, on the initiative of my friend
Hon. —.

The victims are two American ambulance drivers,

Edward Estlin Cummings of Cambridge, Mass., and W— S— B—.

More than two months ago these young men were arrested, subjected to many indignities, dragged across France like criminals, and closely confined in a Concentration Camp at La Ferté Macé; where according to latest advices they still remain,—awaiting the final action of the Minister of the Interior upon the findings of a Commission which passed upon their cases as long ago as October 17.

Against Cummings both private and official advices from Paris state that there is no charge whatever. He has been subjected to this outrageous treatment solely because of his intimate friendship with young B—, whose sole crime is,—so far as can be learned,—that certain letters to friends in America were misinterpreted by an over-zealous French censor.

It only adds to the indignity and irony of the situation to say that young Cummings is an enthusiastic lover of France, and so loyal to the friends he has made among the French soldiers, that even while suffering in health from his unjust confinement, he excuses the ingratitude of the country he has risked his life to serve, by calling attention to the atmosphere of intense suspicion and distrust that has naturally resulted from the painful experience which France has had with foreign emissaries.

Be assured, Mr. President, that I have waited long—it seems like ages—and have exhausted all other available help before venturing to trouble you.

1. After many weeks of vain effort to secure effective action by the American Ambassador at Paris, Richard Norton of the Norton-Harjes Ambulance Corps, to which the boys belonged, was completely discouraged, and advised me to seek help here.

2. The efforts of the State Department at Washington resulted as follows:

i. A cable from Paris saying there was no charge against Cummings and intimating that he would speedily be released.

ii. A little later a second cable advising that Edward Estlin Cummings had sailed on the Antilles and was reported lost.

iii. A week later a third cable correcting this cruel error, and saying the Embassy was renewing efforts to locate Cummings—apparently still ignorant even of the place of his confinement.

After such painful and baffling experiences, I turn to you,—burdened though I know you to be, in this world crisis, with the weightiest task ever laid upon any man.

But I have another reason for asking this favour. I do not speak for my son alone; or for him and his friend alone. My son has a mother,—as brave and patriotic as any mother who ever dedicated an only son to a great cause. The mothers of our boys in France have rights as well as the boys themselves.

My boy's mother had a right to be protected from the weeks of horrible anxiety and suspense caused by the inexplicable arrest and imprisonment of her son. My boy's mother had a right to be spared the supreme agony caused by a blundering cable from Paris saying that he had been drowned by a submarine. (An error which Mr. Norton subsequently cabled that he had discovered six weeks before.) My boy's mother and all American mothers have a right to be protected against all needless anxiety and sorrow.

Pardon me, Mr. President, but if I were president and your son were suffering such prolonged injustice at the hands of France; and your son's mother had been needlessly kept in Hell as many weeks as my boy's mother has,—I would do something to make American citizenship as sacred in the eyes of Frenchmen as Roman citizenship was in the eyes of the ancient world. Then it was

enough to ask the question, 'Is it lawful to scourge a man that is a Roman, and uncondemned?' Now, in France, it seems lawful to treat like a condemned criminal a man that is an American, uncondemned and admittedly innocent!

Very respectfully,

EDWARD CUMMINGS

This letter was received at the White House. Whether it was received with sympathy or with silent disapproval, is still a mystery. A Washington official, a friend in need and a friend indeed in these trying experiences, took the precaution to have it delivered by messenger. Otherwise, fear that it had been 'lost in the mail' would have added another twinge of uncertainty to the prolonged and exquisite tortures inflicted upon parents by alternations of misinformation and official silence. Doubtless the official stethoscope was on the heart of the world just then; and perhaps it was too much to expect that even a post-card would be wasted on private heart-aches.

In any event this letter told where to look for the missing boys,—something the French Government either could not or would not disclose, in spite of constant pressure by the American Embassy at Paris and constant efforts by my friend Richard Norton, who was head of the Norton-Harjes Ambulance organization from which they had been abducted.

Release soon followed, as narrated in the following letter to Major — of the Staff of the Judge Advocate General in Paris.

February 20, 1921.

MY DEAR MR. —

Your letter of January 30th, which I had been waiting for with great interest ever since I received your cable,

arrived this morning. My son arrived in New York on January 1st. He was in bad shape physically as a result of his imprisonment: very much under weight, suffering from a bad skin infection which he had acquired at the concentration camp. However, in view of the extraordinary facilities which the detention camp offered for acquiring dangerous diseases, he is certainly to be congratulated on having escaped with one of the least harmful. The medical treatment at the camp was quite in keeping with the general standards of sanitation there; with the result that it was not until he began to receive competent surgical treatment after his release and on board ship that there was much chance of improvement. A month of competent medical treatment here seems to have got rid of this painful reminder of official hospitality. He is, at present, visiting friends in New York. If he were here, I am sure he would join with me and with his mother in thanking you for the interest you have taken and the efforts you have made.

W— S— B— is, I am happy to say, expected in New York this week by the S.S. Niagara. News of his release and subsequently of his departure came by cable. What you say about the nervous strain under which he was living, as an explanation of the letters to which the authorities objected, is entirely borne out by first-hand information. The kind of badgering which the youth received was enough to upset a less sensitive temperament. It speaks volumes for the character of his environment that such treatment aroused the resentment of only one of his companions, and that even this manifestation of normal human sympathy was regarded as 'suspicious.' If you are right in characterizing B—'s condition as more or less hysterical, what shall we say of the conditions which made possible the treatment which he and his friend received? I am glad B— wrote the very sensible and manly letter to the Embassy, which you mention.

After I have had an opportunity to converse with him, I shall be in better position to reach a conclusion in regard to certain matters about which I will not now express an opinion.

I would only add that I do not in the least share your complacency in regard to the treatment which my son received. The very fact that, as you say, no charges were made and that he was detained on suspicion for many weeks after the Commission passed on his case and reported to the Minister of the Interior that he ought to be released, leads me to a conclusion exactly opposite to that which you express. It seems to me impossible to believe that any well-ordered Government would fail to acknowledge such action to have been unreasonable. Moreover, 'detention on suspicion' was a small part of what actually took place. To take a single illustration, you will recall that after many weeks' persistent effort to secure information, the Embassy was still kept so much in the dark about the facts, that it cabled the report that my son had embarked on The Antilles and was reported lost. And when convinced of that error, the Embassy cabled that it was renewing efforts to locate my son. Up to that moment, it would appear that the authorities had not even condescended to tell the United States Embassy where this innocent American citizen was confined; so that a mistaken report of his death was regarded as an adequate explanation of his disappearance. If I had accepted this report and taken no further action, it is by no means certain that he would not be dead by this time.

I am free to say, that in my opinion no self-respecting Government could allow one of its own citizens, against whom there has been no accusation brought, to be subjected to such prolonged indignities and injuries by a friendly Government without vigorous remonstrance. I regard it as a patriotic duty, as well as a matter of personal self-respect, to do what I can to see that such

remonstrance is made. I still think too highly both of my own Government and of the Government of France to believe that such an untoward incident will fail to receive the serious attention it deserves. If I am wrong, and American citizens must expect to suffer such indignities and injuries at the hands of other Governments without any effort at remonstrance and redress by their own Government, I believe the public ought to know the humiliating truth. It will make interesting reading. It remains for my son to determine what action he will take.

I am glad to know your son is returning. I am looking forward with great pleasure to conversing with him.

I cannot adequately express my gratitude to you and to other friends for the sympathy and assistance I have received. If any expenses have been incurred on my behalf or on behalf of my son, I beg you to give me the pleasure of reimbursing you. At best, I must always remain your debtor.

With best wishes,

Sincerely yours,

EDWARD CUMMINGS

I yield to no one in enthusiasm for the cause of France. Her cause was our cause and the cause of civilization; and the tragedy is that it took us so long to find it out. I would gladly have risked my life for her, as my son risked his and would have risked it again had not the departure of his regiment overseas been stopped by the Armistice.

France was beset with enemies within as well as without. Some of the 'suspects' were members of her official household. Her Minister of Interior was thrown into prison. She was distracted with fear. Her existence was at stake. Under such circumstances excesses were sure to

be committed. But it is precisely at such times that American citizens most need and are most entitled to the protection of their own Government.

EDWARD CUMMINGS

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