

THE BOOKMAN

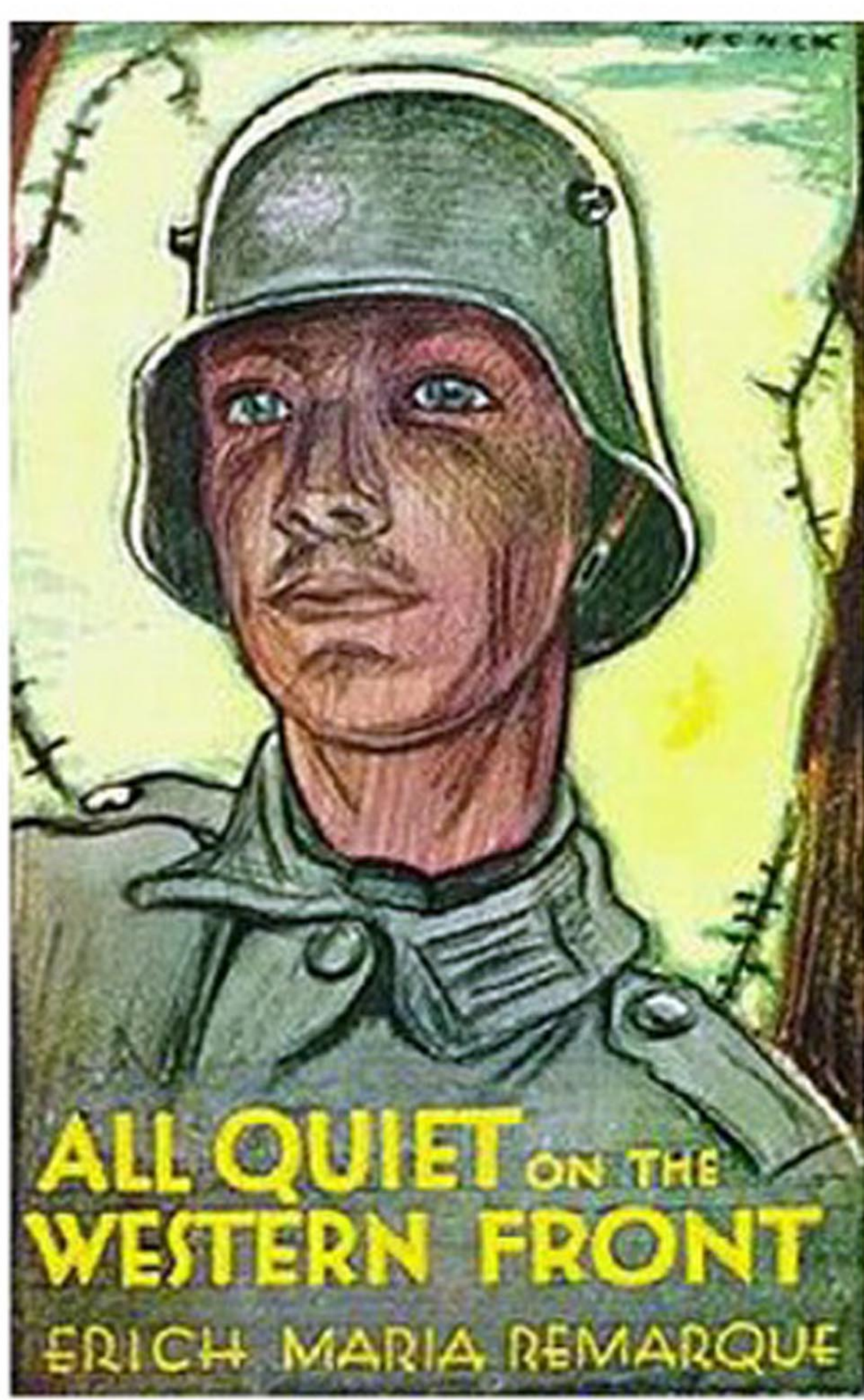
July, 1929

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ALL QUIET ON THE WESTERN FRONT

by Erich Maria Remarque

(LITTLE, BROWN. \$2.50)



HERE is a book about the war of such extraordinary purity and force that, reading it, one seems actually never to have read of the war before. Numberless books have been written which present the stark, physical horrors of war in quite as full detail as *All Quiet on the Western Front*, but their effect has been nullified by one's perception of the intent to shock. Many others have given us a more complete, more literary, rendition of war as it strikes full upon the nerves of sensitive and intelligent men. Nothing could be less academic than Herr Remarque's book; but nothing could be more vivid. *All Quiet on the Western Front* makes the first type of work seem, by comparison, a mere school-boy essay in nastiness, and the second, neurotic and vaguely untrue.

As Homer described the beauty of Helen by its effect on the beholder, so does Remarque describe the horror of war. And no other literary device, however gymnastic, could convince us so perfectly, could force us to participate so completely in that horror. In this book, war and the long strain of the momentary fear of death are things which reduce all life and living to a least common denominator of existence.

Here, on the borders of death, life follows an amazingly simple course, it is limited to what is most necessary . . . In that lies our primitiveness and our survival . . . Life is simply one continual watch against the menace of death;—it has transformed us into unthinking animals in order to give us the weapon of instinct—it has reinforced us with dullness, so that we do not go to pieces before the horror.

Erich Maria Remarque

This is the war as seen through the eyes of Paul Bäumer, a simple German private, a youth of twenty translated from the school-room into the trenches, without any philosophy or any settled views of life, or any convictions one way or another. His tragedy, as well as his comrades', does not lie in having been uprooted, but rather in never having had any roots.

All the older men are linked up with their previous life. They have wives, children, occupations, and interests; they have a background which is so strong that the war cannot obliterate it. . . . We had as yet taken no root.

For the older men the war was merely an interruption. However destructive it might be, when it was over, there were still foundations left upon which to build. For these youths there was nothing else, they were unable to think beyond it, and their lives had been laid waste in a strange and melancholy fashion. Paul is never so conscious of the destiny which had set him apart as when he is home on leave. There he is doubly hurt through the futile friendliness of old associations, through the helpless agony of his mother's love.

. . . I cannot get on with people. My mother is the only one who asks no questions. Not so my father. He wants me to tell him about the front; he is curious in a way that I find stupid and distressing. . . . I realize that he does not know that a man cannot talk of such things. I would do it willingly, but it is too dangerous for me to put these things into words. I am afraid they might then become gigantic and I be no longer able to master them.

The war gave only one good gift to these men, and that was the gift of comradeship—a treacherous gift, to be sure, since, where the primary condition of life was its uncertainty even loving was hazardous, and a comrade's death was to each man a little death of himself. Nevertheless, these men found as they crouched together in danger an intimacy which transcended the need of speech.

It might be claimed as a fault that this book is sharply and bitterly concentrated, that the action is single and exclusive and that there is room in it for neither synthesis nor conclusion. But what it sacrifices in scope, it gains a thousandfold in strength and direction. *All Quiet on the Western Front* is, if not a great book, certainly a book nearly perfect of its kind. One can only regret the stupid necessity which resulted in the suppressing or deleting of material which was included in the English edition. (The translation from the German has been made by A. W. Wheen.)