

PART I

RETREAT FROM THE SOMME

I

A NEW YEAR OF WAR

NEW YEAR'S EVE, 1916

LAST New Year's Eve—the end of a year which had been full of menace for our fighting men, because, at the beginning, our lines had no great power of guns behind them, and full of hopes that had been unfilled, in spite of all their courage and all their sacrifice—an artillery officer up in the Ypres salient waited for the tick of midnight by his wrist-watch (it gave a glow-worm light in the darkness), and then shouted the word "Fire!" . . . One gun spoke, and then for a few seconds there was silence. Over in the German line the flares went up and down, and it was very quiet in the enemy trenches, where, perhaps, the sentries wondered at that solitary gun. Then the artillery officer gave the word of command again. This time the battery fired nine rounds. A little while there was silence again, followed by another solitary shot, and then by six rounds. So did the artillery in the Ypres salient salute the birth of the New Year, born in war, coming to our soldiers and our race with many days of battle, with new and stern demands for the lives and blood of men.

To-night it is another New Year's Eve, and the year is coming to us with the same demands and the same promises, and the only difference between our hopes upon this night and that of a year ago is that by the struggle and endeavour of those past twelve months the ending is nearer in sight and the promise very near—very near as we hope and believe—its fulfilment. The guns will speak again to-night, saluting by the same kind