

6 FROM BAPAUME TO PASSCHENDAELE

vaults where the merchants kept their stores were propped up and cleaned out, and in this underground world thousands of our men lived for several days before the battle waiting for "zero" hour on April 9, when they would come up into the light and see the shell-fire which was now exploding above them, unloosing boulders of chalky rock about them and shaking the bowels of the earth. The enemy knew of our preparations and of this life in Arras, and during the week before the battle he flung many shells into the city, smashing houses already stricken, "strafing" the station and the barracks, the squares and courtyards, and the roads that led in and out. During the progress of the battle I went many times into the broken heart of Arras while the bodies of men and horses lay about where transport columns had gone galloping by under fire and while the shrill whine of high velocities was followed by the crash of shells among the ruins. In the town and below it there were always crowds of men during the weeks of fighting outside. I went through the tunnels when long columns of soldiers in single file moved slowly forward to another day's battle in the fields beyond, and when another column came back, wounded and bloody after their morning's fight.

The wounded and the unwounded passed each other in these dimly lighted corridors. Their steel hats clinked together. Their bodies touched. Wafts of stale air laden with a sickly stench came out of the vaults. Faint whiffs of poison-gas filtered through the soil above and made men vomit. For the most time the men were silent as they passed each other, but now and then a wounded man would say, "Oh, Christ!" or "Mind my arm, mate," and an unwounded man would pass some remark to the man ahead. In vaults dug into the sides of the passages were groups of tunnellers and other men half screened by blanket curtains. Their rifles were propped against the quarried rocks. They sat on ammunition boxes and played cards to the light of candles stuck in bottles, which made their shadows flicker fantastically on the walls. They took no interest in the procession beyond their blankets—the walking wounded and the troops going up. Some of them slept on the stone floors with their heads covered by their overcoats and made pillows of their gas-masks. Under some old houses of Arras were women and children—about 700