

INTRODUCTION

5

offensive in the Champagne under the supreme command of General Nivelle. In the Arras battles our troops were to do the "team work" for the French, and if the combined operations did not produce decisive results the British Armies might then be transferred to Flanders, according to the original plan. It was a handicap to our own strategical ideas, and was certain to weaken our divisions without increasing our prestige before they could be sent to Flanders for the most important assaults on our length of front. In loyalty to our Allies it was decided to subordinate our own plan to theirs, and this agreement was carried out utterly. By bad luck the Italians were not ready to strike at the same time, and the Russian revolution had already begun to relieve the enemy of his Eastern menace, so that the Anglo-French offensive did not have the prospect of decisive victory which might have come if the German armies had been pressed on all fronts.

Our regimental officers and men knew nothing of all this high strategy, nothing of the international difficulties which confronted our High Command. They knew only that they had to attack strong and difficult positions and that the immediate success depended upon their own leadership and the courage and training of their men. They were sure of that and hoped for a victory which would break the German spirit. They devoted themselves to the technical details of their work, and only in subconscious thought pondered over the powers that lie behind the preparations of battle and decide the fate of fighting men. The scenes in Arras and on the roads that lead to Arras are not to be forgotten by men who lived through them. Below ground as well as above ground thousands of soldiers worked night and day for weeks before the hour of attack. Above ground they were getting many guns into position, making roads, laying cables, building huts and camps, hurrying up vast stores of material. Below ground they were boring tunnels and making them habitable for many battalions, with ventilation shafts and electric light. All the city of Arras has an underground system of vaults and passages dug out in the time of the Spanish Netherlands when the houses of the citizens were built of stone quarried from the ground on which they stood. These subterranean passages were deepened and lengthened until they went a mile or more beyond Arras to the edge of the German front lines. The old