

## INTRODUCTION

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year should end, left us, as chroniclers of this twelve months' strife, overwhelmed by the number of its historic episodes and by its human sacrifice.

The year began with the German retreat from the Somme battlefields. It was a withdrawal for strategical reasons—the shortening of the enemy's line and the saving of his man-power—but also a retreat because it was forced upon the enemy by the greatness of his losses in the Somme fighting. He would not have left the Bapaume Ridge and all his elaborate defences down to Péroune and Roye unless we had so smashed his divisions by incessant gun-fire and infantry assaults that he was bound to economize his power for adventures elsewhere. On the ground from which he drew back, more hurriedly than he desired because we followed quickly on his heels to Bapaume, he left some of his dead. Many of his dead. Below Loupart Wood I saw hundreds of them, strewn about their broken batteries, and lying in heaps of obscene flesh in the wild chaos of earth which had been their trenches. On one plot of earth a few hundred yards in length there were 800 dead, and over all this battlefield one had to pick one's way to avoid treading on the bits and bodies of men. From the mud, arms stretched out like those of men who had been drowned in bogs. Boots and legs were uncovered in the muck-heaps, and faces with eyeless sockets on which flies settled, clay-coloured faces with broken jaws, or without noses or scalps, stared up at the sky or lay half buried in the mud. I fell once and clutched a bit of earth and found that I had grasped a German hand. It belonged to a body in field-grey stuck into the side of a bank on the edge of all this filthy shambles. . . . In the retreat the enemy laid waste the country behind him. I have described in this book the completeness of that destruction and its uncanny effect upon our senses as we travelled over the old No Man's Land through hedges of barbed wire and across the enemy's trenches into his abandoned strongholds like Gommecourt and Serre, and then into open country where German troops had lived beyond our gun-fire in French villages still inhabited by civilians. It was like wandering through a plague-stricken land abandoned after some fiendish orgy, of men drunk with the spirit of destruction. Every cottage in villages for miles around had been gutted by explosion. Every church in those villages had been blown up. The orchards