

26 FROM BAPAUME TO PASSCHENDAELE

ghosts of their dead husbands, as I live here alone in my cellar. Peace! Je m'en fiche de ça!"

There was a queer light in her eyes for a moment, in the eyes of this woman of Arras who saw down a vista of two years and two months all the fire and death that had been hurled into this city around her, and the bodies of little children in the streets, and her dead husband lying there on the cobble-stones, where now there was a great hole in the roadway piercing through to the vaults.

* * * *

I met other women of Arras. Two of them were young, daintily dressed as though for the boulevards of Paris, and they walked, swinging little handbags, down a street where at any moment a shell might come to tear them to pieces and make rags of them. Another was a buxom woman with a boy and girl holding her hands. The boy had been born to the sound of shell-fire. The girl was eight years old, but she now learns the history of France, not only out of school books, but out of this life in the midst of war.

"They are frightened—the little ones?" I asked. A solitary gun boomed and shook the loose stones of a ruined house.

The woman smiled and shrugged her shoulders.

"They are used to it all. Peace will seem strange to them."

"Will there ever be peace?" I asked.

The woman of Arras looked for a moment like the one I had spoken to on the steps of the cellar. Then she smiled, in a way that made me feel cold, for it was the smile of a woman who sees a vengeance for the wreckage of her life.

"There is no peace at Verdun," she said. "Our soldiers have done well there."

I said good day to her and went through the ruins again and out of the city, and stood watching an artillery duel up towards Souchez. The stabs of flame from our batteries were like red sparks in the deepening mist. They were like the fire in the eyes of the women who lived in cellars away back there in Arras, with a smouldering passion in the gloom and coldness of their lives.

* * * *

In many French villages the pipes are playing the New Year in, and their notes are full of triumph, but with a cry in them for those who have gone away with the old year, lying asleep