WHAT WE SHOULD REMEMBER AND WHAT FORGET

By Henry Williamson, Author of 'The Pathway.'

WHEN the Germans decided to quit their ragged and perilous lines on the Somme in March, 1917, they mined every cottage and cross-road in the back areas, cut down every tree (except those they wanted for landmarks) that occluded observation, removed the steel rails of the permanent way, put a bomb under every sheet of corrugated iron left behind, and walked away one Saturday night to their new *Siegfried Stellung*. I remember well the strange silence of that Sunday morning, and the unfamiliar figures of the Bengal Lancers trotting in file through our infantry outposts, turban'd and expressionless of face. The newspapers at home hailed this retreat into the colossal fortress of the Hindenburg Line as a victory: 'The German Landslide begins at last.' At the same time much was said, both printed and spoken, about certain enemy factories in use for the purpose of making further patriots of their dead.

We soldiers in France scorned the story; we knew it was a lie, for in places in the green abandoned country between the brown crater-morasses of the Somme and the new Hindenburg Line were to be seen German cemeteries, set with cream-coloured stones and monuments. Some of our shells at Achiet le Grand had chanced to fall among the tombs, disclosing long leather boots and grey tunics, and what they contained.

There were many cemeteries behind their lines in the 'Blood Bath of the Somme,' as the German soldiers called the place. English wounded prisoners who had died in their field hospitals were laid among the German dead; equal honour was done to friend and enemy alike in death. 'Here rests in God an unknown English soldier.' 'Here lies a nameless French hero'—such inscriptions were frequent.

I remember a grave standing alone in the middle of a grassy valley in that country of rolling gentle downland—a solitary grave set with the broken blade of a propeller for headstone, with pansies and mignonette and violet for coverlet, railed off from the cattle around the resting-place of the 'brave unknown English airman, who fell in combat, July 14, 1916.'

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Ten years afterwards. I stood and watched the German graves being dug up, and brown bones and scraps of rags, black like withered mushrooms, being shovelled into boxes, roughly in the shape of coffins, but very narrow. The tall blonde Flemish labourers picked them up and lowered them in, while an Englishman supervised with a French gendarme. The Englishman stood there to see that no English relics were taken in mistake, for in war time friend and foe were often buried together. But not in peace time—that time when the nations (or those minding the business of other people) practise war and invent new ways of death. The bones of the slain may lie side by side at peace in war time, but in peace time they are separated into nations again, each to its place—the British to the tended flowery gardens 'that are for ever England,' and the others to the vast 'concentration graveyard' on the bare chalk of the Labyrinthe, beside the Arras-Bethune road.

THE AUTHOR OF THIS ARTICLE.

With his novel 'Tarka the Otter' Mr. Henry Williamson lately won the Hawthornden Prize for the year's most notable work of imaginative literature. A month ago, the appearance of his newest novel, 'The Pathway,' was greeted with enthusiasm by the critics. Mr. Williamson writes in this article of the war which he himself knew for four years and the thoughts which today trouble the mind of a poet who was once a soldier.

The lorry driver taking a load to the Labyrinthe offered me a lift, and I rode among the narrow elm-wood boxes which rattled at every jolt—they were so light after the years. We came to a place which once was known as a dreaded German redoubt—the Labyrinthe. A vast and terrible sight—a forest of black, as though charred, crosses sweeping over the horizon. Planted close together, upright in pairs placed back to back, with names and numbers and regiments raggedly stencilled on them in white paint, they stood in the bare chalk. Unwanted as thistles—the thistles that the farmer and his wife uproot through the lone spring days. You see them kneeling in the young corn, on hands and knees, sometimes with their children in line, patient and intent in the fields which reveal the past by a circular blotch of chalky subsoil in the brown loam; a bone; a shard of rusty iron; a concrete 'pill-box,' low and square and useless in the wheat. Black as a burned place, bitter and black as frost or fire, a frost of silence among the black crosses. The invaders burned and laid waste, and now their bones lie unwanted, as if disgraced, in a burnt waste.

Invaders? Once these were men enslaved under the universal sky, men who wanted to be home, but had to march where they were ordered. Even in the sunlight the place was sinister, for the vast blackness oppressed the spirit of the living. As I was going away a motor-car stopped in the road outside, and an elderly man and his wife entered through the gate. Their faces were lined and worn, yet inscrutable, as of people who have fortified themselves to endure misunderstanding. They walked a score of paces away from the road, then stopped, gazing round the acres of blackness; they hesitated, and looked at each other, and then walked on slowly, beginning to search from cross to cross. Black and tall and close-set, nearly 100,000 of them, on the bare chalk. O mother, leave the dead to bury your dead, for they do not misunderstand! I helped them in their search, but the morning became the afternoon, and it was time to go. Some months later, in my Devon home, I received a letter from the man I met in the Labyrinthe. It said:—

'I am a German, an old soldier of the line. I saw the battlefields, during the War and afterwards. I met you in the cemetery of Arras, and appreciate how you felt when you saw the graves of my poor comrades of war. On the black crosses were once names; wind and weather wash all away, and soon there will be nothing left but the memory we have for them, and half a generation more that, too, will be gone, and all forgotten.

'But have we the right to forget without having learnt a lesson from this most awful time? No, no, and again no!

(*Continued overleaf*)

(Continued from previous page)

We all—you English, French, and Germans, and all others—have to join and teach the coming generation the lesson of peace and understanding.

When all the ceremonies end and reality is left, then it will be time for us to recall all the horrors of war to our sons and grandsons, to enable them not to get weak again, but to find the way we lost. The development in warfare technics would leave nothing untouched, and our civilization would be done with. Death would be spread not only in the line this time, but everywhere.

'Let us join as brethren do, and forget; let us rebuild what was destroyed, and grow strong in confidence to each other and so help to *save* mankind.

'Believe, when able men of each nation will, they can avoid what in 1914 seemed impossible. You are one of them, as you, having been a soldier of the line, *must* detest war.

'What we write should become our dogma and our duty. A younger generation expects us to do our duty toward them whilst we are alive.'

LONG ago the writer of this letter pressed the concave thumb-piece of one of the thousands of machine-guns whose criss-cross fire filled the rainy air of the Salient with a terrible hissing in the ears of our floundering men; long ago he was one amidst the grey masses, which withered and fell crying under the flame and blast of our barrages. Future generations will see those years as the supreme paradox of the old ways of European thought, when millions (of which I was one) enslaved themselves to a set of ideals which inevitably would destroy them—ideals to maintain which hypocrisy, mistrust, suspicion, subterfuge, although deplored in everyday human life, were accepted as necessities, dutiful, and even honourable, in a national aspect; ideals inspiring competitive armaments, secret service (spying), and secret diplomacy.

These are the things, done in the name of honour and patriotism—the immaculate white exterior of the sepulchres of our minds—we should scorn, and cast out of ourselves, and so forget; and when this has been done we shall remember that the sun is universal, shining on all countries and all flags, and that all men are like ourselves. To think otherwise, out of a sense of superiority, is a sure sign of spiritual inferiority.

The Celebration of Armistice Day.

November 11, 1928.

The following services and ceremonies will be relayed to London and Daventry and Other Stations:

2.30 p.m. 'A CALL TO PEACE'
(Relayed from Trafalgar Square)

The Massed Bands of His Majesty's Welsh and Irish Guards
(By kind permission of their respective Commanding Officers)
will play
National Anthem
Morceau 'Judex' (from 'Mors et Vita') *Gounod*
Largo ..... *Handel*
Ave Maria from Suite 'L'Arlésienne' .... *Bizet*
(Conducted by Capt. Andrew Harris, Welsh Guards)
Old Irish Melody, 'The Londonderry Air' *Traditional*
Old Scottish Lament, 'Flowers of the Forest'
Welsh National Anthem, 'Land of my Fathers'
Old English Song, 'Home, Sweet Home'
(Conducted by Captain Charles Hassell, Irish Guards)
Hymn, 'For all the Saints who from their labours rest.'
A moment of Silence and Recollection.
Hymn, 'Through the Night of Doubt and Sorrow.'

Address by
The Rev. Pat. McCormick, D.S.O.,
Vicar of St. Martin-in-the-Fields

Hymn: 'Jesu, Lover of my soul'
The Rev. H. R. L. Sheppard, C.H., D.D.
Leading up to Prayer
Hymn, 'O God, our help in ages past'
The Grace

At the conclusion of the meeting the bands will play The Hallelujah Chorus from 'The Messiah'

10.30 a.m. THE CENOTAPH SERVICE
(Relayed from the Cenotaph, Whitehall)

Music by the Bands of Coldstream, Scots, Irish, and Welsh Guards

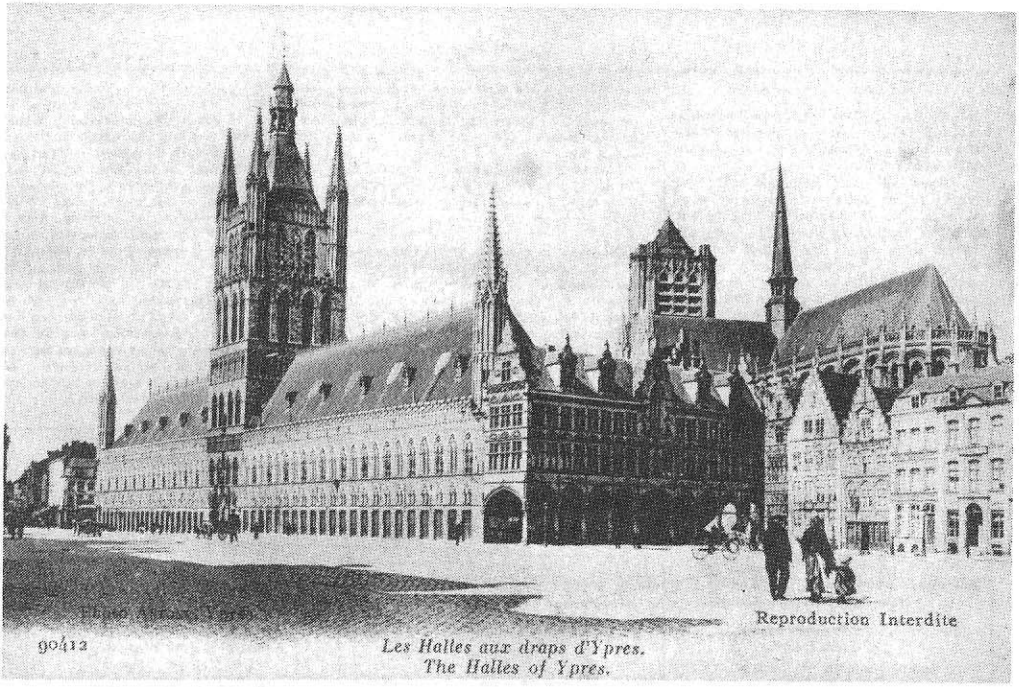
Hymn, 'O Gladsome Light' ..... *Sullivan*
(From *The Golden Legend*)
Judex, from 'Mors et Vita' ..... *Gounod*
Serenade, 'In this Hour of Softened Splendour' *Pinsuti*
Anthem, 'I will arise' ..... *Cecil*
His Majesty places his wreath on the Cenotaph
Chanson Triste ..... *Tchaikovsky*
GOD SAVE THE KING
THE TWO MINUTES SILENCE
The Last Post
A Short Service, conducted by the Right Reverend and Right Honourable the Bishop of London
The Blessing The Reveille
God Save the King

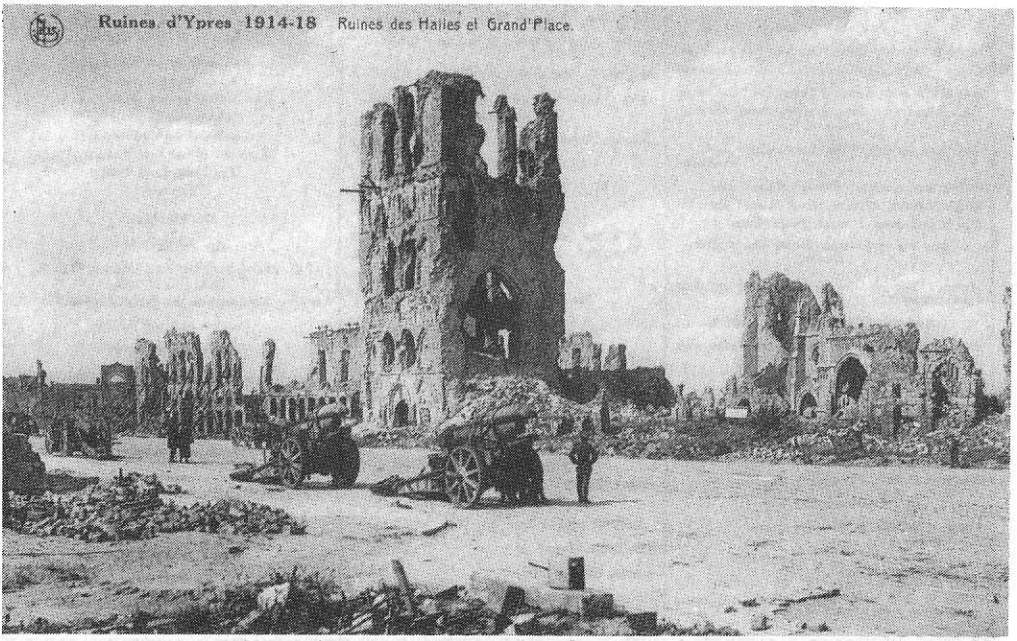
7.55 p.m. A SERVICE FROM St. MARTIN-IN-THE-FIELDS

Hymn, 'Thy Kingdom come, on bended knee' (*E.H.* 504) ..... *W. Blake*
Thanksgivings.—Biddings to Prayer
Hymn, 'These things shall be' (*Songs of Praise* 181) *J. A. Symonds*
Address by the Rev. H. R. L. Sheppard
The Lord's Prayer
Lesson, Wisdom iii
Hymn, 'O valiant hearts'
Prayer The Blessing

9.5 p.m. A REMEMBRANCE FESTIVAL
(Organized by *The Daily Express*, in conjunction with the British Legion)
Under the Musical Directorship of
Dr. Malcolm Sargent
(Relayed from the Albert Hall)
Fanfare of Trumpets
The March to the Trenches
The audience will sing:
Are we Downhearted?
Take me back to dear old Blighty
Pack up your Troubles
Land of Hope and Glory
Keep the Home Fires Burning
The Long, Long Trail
Tipperary
INTERVAL.
An Address by
Admiral of the Fleet Earl Jellicoe, G.C.B., O.M., G.C.V.O.
President of the British Legion
Funeral March (Chopin)
'Lead, Kindly Light'
An Address by the Rev. H. R. L. Sheppard
Hymn, 'O God, our help in ages past'
Anthem
Prayers offered by the Bishop of London
Hymn, 'Nearer, my God, to Thee'
Hymn, 'Abide with me'
The Last Post
The Reveille
The National Anthem

(For full details of the Remembrance Festival see London Programme on opposite page).





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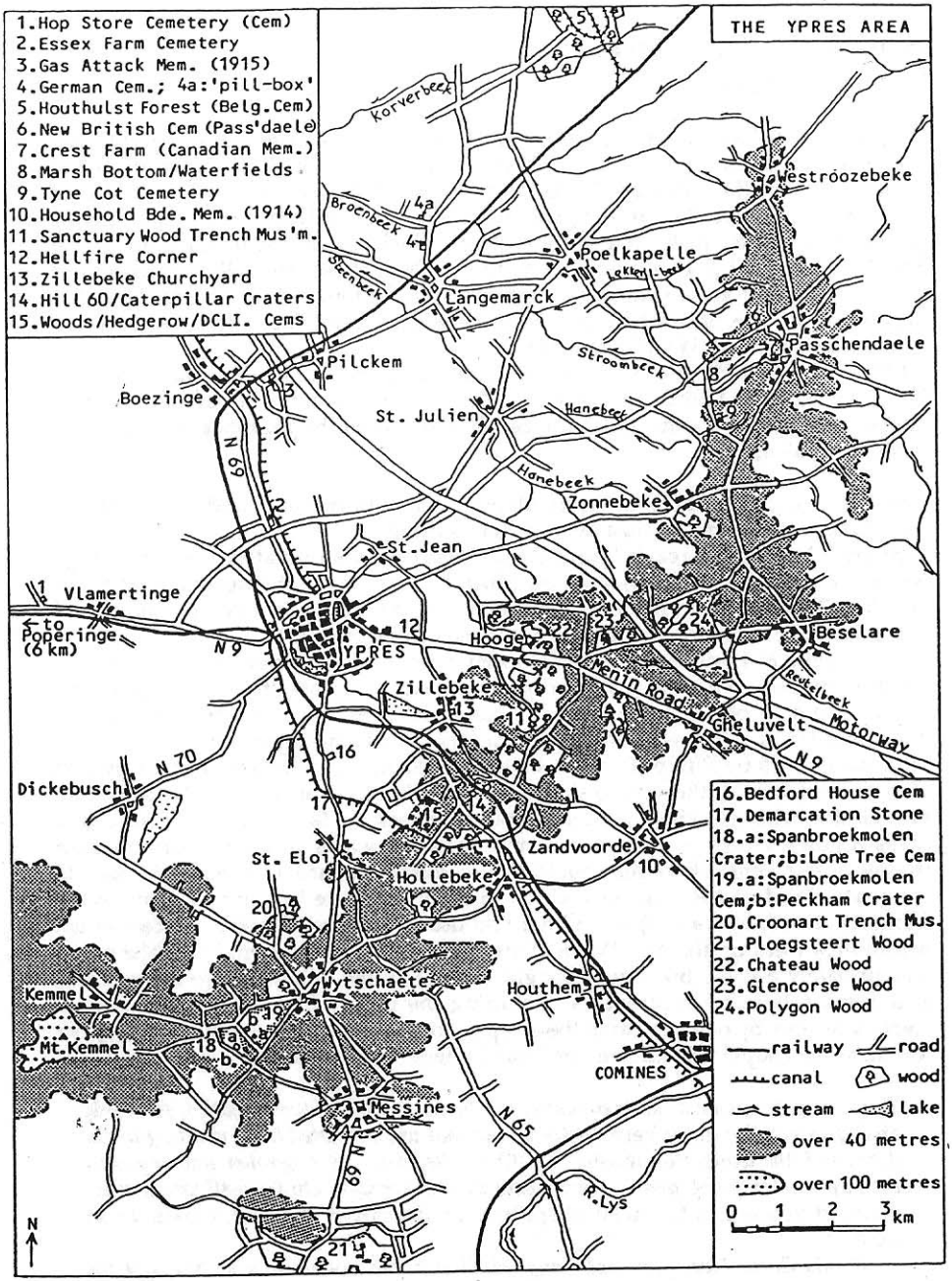

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