

A GHOST IN FRANCE

BY MARTIN ARMSTRONG

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A RETURN, even after the lapse of only a few years, to familiar scenes is always full of surprises. Details once vividly known, and in the interval entirely forgotten, greet one with a shock of recognition, and shock follows shock until the place has built up again its old significance in the conscious mind. But my return to Arras was different from this, because the old significance of Arras was gone, the spirit of the place was changed. The Arras I had known was a deserted town of no nationality, a stark, tragic, but somehow friendly place in which we found occasional billets, or through whose dark streets we marched at night, our boots waking hollow and desolate echoes, on our way to or from the line. But now Arras had become a French town, with cafés whose awnings, tables, and chairs spread half-way across the pavements, and full of French men and women whose presence, I kept feeling, was an unwarrantable intrusion. It was baffling and a little depressing, as if one were to meet a friend whose voice and manner had completely changed. It was not until I had walked out to the railway-bridge at Achicourt that everything suddenly came back; for there in front of me was the little brick house in whose backyard I had seen a shell burst and send up a great cloud of pink dust, and, far beyond it, across the fields, was the line of torn and leaning trees, leaning as if with their backs to a hurricane, which I associated with a special feeling in the pit of the stomach, because they marked the curve of the front line.

Our front line in front of Arras lay through or near a series of villages, Arleux, Oppy, Gavrellé, and so across the Scarpe to Feuchy, Tilloy, Neuville-Vitasse. When I explored that country during the next few days the surprises that awaited me were of a different kind. The villages, except for a few inhabitants and their little temporary huts, and sometimes a huge new barn, were the same battered ruins that I had known before; but, before, our paths to and from and between those villages and over all that country were front-line, support-line, and communication-trenches, each one individual and familiar as a road is individual and familiar. All roads were disused except, here and there, at night. But now the trenches, most of them, were gone and most of the roads had come back to life, and, where there had been an undivided waste, square fields covered the country, and these roads and fields ran at all angles across the old trench lines, so that one crossed the country and approached the villages from unaccustomed directions, and the whole aspect of the place, as it existed in the memory, was disorientated. Only large features uninfluenced by such changes, such as a hill, a wood, a railway embankment, stood out suddenly and startlingly familiar.

So, when I came to Gavrelle, it was from a direction from which I had never approached it before. The No Man's Land at Mill Post had been conveniently bounded on the left by a railway line, which ran over the top of our trench (I used to bump my tin

hat against it every night), and on the right by a road lined with broken trees. Now I found the railway, but our trenches and the Boche trenches were gone, and the line of broken trees was gone, too. At last, I found the road. It was overgrown and almost gone, too, and the tree-stumps, I suppose, had been taken for fire-wood. But one small section of trench remained, and a mound behind it, and I recognized the trench as one out of which I had once climbed to get behind a stable-door, (the only thing left standing) on the mound. Staring cautiously round the edge of that door three and a half years ago, I had tried to get some idea of a spot in the Boche line on which our people were to do a raid.

So, too, I came to Oppy and, as in a nightmare, I could not succeed in recognizing it for the once familiar site. Even the wood seemed different, until I spotted the mound, formerly in No Man's Land, which (I don't know why) we used to call Marian's Mound, and then the whole place suddenly readjusted itself and swung into position. But, even now, where was the steep slope on which Oppy Post once stood? From that post we had overlooked the Boche position; but now, where I searched, the country was almost flat. And then for the first time I realized that what, to men living in trenches with their eyes on the ground level, seemed a considerable hill, might often in reality be a slope of no more, perhaps, than the height of a man.

I realized it again at Neuville-Vitasse, where our outpost line had seemed to run along the crest of a lofty ridge, behind which the hollow plain used to sound and resound with the infinitely various noises of our guns from the cheerful whoop of the 18-pounders to the ponderous detonations of the Corps heavies. The rise into Neuville-Vitasse

is really a trifling affair, and the plain behind it is no plain, but an irregular ascent towards another crest. That trench at Neuville-Vitasse had crossed a sunken road, so that one had to descend from the trench-end into the road and mount again into the trench-end at the other side. When we had lived in those trenches, it had seemed like descending out of one watch-tower to mount into another; now, I found that the banks on each side of that road were hardly more than twelve feet high.

It is generally, as I have said, the larger features that help one most in attempting to identify the old sides. In a third-class carriage full of country folk I came suddenly upon the very embankment from which we had attacked, and eventually taken, Croiselles in August, 1918; and, as the train whirled me past, I caught sight of the gap where heavy *minnies* had been falling on the railway as we tried to get into position; and farther on I spotted, a few yards from the carriage-window, the tin-covered entrance of a dugout that we had searched for prisoners.

But, if the large features help one most in one's search for external things, it is often the little things that bring back the sensation of the past most vividly. To find one's self unconsciously executing the well-learned dodges for climbing in and out of trenches; to feel again that particular physical and mental sensation of having one's legs unexpectedly tangled in wire; to come, as I did, upon an ammunition-box of full bandoliers; and, most searching of all, to find an unopened bully-beef tin with the opener still attached, to open it, and to find the bully, judged at least by smell, perfectly good—it was things like these that completed the miracle of making past and present almost coincide.

A PAGE OF VERSE

DUST

BY STELLA MORRIS

[*The Poetry Review*]

ALL ways are gay with dust this summertide,
The dust lies thick about the countryside.
How shall I go through dust to be his bride?

All ways are gray with dust, gray dust of sighs,
And sobbing memories — for dead, loved eyes
Would see me go to greet him lover-wise.

SONG

BY ESMÉ WINGFIELD-STRATFORD

[*The Saturday Review*]

JACK-in-the-hedge,
Bryony, foxglove,
Robin-run-up-the-hedge —
Sing to my little love.

Speedwell and firmament,
Duckweed and bonfire,
Zephyr, rook-parliament —
Breathe her my heart's desire.

And all ye jolly birds,
Join in our roundelay;
Sing, cockioly birds,
This is my wedding-day!

EPITAPH

BY MARGARET SACKVILLE

[*The Observer*]

HUMBLY I lived, but very proudly died.
Death's chosen! Can you wonder at my pride?
Philosophers and Heroes, Saints and Kings
He left, but folded *me* beneath his wings.

THE WEAVER

BY KATHARINE I. MONRO

[*The Bookman*]

ALL the day long, and every day,
In fog or in sunlight, in gold or in gray,
I weave for my living, down Southwark way:
But at night I weave my dreams.

Cloth for the merchant, and cloth for the maid,
Broadcloth and taffeta, silk and brocade;
Many have labored ere one is arrayed:
But alone I weave my dreams.

Starlight and firelight, laughter and tears,
Gleaming desires and shadowy fears;
Words half remembered, from far-away years:
Of such I weave my dreams.

Now, when the darkness is kindly and deep,
Now, when the moon is atop Heaven's steep,
Some go to slumber, and some go to weep:
But I go home to my dreams.

THE KING OF CHINA'S DAUGHTER

BY JOAN CAMPBELL

[*The Poetry Review*]

THIS is the song of the King of China's daughter.
Very far away she lives, beyond the tumbling water;
Three-and-thirty eunuchs stand to wait on her behest,
Three-and-thirty lute-players to lull her heart to rest.
But the King of China's daughter shall rest no more at all
Because in dreams I went to her, and hold her heart in thrall.