



Private Peaceful

Adapted novel

Subject:

English

Age groups:

12 – 14, 15 - 16

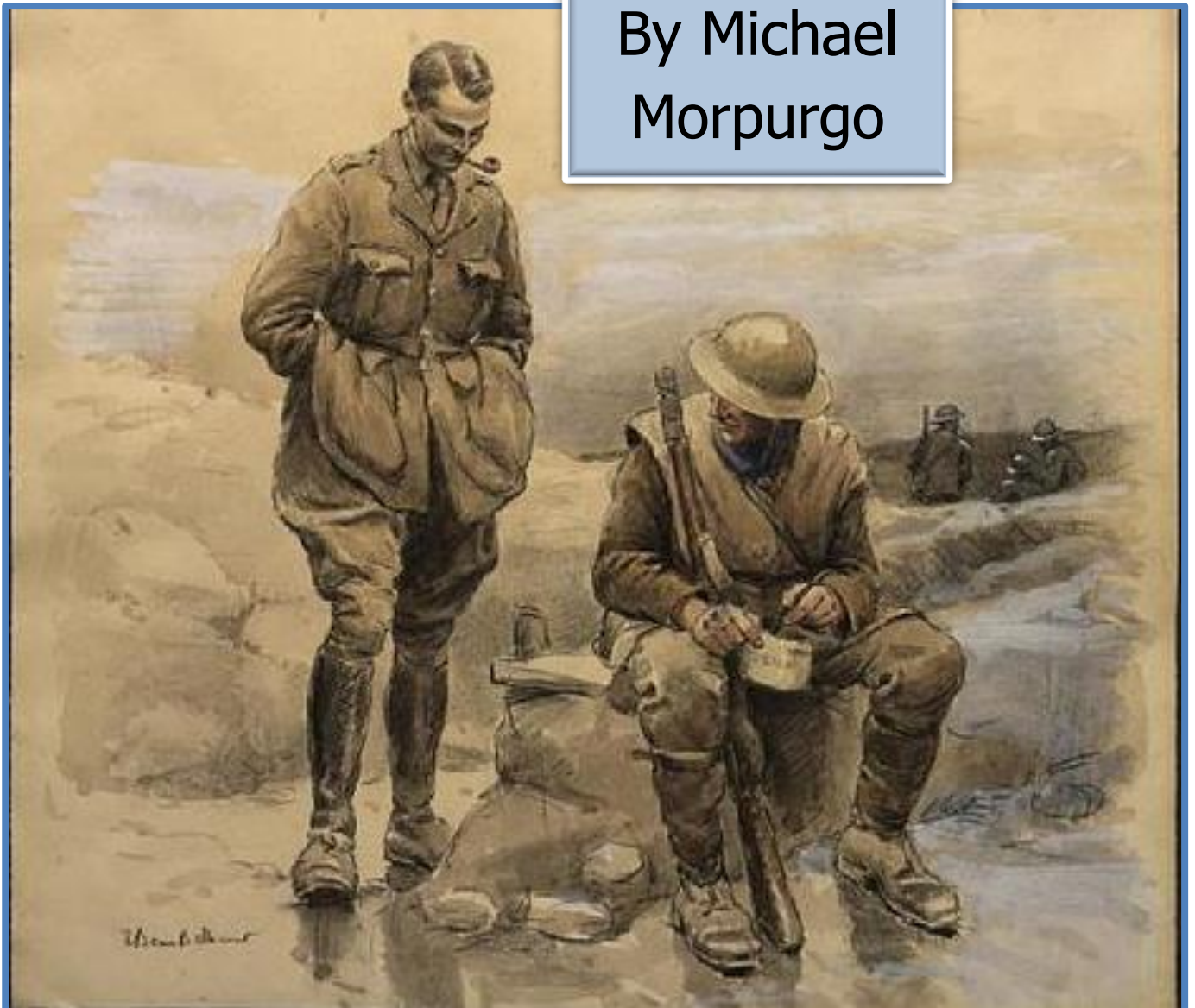
Topic:

Private Peaceful



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By Michael
Morpurgo



Characters you will meet in this book.

The Peaceful family

Tommo – He is the youngest son. He tells the story.

Charlie – He is Tommo's brother. He is three years older.

Big Joe – He is the third brother. He was ill when he was a baby and has learning difficulties. He cannot talk very well.

Mother – She works for the Colonel.

Father – He is a woodcutter for the Colonel.

(Grandma Wolf/the Wolfwoman) – She is Tommo's great-aunt - his mother's aunt.

Other characters from the village.

Molly – She is very good friends with Charlie and Tommo.

Mr Munnings – He is a very strict teacher in the village school.

Miss McAllister – She teaches the younger children in the school and is kinder than Mr Munnings.

The Colonel – He lives in the Big House. He owns a lot of the land and houses in the village. He has a lot of power.

The Colonel's wife – She is very ill.

Old Lambert – He is the Colonel's gamekeeper. His job is to catch people who are trying to steal fish or rabbits from the Colonel's land.

Characters in France and Belgium.

Sergeant Hanley – He trains the soldiers before they go to France. He is very strict.

Captain Wilkie – He is a fair soldier.

Little Les and Pete – They are soldiers with Charlie and Tommo. Little Les was a ratcatcher before he became a soldier.

Anna – She is a French girl who works in a pub.

FIVE PAST TEN

I am eighteen. I am alone. It is night-time. I do not want to sleep. I want to remember my whole life. I want it to be a long night.

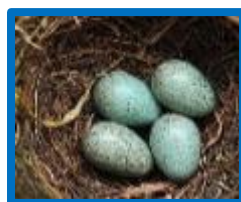


Charlie is taking me to school. I am very scared, because he has told me about the teacher Mr Munnings. He is a horrible man with a big stick. The **stick** is on the wall in front of the children.



Big Joe does not go to school. He is older than me, but stays at home with Mother. He sits in a tree and sings "*Oranges and Lemons*". He is always happy. I want to stay at home too, but I have to go to school. I start to cry. Charlie puts me on his back. He is strong and he always helps me.

I see a dead black **crow** on a fence. I do not feel sad. Perhaps it is the same bird which made my little bird fly away and took her **eggs**. I wanted to take the bird eggs and keep them. I saw the mother bird looking at me so I did not take them.



When I think of the bird's eyes I think of Father. He is under the ground now. We put all his favourite things in the ground with him; his [pipe](#), his [boots](#), his [scarf](#). Mother helped me to put his [gloves](#) in. I felt I could not do it. I was remembering what happened when he died.



I felt my Father stopped me from taking the eggs from the bird. I watched the babies and saw them get bigger. Then one morning I saw the crows come down. All the babies were killed. I don't like crows. I don't feel sorry for the dead one.

Charlie is tired. He keeps on going. He tells me "The first day is bad, but it gets better. I'll be there for you." He has always done that. He is a fantastic brother.

I get to school and stand in line. Charlie is in another line. I see Mr Munnings. He is looking at me and I am scared. "Aha! Another of the Peaceful family! One is bad enough!" he says. "You will do everything I say. Be good, do not come to school with no shoes on, wash your hands. OK?"

I am in the "Tiddlers" class and the bigger children are in the "Bigguns". I want to do my shoes up but I can't tie the laces. Charlie always does it for me. I am glad we have Miss McAllister, not Mr Munnings. She tells me to do up my shoes and I start to cry. She is angry and tells me off. She asks a girl, Molly, to teach me. Molly has lovely red-brown hair, a bit like Father's old horse. She smiles at me and I am happy. I have a friend.

I want to play with Molly or Charlie but they have their own friends. I sit down and learn to do my shoes up. Best of all, Molly sees me and smiles.

At home we only wear boots to go to church. Father had **big boots** for work. He died in them.



That day we went into the wood on his horse Billy boy. I sat behind him and hugged him. I loved going fast. He told me to go and play. I loved looking for animal holes, **flowers and butterflies**. I found a dead **mouse** and put it under some leaves. I made it a little **wooden cross**.



Father was **cutting down wood**. Then I heard a noise. It was a tree, falling towards me. I was so scared I did not run. My father ran up and pushed me out of the way of the tree. Then the tree fell with a thundering noise. When I woke up I saw Father under the tree, blood coming out of his nose. His eyes were open but he could not see. I picked up his glove.



In the **church** we sit at the front. Normally the Colonel and his family sit there. A **bird** flies in and round the church, trying to find a way out. I know it is Father. He told me once he would like to be a bird, to fly where he wanted. Big Joe sees the bird. He gets up and opens the church door. Grandma gives us an angry look. I don't understand why she feels bad about being in our family. I find out later.



The bird is high up in the church. It sees the open door and flies out. I know that Father is happy now in his new life as a bird. Big Joe laughs loudly and Mother holds his hand. We are all thinking the same.

The Colonel goes up to speak. He says that James Peaceful was a good man, and a good worker. He was never late for work. His family had worked there for more than 100 years. I am thinking of the rude things the Colonel said about Father – “silly old fart” and other bad things – but the Colonel is the one who paid Father his money and owns our house. We have to smile when we meet him.



We bury Father in the ground. The church **vicar** talks too much. I want Father to hear the birds singing again. He loves the **larks**, which fly so high in the sky you can only hear them. There is a **blackbird**. Mother tells Big Joe that Father is up in Heaven. She points up behind the church tower. She says he is as happy as the birds now.



The earth falls on the ground. We leave him. We walk home and Big Joe picks flowers for Mother. None of us can speak or cry. I cannot tell the others about my secret. Father did not need to die. I did not run, so he came to save me. It is my fault he is dead. I killed my own father.

TWENTY TO ELEVEN

I can't eat. It is good that Grandma Wolf is not here. She always says, "Eat it all up! Don't waste it!" I'm going to waste it, Wolfwoman.



Big Joe always ate more than all of us. If Charlie or I didn't like anything we gave it to him. When we were little Charlie once put some **rabbit poo** in a bag and told Big Joe they were **sweets**. He ate them all and laughed. We all laughed too. I thought he might be ill, but he was not.



Mother told us once that Big Joe nearly died when he was a baby. That is why he cannot talk. He can't read or write and he is different. We don't mind. He is just Big Joe. Sometimes he is in his own little dream world and looks scared. That makes me scared too. But then he is back again and happy; Big Joe, who loves everything and everyone, especially animals and birds and flowers.

Mother was angry and told us off about the rabbit poo. She shouted at us. Big Joe did not know. But he gave one to her. She was really angry and made us both eat one to show us what it was like. We felt bad about it, but later we laughed when we thought of it.

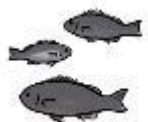


At home we liked people who were kind to Big Joe. If anyone said he was stupid or was not nice to him, we didn't like them. We hated it if people didn't even look at him. Like the day we made rude noises at the Colonel.

Only **Grandma Wolf** liked the Colonel. She and Father used to shout at each other about him. We didn't like the Colonel, but I found out what he was like because of Big Joe.



One day we went **fishing**. Big Joe had **three fish**. He showed the Colonel as he went past on his horse. Afterwards Charlie made a rude noise at him and Big Joe did too. The Colonel looked back angrily at us and shouted "I'll teach you!" After that I felt scared of the Colonel.



At school I got into my first fight because Big Joe came to see us at the school gate at playtime. He wanted to show us a **slow worm** (like a snake) he had found.



He loved to keep lots of little animals in the shed at home. Then a boy called him a “loony” and laughed. I was so angry I started fighting him. He was kicking me on the ground and Charlie pulled him off me and started to fight him. Mr Munnings came up and hit Charlie and the other boy with his [stick](#).



He is the bravest brother in the world. Molly came up and washed my bleeding face and knee. She is very kind. She says, “I like Big Joe. He’s kind”. I know now I will always love Molly until I die.

After that Molly was one of our friends. She came home most days and Big Joe gave her flowers. Mother liked brushing her hair. She loved being with us. We only found out why later on.

Mother. I think of her a lot. She knew all the names of the flowers and butterflies. She used to teach them all to Big Joe. Mr Munnings said Big Joe was too slow to go to school. Mother said he was “special”, not stupid. She sang a lot to him and he was always happy then. When she sang it was the music of our childhood.

After Father died the music stopped. She was quiet and sad. I felt so bad that Father died because of me, and I could not tell the others. Big Joe did not laugh so much. The house was empty without Father.

Mother talked to Big Joe because only she could understand the way he talked, but we could see she was unhappy. Perhaps there was another problem too. We soon found out that it was true.

One day the Colonel came to the house and told us that we must get out of the house. He said that Father was dead and not working anymore, so we had no right to stay. He said we could only stay if Mother came to work up at the Colonel's house looking after his sick wife. The Colonel said we boys were old enough to look after ourselves, and Big Joe could go to a special home for mad people (an asylum). Mother was very angry and said "Never!" When he left she started crying outside. Big Joe and Molly ran out and Big Joe hugged her, singing "*Oranges and Lemons*". We all started singing.

I wanted to tell Charlie my secret, but did not. Charlie said, "I'll do that man one day, Tommo!"

Mother had to take the job, so Grandma Wolf had to move in with us. She was really our Mother's aunt. We did not like her because she had a [moustache](#).



She had worked at the Colonel's house for years looking after the house. One day the Colonel's wife told her to go away. That was why she was free to come. We said she looked like the wolf in "[Little Red Riding Hood](#)". She was very bossy. She told us what to do all the time. But she was nasty to Big Joe. She talked to him as if he was stupid.



Molly got angry once and Grandma hit her. She also hit Big Joe sometimes. Then he would get sad and talk to himself. We did not see Mother much. She worked a very long day. Grandma Wolf always said Mother was not a good woman. She said she had married a man who was not good enough. The family had a shop and were better people. We felt angry and sometimes Charlie and I pretended that we would push the Colonel's wife in the lake and kill her so that Mother could come back. The Colonel could marry Grandma Wolf and have lots of ugly monster children!



At night I had dreams about monsters a lot, but they always finished with the tree falling on Father. I woke up shouting out, and Charlie always came to comfort me.

NEARLY QUARTER PAST ELEVEN

There is a **mouse** here in the barn with me. He is looking at me.
Now he has run away. I miss him already.



Grandma Wolf did not like mice, but Big Joe loved them. When he put food out for them she used to smack him. She tried to kill them with **mouse-traps**, but we all found them in time. She only killed one. We took it and put it in the ground with a proper funeral.



Afterwards we all ate some **blackberries** and sang "*Oranges and Lemons*" for the mouse. Grandma did everything to chase out the mice but they always came back in again. We loved it when she saw them and looked so scared.



Grandma Wolf seemed to like Molly more than us. She said girls were better than boys. Molly's parents also worked for the Colonel; her father looked after the horses. They were very strict too; they sent her to bed a lot or her father hit her with a strap. But Grandma let her come to tea every day because she was very polite.

One day it was Big Joe's birthday. Charlie and I bought some sweets for him. Molly gave him a little field mouse in a box. It was really sweet. Big Joe gave her a big hug and put the mouse in his bedroom **cupboard** so Grandma would not see him. It was his favourite pet.



A few days later I came home from school and Big Joe was crying. The mouse had gone. Grandma Wolf had taken away all his animals from his room and the shed. Molly shouted at her that she was a very bad woman and would go to Hell when she died. Charlie and I pretended that we would put rat poison in her tea. But something wonderful happened.

The Colonel's wife died when some food went down the wrong way. There was a big funeral. Mother had to take Big Joe out for singing loudly. So Mother came home again to us, and we were happy. She had lots of arguments with Grandma Wolf about Big Joe. However, we had no money left.

We were hungry. So Charlie had the idea to go and [catch fish and rabbits](#) on the Colonel's land. We went at night so he would not find us. Molly watched out for us. Next day, the Colonel came to the house. We were scared. Had someone seen us? But no, he had come to ask Grandma Wolf to be his housekeeper. The Colonel's wife had asked him to keep us in our house because she liked us. Mother said she would do his washing and mend his clothes. She would work at home. We were free again!



Molly and Charlie were both older than me. I always ran behind them. Sometimes I had the feeling they did not want me there. If I asked them to wait for me Molly sometimes ran back and took my hand. Then I was happy. We all went playing in the [woods](#) and swimming in the lake.



One day Molly dared Charlie to take off his clothes and he did. She did too, and I sat angrily on the side. A few days later I went in the water with them too, running in fast. One day Molly said she wanted to see the future by looking at the [stones](#). She threw them on the floor and looked at the shape they made. She said, "We'll always be together forever, if we stick by each other."



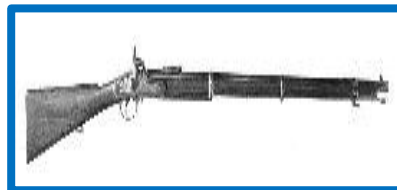
For a few years she was right. Then she became ill. It was quite bad and she was not allowed to go to school. We went to her house with some flowers, but her parents looked at us in anger and told us to go away. She did not come to her window, so we knew she must be really ill. Now we sat together and prayed to God that she would get better again. Big Joe sang "Oranges and Lemons" and we all said "Amen".

TEN TO MIDNIGHT

I don't think I ever really believed in God. He is supposed to be so kind, but I don't see how he could let his son Jesus die in such a terrible way. But tonight I want to think that there is a Heaven where we go when we die. I want there to be a new life after death so we will all see each other again.



In one way Molly's stones were right, and we were happy together. But when Molly was not there, things went wrong. The first time we went out to catch fish without Molly I sat down to watch. I soon fell asleep and only woke up when the [Colonel's gamekeeper Old Lambert](#) and his dog came up. "You naughty boys! I've got you now!" he shouted. Charlie was big enough to run away but he is not like that. Lambert took us up to the Big House with his [gun](#) pointing at us.



The Colonel and Grandma Wolf looked angrily at us. She said we were "common thieves". The Colonel told us to come to the house at ten o'clock the next day to be hit, then to clean out the [dogs' kennels](#).

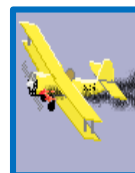


We told Mother and she was very angry. She said nobody could hit us, but we should do the cleaning. She came up with us and we had to clean the kennels every weekend up to Christmas.

We soon found that we liked the job, because the dogs were lovely. Our favourite was called Bertha. When she looked at me I always thought of Molly. Grandma Wolf often came out and said, "That will teach you!" or something nasty. At Christmas we finished. We came home to find that Molly was there, looking rather white, but better. She looked beautiful now, and not like a child any more.

I started to feel there was a big difference between me and them now. Molly moved into the Bigguns' class at school, but then we still walked to school and back and had lunch together. We all played outside, putting our feet in the mud for fun after school. Then it all changed. I was 12, and Molly left school. She and Charlie started working at the Big House. He looked after the dogs and horses and she was in the house. They worked a lot and I did not see them much anymore. At night Charlie talked to me about the Big House, and how they now called Grandma Wolf "Wolfwoman". They said she was living as the Colonel's wife because they had been lovers for years. I tried telling him about school and how Mr Munnings was too mean to put the fire on in winter. It was hard because Charlie and Molly did not seem very interested.

One day I saw them **holding hands**. I knew this was different. I felt very sad and lonely. That day we saw a **yellow aeroplane**. The pilot was lost. He landed and asked the way. We told him and he gave us some **sweets (humbugs)**. I took some back for Big Joe. We all felt it was a special moment.



When I got to school Mr Munnings knew about it. He took my sweets and hit me with his cane (stick) six times. I looked him in the eye, because I knew I had done nothing wrong.



That night I wanted to tell Charlie about it, and about what happened to Father, but he wasn't listening. He said he was in trouble. The Colonel had told him that he wanted to shoot Charlie's favourite dog, Bertha, because she was not good at hunting any more. Charlie loved the dog and had taken her into the woods to hide her. We were scared that the Colonel would find out.

TWENTY-FOUR MINUTES PAST TWELVE

The next day we were worried. Big Joe knew something was wrong, and was **rocking** in his **chair**. Mother also knew. The Colonel came to the door. He said Charlie was no good and a thief, because he had stolen fish and also the dog. When Charlie told Mother he wanted to save Bertha, she asked the Colonel if we could look after the dog, and she gave him some money. The Colonel agreed, but he said that Charlie had lost his job. We didn't care. We were so happy we **danced** and sang. We went to get the dog from the shed in the wood with Molly. She was a lovely dog; she liked Big Joe a lot and followed him everywhere. He was so happy because he had a new friend.



Charlie found a new job **milking cows** for a **farmer**. He was out even more than before. He was not happy, because Molly stopped coming. Mother said it must be because the Colonel had said something about Charlie to her parents. I went to the house and Molly's parents would not let me in. I saw her at the window and she pointed to the woods.



Later I met her there and she told me. The Colonel had told her parents she was seeing Charlie and that he was a thief. They did not want her to see him anymore. I started taking **letters** from her to Charlie and from him to her. I enjoyed meeting her to pass them on in the woods. She said her father would hit her if she saw Charlie again. She hated her home, and missed Charlie. Her father was always telling her she would go to Hell.



Every day we met secretly in the woods and I gave her Charlie's letters. One day she told me there might be a war. The Colonel was in a bad mood about it. The Wolfwoman was also in a bad mood because somebody had put **salt** in her tea. Nobody knew who it was. Molly smiled. I wanted to **kiss** her but didn't.



Mother found me a job at the farmer's with Charlie. I was happy. We were together again. One day, after finishing work on the farm, Charlie and I came home. Molly was sitting there with her mother in our house crying. She had found all the letters and read all of them. She was very angry. She said Molly and Charlie had been meeting. I was surprised and angry. They had not told me. Mother said it was only normal at their age. Molly's mother said they were "disgusting". She said she would tell the Colonel if they met again. Later, Charlie told me he did not say anything because he knew, and Molly knew, that I loved her.

Just after that Bertha started to go missing sometimes. One day she did not come back and we went to look for her in the woods. Suddenly, I heard a gun-shot. I ran up to the place and found Bertha, dead, outside Father's wooden shed. Molly and Charlie came out and the Colonel was standing with his gun. "Why?" said Molly, looking at the Colonel. "Why?"

NEARLY FIVE TO ONE

The next day we buried Bertha in the ground. We did not sing or put flowers down. We were so sad. Big Joe asked if she was in Heaven. Mother said yes. Charlie said the Colonel would go to Hell, but Mother gave him an angry look.

Soon afterwards Big Joe went missing. He loved playing in the woods but this time he did not come back. I was really scared. Charlie and I went to look for him and Mother asked everyone in the village to help. We looked everywhere for him. In the morning he was still not there. I went to see Mother. Molly was hugging her and made her feel a bit better. Then Molly had the idea to look in the [church tower](#), because once she had said that Heaven was “up there” and pointed to the church tower. Charlie and I ran to the tower and up the ninety-five steps. We found him curled up on the ground, waiting to die, to be with Father and Bertha again. We rang the [church bells](#) and all the village people came to see Big Joe, happy that he was safe. The [swallows](#) were flying about in the sky full of joy.



TWENTY-EIGHT MINUTES PAST ONE

Churches do not look the same in France. I don't think God notices us anymore. He has left us alone here. He has broken his promise.



We all went to the pub to celebrate finding Big Joe. Even Molly's parents were there, and the Colonel and Wolfwoman looked happy too. Then the Colonel started talking about the war, and how they needed more **soldiers**. One night I went to the pub to have a drink with Charlie after work.



We went home and found Molly in our house. Mother said Molly had come to stay with us. Mother said it was Charlie's fault they had hit her and thrown her out, because she was **expecting his baby**. Charlie was pleased about the baby. They were happy together, but I felt really bad.



They had a short wedding; the vicar did not ring the church bells. The Wolfwoman sent a nasty letter saying Molly was bad and weak. Mother threw the letter into the fire. I moved into Big Joe's bedroom. I felt Charlie and Molly had left me all alone, and I tried to be on my own when I could.

One day I went to the [market](#) and saw a group of soldiers singing and marching. One of them asked the men to join the war. He said the Germans were coming to our country and we had to try and stop them. One of my old school friends decided to join them. I did not want to; an old lady asked if I was a coward and too scared to fight. I thought Molly might think well of me if I joined the soldiers. I went home and told them. Charlie said he would not go because he did not hate the Germans. He had never met any. Mother said I was too young.



That night Molly started crying. She said the Colonel wanted all the workers on his land to join the army. He said if Charlie did not go Molly and Mother would lose their jobs and the house too. Charlie said he was going, and then I wanted to go too, so I could be with him and help him. I wanted to show myself that I was not too much of a coward to go. After a couple of days Charlie and I said goodbye and went off in the [train](#) together, through a tunnel. "Thanks", he said.

FOURTEEN MINUTES PAST TWO

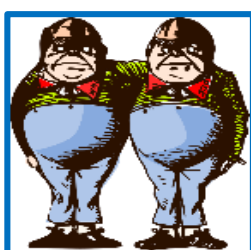
I keep looking at the **watch**. There are 3 hours and 46 minutes left before the **sun comes up**. Charlie said this was the best watch in the world. No. If it was so good it would stop time. I wish I could stop tomorrow from coming. Don't think, Tommo. Just remember.



When we first got to France life was very hard. The army sergeant shouted at Charlie and me all the time: "Stand still! You, Peaceful, are no better than a dirty **rat**!"



We called him Horrible Hanley. Charlie told me to say we were **twins** and not to speak. I did not want people to know I was only 16 and too young to be in the army. Our uniforms were much too big; we looked really funny in them. A lot of our friends from home were there too.



Back in England we **trained** in Salisbury. We had to mend our uniforms, run with **heavy bags**, learn to use guns and march up and down. Charlie was the best shot with a gun. I was really proud of him. But that was all like a game.



The army corporals shouted, "Get digging!" They made us **dig big holes** in the ground. They said if we did not learn we would die. We never talked about real fighting. But one day, we were on the hills and heard some big guns. It came from France. Suddenly, we all saw the fear in each others' eyes.



I sometimes thought of Molly and Big Joe, but mostly we were too busy. Charlie and I wrote letters home, saying we were having a good time. It was true then – until we got on the **ship** to France.



The journey was terrible: we were both really sick. When we finally arrived in France we saw them: long lines of **injured soldiers**. We knew then this was real. Seeing the huge army camp full of soldiers training was a shock too. It was so noisy and busy.



Then I saw Horrible Hanley. We were always scared of him: the only way to survive was to do what he said. I knew this, because of Charlie. Hanley often called him names, but Charlie just replied, "I'm happy to be here, Sir!"

Hanley hated Charlie for that. Some people said it was bad for all of us to annoy Hanley. I tried to talk to Charlie. I said Hanley was a bit like Mr Munnings: "You can't fight him." Charlie just told me to be careful of Hanley.

By then everyone knew I was only 16. If people laughed at me Charlie always gave them a look, and they stopped. Hanley picked on me a lot. The more he did it the more tired I got, and then he punished me more. One day he said my gun was dirty. He made me run round the field five times with my gun over my head. Soon I was too tired to keep my arms up. Charlie ran up to Hanley and shouted in his face.

The next day, Charlie was tied to a big **wheel** with his arms and legs out all day. He looked like Jesus on the cross. I thought of the song "What a friend we have in Jesus!" Now I sang, "What a friend I have in Charlie!"

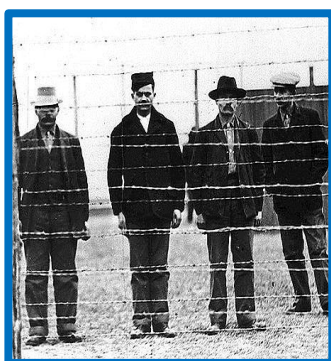


A MINUTE PAST THREE

I fell asleep for a few moments just then, like sometimes when I was in the trenches. I sing "Oranges and Lemons" to keep awake.



I remember leaving France and Horrible Hanley when we went to Belgium. We sang as we marched. Now we have a kind captain, Wilkie. It is quiet in Belgium. No fighting yet. So far we have only seen [German prisoners](#). One waved his hand at me and said, "Hallo Tommy!" He looked just like one of us. I see two planes in the sky. We cheer for the smaller one. I think of the yellow plane that landed near us at home. The small plane falls out of the sky. We are all quiet.



We get our first letters from home. The Big House is now an [army hospital](#). Molly is well, but she misses me. She feels sick at times.



One night we are allowed to go into the village for **egg and chips**. I see a beautiful girl there. She smiles at me. I have drunk too much **beer**. I would like to talk to her. We go home and hear big guns in the distance. We are near the town of Ypres.



The next night we go into the line ready to fight. We have to be quiet, or the Germans will kill us. I am on sentry duty. The enemy is only 200m away in a trench. Charlie is with me – he smiles, and my fear is gone. Our Captain tells us to keep the trenches clean because of the **rats**. Luckily, we have a rat-catcher, Little Les. His job was to catch rats before he became a soldier.

Another problem is the insects on our skin. We all have **lice** and wish we could have a **bath**. Even worse than that is the terrible rain in the trench. I have wet feet all day and all night.



Charlie is always there for everybody. He stops us all from arguing and cheers us up. He is everyone's big brother. When we get to camp we have to do lots of inspections and marches, then dig more trenches. We get warm woollen clothes from Molly and Mother and have a warm bath in a barn. Then we go for a lovely meal in the village again. I am too shy to speak to the girl I like.

In winter we are in the trenches again. So far we have only had a couple of people hurt or ill. We are lucky.

Then Captain Wilkie has orders to make us go and find out how many Germans there are in the opposite trenches. Every night a few of us have to cross no-man's land. Now it is my turn; Charlie and my other friends are with me. I am not scared. Wilkie says we have to take one German prisoner, and he gives us extra alcohol to drink.

We go over the top of the trench on our hands and feet. We hear music. I feel ready now. We go through a hole in their wire and drop down into their trench. We can hear them talking. One soldier opens the curtain of the dugout. He sees us, shouts out and runs back in. Someone throws a grenade in after him. We hear people screaming. I go in. Little Les is dead, along with several Germans.

Only one is alive. He is crying with fear, naked and shaking. Charlie gives him a coat. Then there is a flare of light. I shut my eyes and think of Molly. I say sorry to Father. There is gunfire behind us so we pretend to be dead. We jump into a hole. The shelling starts. I hold on to Charlie and the German in the smelly water.

We see Wilkie. His legs are hurt. We pull him into the hole. The most frightening thing is the shells. You don't know if they will get you or not. Wilkie asks us to leave him there. Charlie says no, and carries Wilkie back to our trenches. We have a cup of tea with the German. "Danke", he says. He looks just like us.

Later, Charlie and I go to visit Captain Wilkie in hospital. He is not there. He has gone back to England because they cannot help him. He left his [watch](#) for Charlie. Charlie says to me, "If anything happens to me, the watch is yours."



TWENTY FIVE PAST THREE

The mouse is looking at me. He is not sure if I am a friend or an enemy. I remember a poem about a mouse. Now he has gone and I'm alone again. They asked me if I wanted anyone to stay with me tonight; to sing or eat or drink with me. I said no.



The next time Charlie and I went into line with the army was at Wipers – the name we gave to Ypres. The Germans had attacked the town and we had to keep going. We had no proper captain now. In the town I saw two dead horses. It was a terrible sight. When we reached the trenches we were shocked. They were not deep enough to keep us safe, and full of mud. There was a horrible sickly smell.

The next day I see the fields full of dead bodies. One is pointing with his hand up at the birds. There is a **blackbird singing on the wire**: there are no trees now.



There are two days of bombings. When I sleep I see Father's hand pointing up and I wake up shaking. I start crying; not even Charlie can help me. When the shelling stops we are told to go out with our **gas masks** and **bayonets**. We see them coming – thousands of them. Charlie is with me. He says "Stay by me." We are firing at them. They are brave; they keep on coming. Most only get to the wire; some turn back.

I feel glad that I did not run away, because of Charlie. We have to run over the field now. I do not feel sorry for the Germans because they came to kill us, but I don't hate them.



We jump into their trench. It is empty. I look around for Charlie. Then the shell lands next to me. I throw myself down in the mud. It is all so unreal. The shell explodes. I cannot hear now. One of our men pulls me up and back into the trench. He keeps telling me to go on. He is a good man. Suddenly, he is hit. I go back into the dugout. Pete says he has seen Charlie. He was hurt in the leg and using his gun to help him walk. I cannot stop thinking about him. Both armies lie exhausted and bleeding in the trenches.

Next morning I know he is dead and I feel empty inside. I think about writing to Molly and Mother, and how Big Joe will think Charlie is in Heaven with Father. I cannot believe in God any more. Hell is made by people here.

That night I was on lookout duty. The stars were shining. I chose two of them to be Father and Charlie. I saw something moving in the field. There was someone talking. It was Charlie! It was not a dream! I hugged him and we both cried. He had been shot in the foot, and had to spend a few days in hospital. The doctors told him to go back to England for an operation. I felt angry then. He was going to leave me alone! He was pleased to be going! But then Charlie said, "I'm coming back."



That night I went to the pub. I felt really unhappy. I wanted to run away, but I knew that they would shoot me for it. The beautiful girl in the bar came up and asked me if I was ill. I told her no. She asked me how old I was. "Sixteen." I decided to go to the pub again and speak to her, and two weeks later I did. Her name was Anna. We talked and she took me to see her father's horse. She kissed my face – I walked home, singing.

Pete was in the tent. He told me some bad news. Horrible Hanley was back. He was our new captain. We were never going to be allowed out again. How we hated that man; more than the Germans.

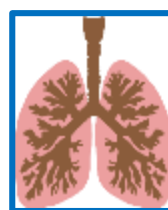
NEARLY FOUR O'CLOCK

It is nearly morning. I remember happy mornings walking to school with Charlie. In the army mornings were frightening times. I thought that today could be my last day. This morning I know who is going to die, when and how.



We had some new soldiers join us. We needed them, because nearly half of us had been killed or hurt by then. For some time trench life was quiet and there was no fighting. The sun came out and we could sleep on dry ground at last. We told the new soldiers stories of war, especially Pete. Sometimes we even felt quite bored.

I am in the dugout one day, writing to Mother. "Gas!" shouts someone. We rush to put on our **gas masks**. We reach for our guns and start firing. The yellow gas is coming for us. It is near me – I try not to breathe. I see men running and falling. Pete grabs me and we run. I fall over and my mask comes off. My **eyes** and **lungs** are burning. At last we are in the other trench. I feel sick. I look up and a German is standing over me with his gun. It is the end. He puts down his gun. "Go, boy. Go, Tommy, go!" he says.



I have to go to hospital but the doctor says I am lucky. I saw many people on the field who were killed by the gas. In the tent Pete was there. We were nearly crying. He had good news. I had two letters. Pete had nobody writing to him because his parents did not know how to write. I always keep those last letters in my pocket. I see their faces when I read them.

Mother's Letter:

My dear Son,

Molly has a lovely little baby boy. Charlie was home. He is very thin so I have told him to eat more.

Great Aunt Wolf came to see the baby and said he had "pointed ears". Molly was upset.

Most of the young men have gone to war. There are not enough people to work on the fields. One family have had bad news about their son. Charlie told us the war will soon be over. Come home safe and soon,

Your loving Mother.

Pete is angry because Charlie said they were having a good time. He says people are "dying for nothing".

Charlie's Letter

Dear Private Peaceful,

I am now the father and you are the uncle of the best looking baby. Big Joe looks after him when he is asleep. We have called the baby Tommo. I have three days off and then I have to come back to war.

Your brother, Charlie.

Molly's Letter

Dear Tommo,

I have told little Tommo all about his brave uncle. After the war we will all be together again.

Your Molly.

I felt stronger after reading the letters. I hoped Sergeant Hanley would let us rest, but he said no. He was angry because we ran away from the gas attack. We had to exercise day and night. Those were very dark times. He took away our hope. I often dreamt of running away to Anne but I was too scared. I did not want to leave Pete and the others, or not be there when Charlie came back. I wanted Molly to be proud of me.

To our surprise, we had one free night. I went to the pub and looked for Anna. Another girl came with the food. I went to the horse stable. There was no horse there. I knocked on her door. Her father came to the door. He told me Anna was dead. She was killed by a shell. Her father was angry. He told me to go to Hell, me and my war. I went to see her grave and felt a pain inside me. I kissed the earth where she lay.

The next day we had to join the line with hundreds of others, ready for an attack. In walked Charlie, smiling. He was my best friend and I felt safe. Sergeant Hanley tried to make Charlie feel small, but Charlie always had a good answer. I asked Charlie lots of questions about home, but he did not want to talk about it. I understood that he did not want to bring his thoughts of home to the war.

We hear the first shell coming. We are all thrown to the ground. There are thousands more. We are shooting all night. We try to keep close in the dugout, drinking tea and smoking or eating. The second day is worse. Our fear turns to terror. I am in a ball, screaming. Charlie is next

to me holding me. He is singing "Oranges and Lemons". Soon I am singing too. But I am still afraid.

In the early morning the attack comes. Our guns kill thousands of Germans before they reach our wire. I am shaking. When they run back we go over the top of the dugout. I find myself on my knees. My head is hurting terribly. It is getting dark now, and I am glad to be dying.

FIVE TO FIVE

65 minutes to go. I can't sleep or eat or scream or pray to God. The army rule is clear. Private Peaceful is going to be shot by firing squad at 6 o'clock for being a coward. I don't know where. I want it to be outside, with sky and trees and birds. And let it be quick.



I wake up to machine gun fire. I am not dead. I cannot see because of my wounded head. Then I move my head and the blackness falls on me. I cannot move. No, it is earth! They thought I was dead and buried me! I try to breathe but there is no air. Then I feel someone pulling me into the air. Charlie is pouring water on my face.

"We thought you'd died. You were lucky!"

We are in an old dugout in no-man's land. We think we should wait. Then Sergeant Hanley comes up and tells us to go out to fight. It is 50 metres to the German's trench.

"I don't think I can make it," I say. Charlie says, "Don't worry, we will stay together."

The sergeant tells us to move. Nobody goes. Charlie says they know they will die if they go out. The sergeant is really angry. He says Charlie will be arrested and shot if he does not come. Charlie says he has to stay with me because I am hurt. Pete goes out, and we hear the screams.

I wake up to see one or two people come back into the dugout. Charlie puts his arm round me. He says he wants me to look after everyone and have the watch if anything happens to him.

Sergeant Hanley came back and they arrested Charlie because he did not go out to fight when Sergeant Hanley told him to. I was only allowed to see him six weeks later. I had 20 minutes with him yesterday. He is in a [stable](#).



We hug each other and cry. He has a letter from Molly. Baby Tommo is learning to make rude noises and Joe sings to him at night. They do not know about Charlie. He does not want them to think he is a coward.

Sergeant Hanley was the only person at the court martial. They said Charlie had hurt his foot so he could get back to England away from the fighting. A letter from Captain Wilkie would have helped, but he was dead. The army court said that Charlie was "worthless". Charlie tried to say it was going to be a quick death. We talked about home but not about Mother, Molly or Big Joe. I promised I would look after them and he said I would make a good father to Tommo.

"You're not worthless, Charlie," I say. "They are worthless. You are the best friend I've ever had."

I tell him about how Father died. He smiles. He says he knew already, because I talked in my sleep a lot. "It's not your fault, Tommo," he said.

He gives me letters and I tell him he is the best friend I've ever had. We sing "Oranges and Lemons" together.

When I get back the men are smiling. Sergeant Hanley is dead. It was an accident. He was killed by a grenade. Too late for Charlie, though. We all felt really sad for Charlie. It was not fair. He was going to be killed.

We are camping near a farm waiting to go into some more trenches. The men are being very kind, but I just want to be alone. The church man comes to help me, but I don't want to speak to him. I sit alone in the barn. At the right time, I will go outside and look at the sky. Charlie will be outside too, and we will be looking at the same sky. We can be together that way.

ONE MINUTE TO SIX

I try to think about Charlie at home, but I can only see Charlie being taken out by the soldiers to be shot. His head is high. They do not want to shoot him, because he is one of them. They do not look at his face. It is cold but Charlie does not shake. He does not want them to cover his head. He thinks about home, shuts his eyes and sings, "Oranges and Lemons". I sing it too. I hear the guns. It is over. Part of me has died. I go back and the soldiers are standing outside their tents thinking of Charlie. And the birds are singing.



Later I go to see his [grave](#). It is a nice place near the trees. Charlie was smiling as he walked out, they tell me. He was singing when he died. We all say goodbye to Charlie.

The next day we go back to the Somme. I know I have to stay alive. I must keep my promise to Charlie.



POSTSCRIPT

In the First World War (1914-18) over 290 soldiers were killed by their own army for trying to run away from the war, and two were killed for sleeping when they were at their posts.

Many of these men had shell shock. The fighting and the noise from the shells made them ill. They did not get a fair hearing. Nobody has said it was wrong to kill them.