

Five Past Ten

Thomas (Tommo) Peaceful is 18 years old. He is in a barn in the battlefields of World War 1.

It is night time. The other men have gone. He is alone. He does not want to sleep. He wants to use the time to remember everything of his life - just as it happened.

He remembers he is 5 years old. He's walking to his first day at school with his older brother Charlie. Charlie gives him a piggyback. Charlie knows Thomas feels scared of the teacher, Mr Munnings. Mr Munnings has a bad temper and hits the boys with a long thin stick. He wants to feel happy like Big Joe. Big Joe is his oldest brother. He stays home with Mother all day and sits in the tree singing '*Oranges and Lemons*'.

Then Thomas sees a dead crow on a fence. He hates crows. He thinks the crow took the robin's eggs from the nest. Thomas collected birds' eggs like Charlie. He did not take the robin's eggs because he knew the robin was watching from the rose bush and he knew Father did not want him to steal things.

Thomas thinks of Father. When Father died, Mother, Charlie and Big Joe buried Father's pipe, boots and scarf under the rose bush but Thomas couldn't put the gloves in. He knew the secret about Father's death and he could not tell them. Finally, Mother helped him do it.

At school, Charlie and Thomas go to different classes. Thomas can't tie his boot laces. He feels stupid and wants to run away but Molly, an older girl, ties them and smiles at him. He feels happy because Molly is a good friend. At home they don't wear boots except for church. Only Mother and Father wear boots. The same boots Father died in.

On that day, Father took Thomas to play in the wood while he chopped down a tree. Thomas heard the sound of the huge tree coming down. Slowly he realised the tree would fall on him. Father shouted but Thomas did not move. He remembers Father running, lifting him and throwing him away from the falling tree. Then Thomas saw Father on his back with the great tree on top of him. His eyes are open but Thomas knows they do not see him. He is not breathing. He does not wake up. Father's glove lay beside his finger which was pointing at Thomas.

At the funeral service for Father, Thomas watches a swallow trying to fly out of the church. He believes it is Father trying to escape because Father once told him he would like to be a bird and fly free. When Big Joe opens the door to let the swallow out, Thomas sees that his Great Aunt, nicknamed "Grandma Wolf" is ashamed to be part of their family.

Thomas understands why she is ashamed when he is older.

The Colonel, owner of all the land, forest and cottages round the village, makes a speech. Father was a good man. In all his thirty years as a forester he was never late for work. Father used to call the Colonel names but Mother warned us to show respect because he owned their house.

As the family walk home with sad hearts, Thomas keeps the terrible secret that Father died trying to save him. He blames himself for not running when father shouted. He thinks, "I have killed my own father and caused all this."

Twenty to Eleven

Big Joe ate everything. Once Charlie and Thomas put rabbit droppings in a bag and told Joe they were sweets.

Tommo remembers..... 'He ate them and we laughed. Big Joe laughed too and offered us one each. Charlie said they were a present for him.

Mother told us Big Joe nearly died of Meningitis when he was born. The doctor said Joe had brain damage and would be no use even if he lived. Big Joe did live. As we were growing up, all we knew was that he was different. It didn't matter that he couldn't speak well or read or write like other people.

Sometimes he had nightmares. These frightened us but he always came back to being Big Joe who loved everything and everyone, totally trusting, always forgiving – even when he found out the 'sweets' were rabbit droppings. Big Joe had offered Mother one of the rabbit droppings. She was furious with us. She made us eat one to know what it was like. We felt ashamed. Whenever someone says rabbits I remember that time and smile.

We only liked people if they liked Big Joe. If people didn't like Big Joe and were nasty to him, we didn't like them. My first fight at school was about Big Joe. Jimmy Parsons, the school bully, was mean about Joe and I started hitting him. Jimmy was bigger and beat me to the ground. Then Charlie came, pulled him off and they started fighting. Mr Munnings ran over, shouting. He punished Charlie and Jimmy –six hits each with a stick on the bare bum. Charlie was brave and didn't show it hurt. When Molly said she liked Big Joe because he is kind, from that moment she became one of our family, like a sister to us and a daughter to Mother.

I think of Mother often. She taught Big Joe and sang to him. Her voice was the music of our childhood. When father died it stopped. There was sadness about the house. One day the Colonel came and told us we had to leave because no one was working. Then he said Mother could work as his wife's maid. Mother had no choice and Grandma Wolf moved in to look after us. Everything changed. She told Mother what to do in her own house and said we had terrible manners. She was nasty to Big Joe and Mother was too tired to fight back.

At night we could hear Grandma Wolf snoring. Charlie and I made up a story that the Colonel's wife would die, Mother would come home and the Colonel and Grandma Wolf would live unhappily ever after with old-looking monster children.

Then I would have nightmares about Father and the tree falling and wake up screaming. Then Charlie was beside me. Charlie always made everything all right again.'

Nearly Quarter Past Eleven

Tommo sees a mouse in the barn.

He remembers..... 'Grandma Wolf hated mice. Big Joe loved mice. She set traps but Charlie and I opened them so she only ever killed one. We gave it the biggest funeral a mouse ever had.

Grandma Wolf liked Molly more than us because she thought her family were better. But Molly's parents were strict; her father hit her for very small things. They wanted her to be perfect.

Soon after the mouse funeral, it was Big Joe's birthday. Molly's present was a brown, harvest mouse in a box. Big Joe loved it but Grandma Wolf found it and killed it and killed his two lizards, hedgehog and slow worm.

Then a miracle happened. The Colonel's wife died and Mother was back home. Grandma Wolf moved back to the village. But, with no money coming in, there was little food. Charlie decided to poach (*kill animals for food without paying*) on the Colonel's land.

We caught trout, salmon and rabbits. Charlie and Molly jumped in the lake without clothes but I was embarrassed at first. Molly told the future using some stones like the gypsies. The stones said as long as we were together we would always have good luck.

At that time Grandma Wolf also had news. She became the housekeeper for the Colonel at the Big House. Mother did the sewing and laundry for the Colonel so she had some money coming in again.

For a year or two the stones were true. Then Molly got very sick with Scarlet Fever and me and Charlie could not see her.'

Ten to Midnight

Tommo remembers that in a way Molly's stones were right. When they were together they *were* lucky and without her they weren't.

'The first time we went poaching without Molly things went very wrong. Without Molly beside me, I fell asleep on lookout duty and the Colonel's bailiff (*man who looks after the lands*) caught me with his two dogs and saw Charlie with fish in the nets in the middle of the river. The bailiff, Old Lambert, marched us back to the Big House. He locked us in the stables. We had to say sorry *and* clean the kennels (*dog houses*) every weekend until Christmas. The Colonel wanted to hit us but Mother would not allow it.

We hated the smell in the kennels but we liked the dogs. A favourite dog was called Bertha. Finally, Christmas came and our punishment was over. The best Christmas present was Molly. She was better and back with us.

Then suddenly, after my 12th birthday Charlie and Molly left school and found work at the Big House – nearly everyone in the village worked there. Molly was a maid and Charlie looked after the dogs and horses. They worked six days a week. I only saw Molly on Sundays. They talked about the Big House - the Colonel and 'Wolfwoman' – their new name for Grandma Wolf. They were not interested in my stories about school. When I saw Charlie and Molly holding hands one day I felt a pain in my heart. It was not anger or jealousy but a feeling of loss.

One day we saw an aeroplane – the first one we had ever seen. I never believed they were real until that day. It landed in the field near us. The pilot shouted for directions because he was lost. Charlie told him and he gave us sweets called 'humbugs'. I took mine to school but Mr Munnings took them off me and hit me with his ruler. Then at night, Charlie told me he was in trouble. Charlie had stolen Bertha, his favourite dog. The Colonel was going to shoot Bertha because she was old so Charlie had hidden her in a shed in the forest.'

Twenty Four Minutes past Twelve

'The next day the Colonel knocked on our door. Charlie refused to tell him where Bertha was so Mother offered to pay for Bertha. The Colonel took the money but Charlie lost his job. We got Bertha from the wood and she became Big Joe's best friend. They went everywhere together.

Charlie got another job at Farmer Cox's place the other side of the village. Then Molly suddenly stopped coming to our house. Mother guessed that the Colonel or the 'Wolfwoman' had told Molly's parents that Charlie Peaceful was a thief and we were not a good family for Molly to visit.

Molly's parents would not open their door when Charlie went to their house. So Charlie sent me with a letter for Molly. Her parents would not open the door but Molly saw me from her window and I waited for her in the wood. She was crying because she couldn't see Charlie and her parents were so angry. I gave her the letter and after that, almost every day, I met Molly and exchanged letters between Charlie and her. I didn't mind because I could see Molly often.

At this time we heard the first news of the war. It was Molly's job every morning at the Big House to iron the Colonel's *Times newspaper* before she took it to him. She read about the war and told me. Then I left school too and worked with Charlie at Mr Cox's farm. I grew taller and Charlie didn't treat me like a boy anymore. I liked that a lot.

I was still Charlie and Molly's postman but not so often. Then one day Molly's mother came to our house. She had found Charlie's letters and called them disgusting love letters. Then I found out they were meeting in secret too and I did not know. That secret hurt me a lot. I felt angry with Charlie and Molly. Charlie knew I loved Molly. He said he loved her too that's why he would find a way to keep seeing her.

Then Bertha started to go missing. One day she did not come back. I searched for her. Then I heard a gunshot coming from near the shed in the wood. Bertha lay dead with blood in her mouth and beside her stood the Colonel with his gun. Then door of the shed opened. Charlie and Molly came out, shocked, why? Asked Molly to the Colonel, Why?'

Nearly Five to One

'We buried Bertha the same day where Big Joe always buried his animals. We didn't sing. We were too angry at the Colonel. That evening Big Joe went missing. Big Joe was scared of the dark so as night fell we knew there was something wrong. No one found him. We needed more people to look. Mother sent Charlie and me to the village and she went to ask for help at the Big House. They agreed that if anyone found him they would ring the church bell. All night people searched their farms, sheds, gardens.

Then Molly remembered that Big Joe would like to be near Bertha in Heaven and she remembered that Big Joe believed Heaven was at the top of the church tower. Charlie and I ran but Charlie slipped and fell. I climbed the tower by myself and found Big Joe lying sleeping, sucking his thumb. I woke him gently and shouted to Charlie. Then he rang the church bell.'

Twenty-Eight Minutes past One

'Everyone was happy the day we found Big Joe. Even the Colonel and Molly's parents were nice to us! Then one evening Charlie and I came home late from work and found Molly crying, her head on Mother's lap. Molly was pregnant with Charlie's baby and her parents had thrown her out of the house. Mother said Molly belongs with us now. I was happy and sad at the same time. Everyone found out about Molly's baby so Charlie and Molly were married quickly without any celebration. I moved into Big Joe's room so they could be together but now felt I had no place at home anymore.

I worked longer hours for Farmer Cox and avoided Charlie and Molly as much as possible. Then one day I was in Hatherleigh market doing a job for Farmer Cox when I saw a band of soldiers in red uniforms marching past me. The sergeant major gave a speech to the crowd. The army needed more men. We had to stop the Germans coming to kill and burn our houses. He asked who was brave enough. I saw Jimmy Parsons, the school bully, step forward. He was even bigger now and showing off. Then others went forward and joined.

Suddenly, an old, toothless lady poked and pushed me forward. I moved away. She called me a coward. Then she screamed, "Chicken" and I ran and ran. I felt shame but on the way home I decided to become a soldier in a smart, red uniform. Then Molly might even love me.

A few weeks later, the Colonel came to see Mother. He told her that Charlie must enrol in the army. If not, we could not keep our home. The war was changing our lives and I decided right then to join and go with Charlie. They tried to tell me I was too young but they could not change my mind. The real reason I wanted to join was to find out if the old woman was right to call me a coward or if I could prove to myself I had courage. Two days later, we were on our first train journey to the army training camp.'

Fourteen Minutes past Two

Tommo keeps looking at his watch. He wants time to stop so the night will never end and morning will never come. Charlie gave him the watch. It is still ticking. Tommo tells himself, 'Don't listen Tommo, and don't look. Don't think. Only remember.'

Tommo remembers Sergeant "Horrible" Hanley at the training ground called Etaples in France.....

'He was always picking on and shouting at Charlie because Charlie wasn't frightened of him like the rest of us.

Before, at the first training camp in England, it was just playing at soldiers – not real. We laughed a lot. There were other boys from our village. We learnt to march, to run up hills with heavy packs and learnt to shoot straight. Charlie was the best shot in the company. He won the red marksman's badge. I felt so proud of him. We had to do everything in lines or rows – sleeping, eating, even the toilet. Nothing was private. We learnt to dig lines of trenches but it still felt like acting in a play.

Soon we were on a ship to France. Charlie and I were seasick. At last the engines stopped. We had arrived. We saw lines of walking, badly wounded soldiers. Now we knew this was for real.

At Etaples, Sergeant "Horrible" Henry had eyes of steel. We had to obey his orders exactly. One day he saw Charlie's cap badge was crooked. He shouted an insult at Charlie, "You're a blot on Creation, Peaceful. What are you? Charlie refused to say, "I'm a blot on creation." Instead he answered, "Happy to be here Sergeant." This got Charlie a punishment of extra sentry duty, night after night with no sleep.

Then "Horrible" Hanley realised Charlie looked after me and decided to pick on me as well. One morning he said my rifle was dirty. The punishment was five times round the parade ground holding the rifle above my head. Each time I lowered it, I had to do five more. It was too hard. Just before I fell unconscious with the pain, I heard Charlie shouting. Charlie had got so angry he ran at Hanley and stood there nose to nose telling him what a nasty man he was.

Everyone cheered but Charlie was marched off to the guardroom under arrest. The next day, in heavy rain, Charlie was tied to the gun wheel, with his legs and arms pulled apart all day. As we marched past Charlie smiled at me. I tried to smile back but I only had tears. He seemed to me like Jesus hanging on the cross in the church back home.

A Minute past Three

Tommo sings *Oranges and Lemons* like Big Joe does over and over to keep awake.

*Oranges and Lemons, say the bells of St Clements
You owe me five farthings, say the bells of St. Martins.
When will you pay me? Say the bells of Old Baily.
I'm sure I don't know, says the great bell at Bow.
Here comes a candle to light you to bed,
And here comes a chopper to chop off your head.*

'I remember Charlie started singing this when we left Etaples and Sergeant Hanley to go to the front line in Belgium. Everyone laughed and joined in. No one knows it's Big Joe's song and we're both thinking of home. Captain Wilkes, or "Wilkie" is the opposite of Hanley. He treats everyone with kindness and consideration. At rest camp they let us go one evening to a village, Poperinghe or "Pop". We drink beer and eat at the *estaminet*, the *restaurant*. The owner's daughter smiles at me as she clears the plates. I don't forget her smile.

Back at the camp we hear the big guns firing at the town of Ypres. Someone nicknames it 'Wipers'. This time it's not us getting the bombs but we know our time will come.

The next evening we go up into the line. We must be silent. We slide and slip through mud. At last, exhausted, we find our dugout. I am on sentry duty and terrified. Then Charlie whispers something to make me feel better.

The trenches are full of rats. I try stamping them to death and don't kill any. Luckily, we have Little Les. He used to be a rat-catcher and knows the ways of rats. He kills them every time. Another problem is lice. We burn them off our skin with cigarettes. But the rain is the worst thing – we're always wet and stuck in mud in the trench. But Charlie's like a big brother to everyone, keeping us cheerful. I am proud of him.

Then snow falls. We must make patrols at night and bring back a prisoner. We climb over the top and crawl through the wire into no-man's-land. We reach the Germans' trench and crawl along. A soldier comes out of the noisy dugout. He sees us and shrieks. Someone throws a grenade in. They fire back. Little Les is shot dead. Some Germans are dead except one. We take him, climb out of the trench, through the German wire and run. A machine gun fires and we pretend to be dead, run again, more shots and we jump into a crater. Now both sides are firing. Wilkie can't move his legs Charlie goes back for him. Finally the guns stop and Charlie carries Wilkie to our trench. He's taken to hospital. In our trench, we share tea and a cigarette with our prisoner. That night I think about the prisoner –he's just like us.

At the rest camp we look for Wilkie in the hospital but he's gone to Blighty (England) because his wounds are so bad. Wilkie left his watch for Charlie.

Then Charlie said to me, "If anything happens to me it's yours, all right? "

Twenty- Five Past Three

'Back at the front we have to go to the trenches in the Wipers salient (*the land around Ypres*). The new commander Lieutenant Buckland said the Germans nearly had Ypres and we had to stop them. As we marched through Wipers I wondered why it was worth fighting for because there was not much town left. I saw only rubble, soldiers, guns, dogs, dead horses.

The new trenches are very bad and the bombing doesn't stop for two days. Sleep is impossible. I am so scared I get the shakes. I know they'll be coming for us and I'll have to be ready. Then the order comes to stand on the fire step, gas masks on, bayonets ready. Out of the smoke I see hundreds, thousands coming. I want to run but I stay only because Charlie is beside me. The firing starts all along the line but they keep coming. It is the wire that stops them. I feel proud not because we have won, but because I stayed, I didn't run. I'm not a coward. .

Then the whistle blows. We run across no-man's-land, firing at them as they run back. I look around for Charlie and suddenly a shell explodes behind me. Now our men are retreating. My legs are weak. The Lieutenant helps me. He's a good man. Then he is hit. He drops to his knees and dies. Somehow I get back to the dugout. Charlie is not there. I think about each and every horror. Outside the world is silent. Both armies exhausted in their trenches, bleeding to death.

That night I get up to take my turn on sentry duty. I look at the stars and wish I had told Charlie about how Father had died. Then, like a miracle I hear Charlie's voice and see a shape move under the wire towards me. We hug each other and Charlie tells me how he was shot in the foot and fell unconscious in a shell hole as he tried to get back across no-man's- land.

They took him to hospital that night. When I got to see Charlie he was happy. They were sending him home for an operation and he would see Mother, Molly, Big Joe, maybe even the baby. I should have been pleased for him but I wasn't

The next night I drank in the *Estaminet*. I was angry at Charlie for abandoning me, for going to see Molly, for going home. Going outside I saw the girl from the *Estamine* . She spoke to me and I felt calmer. Next time, I promised myself I will ask her name. I did and Ann gave me my first kiss. I sang *Oranges and Lemons* all the way back to the camp.

My happiness stopped quickly when I heard our new sergeant was Horrible Hanley. I couldn't leave the camp to see Anna again. Everyone of us hated him like poison, more than we ever hated Fritz (*nickname for the German soldiers*)'

Nearly Four O'clock

'For a while there wasn't much fighting on the front line. New recruits arrived from home because half of us were missing – killed, wounded or sick. It seemed like Fritz was asleep. We thought we could go to sleep too. Then suddenly it happened....

I was in the dugout writing a letter to Mother when I heard the shout, "Gas! Gas"!

Hanley orders us onto the firestep, bayonets ready. I see the killer gas rolling across no-man's-land. I try not to breathe. Everyone is running. Pete grabs me and I have to breathe to run. I trip and fall. My gas mask comes off. Coughing, choking I get to the reserve trench. I am on my hands and knees vomiting. When I look up a German is standing over me with a rifle at my head. I have no rifle. Then he decides not to shoot and I survived.

At the rest camp that evening I found Pete. We swapped escape stories and then Pete gave me good news –two letters from home. Pete's family did not write to him so he wanted me to read my letters to him. I could not say no.

I keep these letters close to my heart because everyone I love is in them. I read them over and over again.

Mother's letter said that Molly and Charlie's baby boy and Charlie's made them happy. Charlie didn't tell them the truth about the war. He told Mother we were having a fine time and soon we would win the war. Pete got very angry when he heard that because men were dying every day.

I read the other letter from Charlie's letter to myself. Charlie explains that he doesn't want to worry them. Molly writes a little – that the baby is called Tommo after me. The letters give me the strength to stop going mad.

Meanwhile Sergeant Hanley makes our lives hell, crushing our hope and strength.

We had one night off before going back to the front line. I looked for Anna in the *Estaminet*, she wasn't there. I found the courage to knock on the back door. Her father opened it. He was drunk and angry. Anna was dead, killed by a Boche shell on the road. He wanted everyone in the war to go to Hell. I felt a great sadness inside me.

Then we were back in the trenches and Charlie was back. Charlie wouldn't say much about home. He wanted to keep war and home separate and never touch each other. I understood.

Then the biggest gun battle starts and gets worse. The whistle comes and we go out over the top. Suddenly I am on my knees, blood pouring down my face. I am dying and I welcome it.

Five to Five

Sixty-five minutes to go. How shall I live them? Sleep? I can't. Eat breakfast? I don't want any. Scream and shout? No point. Pray? What for? Who to?

No. They will do what they will do. Field Marshall Haig is God out here and he has signed. He has decreed that Private Peaceful will die, will be shot for cowardice in the face of the enemy at six o'clock on the morning of 25th June 1916.

Tommo remembers.... 'I wake to the sound of gun-fire. This means I am not dead but all I can see is darkness. I can't move my legs or arms, only fingers. Slowly I understand I am buried alive. I panic. I cannot breathe. I feel a hand on my leg. I hear Charlie's voice. They are digging for me, pulling at me. We are in an old German dugout, in the middle of no-man's land with machine guns firing on three sides. Sergeant Hanley gives the order to go out but no one moves. Charlie tries to tell him the order is crazy, suicidal but Hanley is angry at Charlie and threatens him with a court martial and the firing squad if he disobeys.

I hear Charlie tell Hanley he won't leave me because I'm badly wounded and can't walk. The sergeant is shaking with anger at Charlie and threatens to kill him. He stops himself and screams at the men, "Go! Go! Go!" Pete tells Charlie it is better to obey Hanley. Charlie knows but chooses to stay with me. We hear the screams of men dying and the rattle of machine guns. After a while Charlie speaks. He asks me to promise I will look after Molly and the baby. He gives me his watch too. By nightfall only Sergeant Hanley and a few men have returned – the rest killed. We go back to the trenches across no-man's-land with Charlie lifting and dragging me all the way. Then Charlie is taken away under arrest.

I couldn't see him until yesterday, six week later. By then, the court martial was over and the death sentence decided. We hugged. It was hard not to cry but Charlie wanted to stay strong. He read a happy letter about the baby from Molly. The family didn't know anything. They would get a telegram afterwards. Charlie wanted me to make sure they knew what really happened: that he wasn't a coward; he didn't get a fair trial at the court martial; the court only believed Sergeant Hanley.

They told Charlie he was a trouble maker and worthless. That word hurt Charlie a lot but he wouldn't let them see that. Then they passed sentence.

Charlie asks me again to be a father to little Tommo and to pass on the watch when the time comes. I tell Charlie it was my fault Father died but Charlie smiles and says it was the tree not me and they knew that already.

There is panic in Charlie's eyes. He gives me letters for home. Then we sing, 'Oranges and Lemons'. I'm with the best person I have ever known.....for the last time. When I get back to camp I hear Sergeant Hanley got killed by a grenade - too late for Charlie though.

One Minute to Six

I try not to think what is happening to Charlie right now. I just try to think of Charlie as he was at home. But all I can see in my mind is the soldiers leading Charlie out into the field. The firing squad are standing, waiting. Six men, their rifles loaded and ready. They will be shooting one of their own and it feels to them like murder. They try not to look at Charlie's face.

Charlie is tied to a post. The padre says a prayer and moves away. It is cold but Charlie does not shiver. They try to put a hood over Charlie's face but he will not have it. He looks up at the sky and sends his last living thoughts back home.

"Present! Ready! Aim!"

He closes his eyes and as he waits he sings softly, "*Oranges and Lemons*".

I hear the echo of the gunshot. It is done. Over and a part of me has died with him. All over the camp I see everyone standing to attention in respect for Charlie. And the birds are singing.

When I collect Charlie's things at Walker camp and see where they buried him, they tell me he walked out with a smile on his face and they heard him singing. Six of us who were at the dugout that terrible day stand vigil over his grave until sundown.

The next day the regiment is marching up the road to the Somme. There is going to be a big push to win the war. All I know is that I must survive. I have promises to keep.

Postscript

In the First World War between 1914 and 1918, over 290 soldiers of the British and Commonwealth armies were executed by firing squad, some for desertion and cowardice, two for simply sleeping at their posts.

Many of these men were traumatised by shell shock. Court martial's were short, with no one to speak on behalf of the soldiers.

To this day the injustice they suffered has not been recognised. The British Commonwealth continues to refuse to grant posthumous pardons.