

# **The Promise of Glory**

The posters had lied. They had promised Charles an epic adventure with friends and a noble quest to defend his nation and people.

"Nothing about this is noble," Charles whispered, abruptly ducking before a stray bullet smashed into his eye. The man right behind him was not so fast. He fell screaming. But his screams were barely heard, even by Charles. They had to contend with the shrill ringing from nearby artillery pummeling holes into the ground, shells from enemy machine guns peppering holes in the trench walls, and fellow soldiers shrieking in agony as they too collapsed.

Charles gagged and coughed violently as sulfuric smoke from fires in the no-man's land pawed at his throat. A familiar voice pulled Charles out of his distress.

"Charles! You pick up that damn rifle right now, or you'll be paying me triple of what you owe me for yesterday's trip to the bar!" roared his best and only friend, John. They had enlisted together, trained together and were now fighting together. Charles had often wondered why John remained with him all this time. They made a strange pair - the handsome, muscular, blond sports-lover and the bespectacled, quiet, dirt-haired short boy.

Well, ponderings aside. Charles blinked away the tears then grasped the rough leather handle of his rifle and heaved it onto the trench wall. He peered through the rifle eyehole, noticing a small group of men attempting to ambush his trench. As he unleashed his bullets on them, he thought, "It's much more fun to defend. More amusing to attack the hesitant prey rather than be hunted down." Charles came back to himself as the soldiers fell within seconds of each other. "My God, what am I becoming?" he breathed. His professor had warned him.

"War makes all men monsters," Professor Galligan had remarked, as Charles and John handed in their notices to leave university for the army. "I hope you boys know what you're getting yourselves into. No man can kill another and claim to be noble." Charles had

not paid attention. He had been entranced by the posters' promise of glory, of finally being accepted and loved by a society that loved only heroes and 'real' men.

"Charles! Move it! Now!" John's frantic yells dragged him out of his memories yet again. Charles looked away from his eyehole. Then, he saw them.

With eyes like houseflies and short, stocky proboscises, giant black insects trooped closer and closer to Charles. They released long stingers from metal shells attached to their hips and began to emit ... gas. These were no insects, Charles realised. These were gas attackers. The enemy, protected from the lethal chlorine by gas masks, unleashed tons of mustard-coloured gas onto the unsuspecting soldiers.

But Charles had only eyes for one. John had climbed up to the bell tower and was now ringing it continuously.

"John! Get down! What are you doing?" Charles shrieked at him.

"The other soldiers don't know! " John roared back, not stopping his ringing.

Charles shook his head frantically. Yes, the men needed to know, but John could not do it. If he died, Charles would be all alone in the world. "Get back down!" he screamed.

Then, yellow gas enveloped the bell tower, and John vanished.

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Charles woke up in his armchair, gasping like a fish out of water. He glanced at his phone, inhaling deeply to calm himself down. "Six post merīdiem. November eleventh. Two thousand and eight," he read aloud from the lock screen, reminding himself of the present as his therapist had advised.

John's body had never been found, as had millions of others. Soon, celebrations commenced when the Great War ended. But Charles stayed at home, ill and weary. His best friend had died, and for what? For Charles' foolishness in believing the posters, he had seen.

Now, Charles felt tears come to his eyes, as they always did when he thought of John. "It should have been me," he wept bitterly. "It was my fault."