

Private Peaceful



INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF MICHAEL MORPURGO

Michael Andrew Bridge was born in 1943 in St Albans. His father was actor Tony Van Bridge, but Michael wouldn't learn this until he was nineteen. His mother, Kippe Cammaerts, was also an actress, and the surname Morpurgo originates from her second husband, Jack Morpurgo, who was a literature professor. Michael went to school in London, and later attended the University of London, studying English and French. He then became a primary school teacher, but it was while teaching that he realized he wanted to be an author. He made up stories for the children, and says "I could see there was magic in it for them, and realized there was magic in it for me." He would go on to become a greatly successful and well-loved children's author, best known for works such as *War Horse*, *The Butterfly Lion* and *Private Peaceful*. *War Horse* in particular has been wildly successful, having been adapted into an award-winning play and made into a Steven Spielberg blockbuster in 2011. Morpurgo held the role of Children's Laureate from 2003-2005, and also set up a charity called "Farms for City Children" with his wife, Clare, which allows inner-city children to experience the countryside. He was made a Knight Bachelor in 2018 for his services to children's literature and charity.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

While *Private Peaceful* encompasses many aspects of the First World War, it is more specifically about the British soldiers who were executed by firing squad at the hands of their own army. Morpurgo explains in the novel's postscript that, throughout the war, over 290 soldiers were executed by firing squad, "some for desertion and cowardice, two simply for sleeping at their posts." The youngest was only seventeen years old. Most of these men, as we can now appreciate, were suffering from PTSD and were completely traumatized by their experiences of war. Their sentencing was deeply unjust, as they often had no one to defend them in court against a completely biased jury. The British government still has not granted any posthumous pardons.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

Michael Morpurgo has written many other books about the experience of the First World War, with the most notable being *War Horse*, which narrates the story of the war through the eyes of a horse. He has also written stories about the Second World War, such as *The Amazing Story of Adolphus Tips*, and

stories about life more generally in England, such as *The Butterfly Lion*. Morpurgo once claimed that his writing at large was influenced by Hemingway's *The Old Man and the Sea*, Paul Gallico's *The Snow Goose*, and Ted Hughes' *Poetry in the Making*. Ted Hughes also wrote children's fiction, and Gallico's *The Snow Goose* is similar to many of Morpurgo's works in its depiction of heroism against a backdrop of war. One might also look to classic literature of the First World War for related content, such as the poetry of Wilfred Owen, Siegfried Sassoon, and Rupert Brooke, or Erich Remarque's *All Quiet on the Western Front*.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** Private Peaceful
- **When Written:** 2003
- **Where Written:** Devon, England
- **When Published:** 2003
- **Literary Period:** Contemporary
- **Genre:** Young Adult, War, Bildungsroman
- **Setting:** First in the village of Iddesleigh in Devon, and then in the battlefields of Belgium in the First World War
- **Climax:** The execution of Charlie Peaceful
- **Point of View:** First person

EXTRA CREDIT

Famous Fathers. Michael didn't know about his birth father, Tony Van Bridge, until he watched the film *Great Expectations* with his mother. His father (an actor) was starring in it.

True Story? Much of the story of *Private Peaceful* is based on real conversations Michael Morpurgo had with war veterans from the village of Iddesleigh in Devon, where he lives.



PLOT SUMMARY

Private Peaceful follows the early life of Tommo Peaceful, and is told from his perspective. The novel alternates back and forth between the present and Tommo's recollections of the past.

The narrative begins in Tommo's childhood. He is nervous about his first day of school, but his brother Charlie reassures him and gives him a piggyback on the way. Tommo is dreading school, but once he has arrived he meets a girl named Molly, who helps him to tie his shoelaces and smiles at him. Tommo knows from this first day that Molly will become his friend.

Tommo has a flashback to a day in the woods with his father.

Tommo's father was a woodcutter, and Tommo had joined him for the day. Tommo went off to play in the woods, and became engrossed in his imaginary games. Suddenly he heard a noise, and realized that a tree was falling. If he didn't move, it would fall right on top of him, but he found himself frozen with fear. Before he knew it, his father was shouting and running at him. Tommo survived, but his father was crushed by the tree.

Tommo attends his father's funeral in the village church with his family. They all notice a swallow swooping around the church, and Tommo thinks that the swallow is the spirit of his father trying to escape. After the funeral, Tommo's mother tells Big Joe (Tommo and Charlie's brother) that their father is up in heaven and "happy as the **birds**." Tommo, however, feels burdened by the terrible guilt that he is responsible for his father's death.

Big Joe has had brain damage since birth, which means that he is slightly "different" to his brothers, but they love him regardless. To them, he is just "Big Joe," and he is always completely trusting, happy, smiling, and kind. One day, Molly tells Tommo that she likes Big Joe because she thinks he is kind, and Tommo decides that he will love her forever. Molly soon practically becomes part of the Peaceful family. She comes home with the boys every day after school, and the three kids become almost inseparable.

Everything is relatively happy in Tommo's life for a while. The only problem is that he feels left out of his friendship with Molly and Charlie, because they are older than him. They both leave school and start work up at the village estate, which is owned by a terrible man named the Colonel, but Tommo is left behind in class. One day he sees Molly and Charlie holding hands, and feels a deep pang of "loss" and sadness. He realizes that they are leaving him behind and falling in love with each other.

Charlie has started a job working at the hunt kennels at the estate. One day, he confesses to Tommo that he's in deep trouble. He has rescued a dog from the kennels because it was going to be shot, but he knows that the Colonel will accuse him of stealing it. Sure enough, the Colonel fires Charlie the next morning, and later kills Bertha the dog anyway, just out of personal spite.

After the dog incident, the Colonel tells Molly's mother and Molly's father that Charlie is a bad influence, so they ban Molly from seeing Charlie. Nevertheless, Charlie and Molly continue to meet each other in secret. Weeks later, Molly becomes accidentally pregnant, and is kicked out by her parents. Luckily, the Peaceful family welcome her with open arms, and Charlie promises to look after her and their baby. They get married soon after, although no one but the Peacefuls comes to the wedding.

Soon afterwards, the Colonel makes up his mind that Charlie must enlist to fight in the war, and tells the Peacefuls that he will evict them from their cottage (which the Colonel owns) if

Charlie refuses. Charlie bravely accepts his fate, and Tommo resolves to join him, as Tommo is technically too young to be fighting anyway (he is only fifteen).

When the boys arrive at their training camp in France, they meet a terrible man named Sergeant Hanley. The arrogant Hanley is in charge of their company, and takes an instant dislike to Charlie, because Charlie won't submit to him as the other men do. Hanley even starts picking on Tommo purely because he is Charlie's brother. One day, Tommo becomes so exhausted from Hanley's punishments that he collapses, and Charlie is so angry that he screams at Hanley in front of everyone. Hanley punishes Charlie, but the courageous Charlie takes his punishment with characteristic dignity.

Soon the soldiers are sent up to the front line, but find it to be very quiet at first. Their morale is kept high by Captain Wilkes, who often encourages the men to sing to stay jolly. Charlie and Tommo get everyone singing "**Oranges and Lemons**," because it is a song that Big Joe always used to sing at home. The trenches are cold and full of rats and lice, but there is little fighting at first. The soldiers particularly enjoy visits to a local pub, where Tommo takes a liking to one of the waitresses.

One day, the company captures a German prisoner during an attack. The British soldiers realize that the German is actually just like them: he prays to the same God, and he looks exactly the same as them without his uniform on. They even share a cup of tea before he is taken away. Captain Wilkes is injured in the same mission that captures the German prisoner. Charlie loyally carries him to safety, and as thanks for his bravery and loyalty, Wilkes later leaves his precious golden watch to Charlie.

The company are sent up to the front line again. Their new commander is a man named Lieutenant Buckland, who has come straight from England. The soldiers think he seems young and inexperienced because of this, as he has seen less of the war than they have. One day, the British men head into battle, and Tommo is gravely injured. He can't move his legs, and he loses sight of Charlie in the chaos. Lieutenant Buckland proves his naysayers wrong and courageously comes to Tommo's assistance. He tries to carry Tommo back to safety, but is tragically killed as he stands by Tommo's side.

When Tommo finally gets back to the trenches, he can't find Charlie, and assumes that he is dead. In the middle of the night, Charlie returns. He was injured and couldn't get back before now. The brothers hug each other and cry tears of relief.

Charlie is taken to hospital, and when Tommo goes to visit him he learns that Charlie is being sent back to England to recover, which Tommo is very bitter about. Charlie manages to visit home while he is recovering in England, and meets his baby son for the first time. The baby has been called Thomas, or Little Tommo, in honor of Tommo.

Tommo decides to be brave and ask the girl in the local pub for

her name. She tells him it is Anna, and they start to talk a little over his next few visits. One day, Tommo arrives at the pub and cannot see Anna anywhere. He tries to find her at her house, but Anna's father tells Tommo that she has been killed by a stray explosion. Tommo goes to visit her grave and then returns despondently to camp. He wants to believe that Anna is in heaven, but finds that his faith has been destroyed by the war.

The next commander of Tommo's company is none other than Sergeant "Horrible" Hanley, who proceeds to make all of the soldiers' lives a living hell, constantly punishing them for the tiniest of offences. He becomes even worse when Charlie returns, and tells Charlie that he will be keeping a close eye on him.

In a huge battle a few weeks later, Tommo is gravely injured again. He feels a burning pain in his head and loses consciousness, and thinks that he is dying. Charlie pulls him up, and Tommo miraculously survives. The whole company are sheltering in a dugout, because they are surrounded on all sides by German guns. Everyone agrees that they should stay put, as to leave the dugout would be a case of almost certain death. Sergeant Hanley, however, has other ideas, and orders the men to move out and attack. Charlie refuses, telling him that this is a suicidal and pointless order, and that he will not abandon Tommo. Hanley tells Charlie that he will be executed if he doesn't obey his order, but Charlie stubbornly stays put. The men go out to fight, and Charlie and Tommo remain in the dugout. While they wait, Charlie asks Tommo to promise that he will look after Molly and Little Tommo should anything happen to him, and Tommo agrees.

Only a few men return from the attack, unfortunately with Hanley still in their midst. As soon as they reach the British trenches again, Charlie is taken away under arrest. Six weeks later, Tommo is allowed to visit Charlie. It has already been decided that Charlie is going to be executed "for cowardice." He will be executed tomorrow, and Tommo is only allowed to visit him for twenty minutes today. Charlie tells Tommo about his trial, which was completely unfair. He wasn't allowed any witnesses, as the only possible witness was Tommo, who, as his brother, was deemed too biased. The only other person present was Sergeant Hanley. The judges listened to everything Hanley had to say and then blatantly ignored Charlie. They were biased from the start of the trial, and the verdict was made in less than an hour.

The boys then spend their remaining time together talking about their home. They end Tommo's visit by singing "Oranges and Lemons" together, and then Tommo is called away. Tommo waits in a barn overnight for Charlie's execution the next morning. His fellow soldiers try to offer him support, but he turns them all away and decides to spend the night alone, reflecting back on his past and his memories of Charlie. This is the story that the reader has just read.

When the time of Charlie's execution arrives, Tommo goes

outside and sings "Oranges and Lemons." He knows Charlie will be singing it too, and it helps Tommo to feel connected to Charlie in his final moments. Tommo is sure that Charlie will be facing his death with dignity, with his head held high and a smile on his face. When he returns to camp, he finds all of his fellow soldiers standing to attention outside their tents to honor Charlie's passing. The next day, Tommo's regiment leaves for the Somme. All Tommo can think now is that he "must survive." He has "promises to keep."



CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

Thomas "Tommo" Peaceful – Tommo Peaceful is the narrator and protagonist of the novel. Tommo is a kind boy who is fiercely loyal to his brothers Charlie and Big Joe, as well as his mother, Mrs. Peaceful. Throughout the novel, he struggles with feelings of inadequacy and guilt, especially surrounding his father's tragic death. Tommo's father was crushed by a tree as he was rescuing young Tommo from the same fate. In an unfortunate coincidence, the way that his father's body was positioned when he died meant that his finger was pointing right at Tommo, which Tommo interpreted as a sign that he was to blame for his father's death. By the end of the novel, Charlie assures Tommo that the death was not his fault, and Tommo finally comes to terms with the loss of his father. Tommo also initially considers himself to be something of a coward after an old woman accuses him of being a "chicken" for hesitating to enlist in the First World War. In an effort to prove his own bravery, he enlists to fight alongside his brother Charlie, even though he is technically too young to fight at just fifteen years old. The youngest in the family, he also feels left out of Charlie and Molly's relationship as they begin to fall in love and grow up faster than Tommo. Tommo loves Molly, so he is jealous of Charlie in particular. Tommo later also falls in love with a girl called Anna in France, although she is killed not long after they meet. Tommo also loves his family, and their letters buoy him throughout the war. Charlie is a great inspiration to Tommo throughout the novel, often inspiring Tommo to be brave by example of his own courage. Charlie is in fact executed because he refuses to leave Tommo on the battlefield when Tommo is too injured to walk, demonstrating great courage and brotherly loyalty. This in turn inspires Tommo to try and survive the war, so that he can repay Charlie for his sacrifice by caring for his family, including his and Molly's infant son, Little Tommo.

Charlie Peaceful – Charlie is Tommo and Big Joe's brother, Mrs. Peaceful's son, and Molly's eventual husband. He is presented as a fiercely loyal and brave figure throughout the novel. He consistently sticks up for Tommo and those he cares about, and always does what's right. He defends Tommo from bullies at school, and later in the war he again defends Tommo against the terrible Sergeant Hanley. Tommo is often inspired

by Charlie's bravery, and signs up to fight in the war because Charlie does. Ultimately, however, Charlie pays the price for his loyalty and bravery when he is executed for refusing to obey Hanley's suicidal orders, which would have meant abandoning a gravely injured Tommo on the battlefield for a pointless mission. Hanley hated Charlie from the first time they met, because Charlie wasn't afraid to stand up to Hanley, and Hanley couldn't handle this threat to his authority. By contrast, Charlie is very loyal to his second commander, Captain Wilkes, because Wilkes is respectful and kind to his men. Charlie ends up bravely rescuing Wilkes when he is injured, and Wilkes leaves him his golden watch as a thank you. He also remains loyal in his love for Molly, sticking by her and marrying her when she falls pregnant, even when Molly's mother and Molly's father reject her. Charlie is briefly injured during the war, meaning that he gets sent back to England for a little while (much to Tommo's chagrin, as he has to remain in France) and manages to meet his newborn baby, Little Tommo. He only meets his child once, however, as Charlie is killed shortly afterwards. Charlie is always poised and dignified, even in the face of fear. He accepts punishment with his head held high, and even as he is executed he keeps a smile on his face. His bravery inspires Tommo to survive the war and to take courage himself.

Tommo's Mother / Mrs. Peaceful – Mrs. Peaceful is Tommo, Charlie, and Big Joe's mother and Mr. Peaceful's widow. She is a kind, loyal, and courageous woman who sets an excellent example to her family, and all of her children look up to her. She is not afraid to stand up to people if she feels they have wronged her children. Grandma Wolf, for instance, is terribly cruel to Big Joe, and Mrs. Peaceful has "blazing arguments" with her as a result. She also stands up for Charlie and Tommo against the Colonel. She is always true to her word, on one occasion promising the boys that she won't let the Colonel beat them for poaching on his land, and indeed, somehow managing to dissuade the Colonel from his punishment. Her kindness is demonstrated when she later welcomes Molly into the Peaceful family after Molly's mother and Molly's father kick her out of the house upon learning that Charlie got her pregnant.

Big Joe Peaceful – Big Joe is Tommo and Charlie's brother and Mrs. Peaceful's son. He had meningitis as a baby, which left him with brain damage. This makes him a little "different" to Tommo, Charlie, and Molly, but they love him dearly regardless. Big Joe is nearly always cheerful and smiling, and he devotes himself completely to his family and his beloved pets. He always sings "**Oranges and Lemons**" to himself as a means of comfort, and the song later proves to be a great source of comfort to Tommo and Charlie as they fight in the war, because it reminds them of their brother. Big Joe is also notable for his unquestioning faith, starkly contrasting with Tommo's constant religious questioning. Big Joe innocently believes that heaven is located in the **church tower** in the village, so he goes up there when his dog is killed because he believes that this is where he will find

her.

Molly – Molly is a childhood friend to Charlie, Tommo and Big Joe, and later marries Charlie and has his baby, whom they name Little Tommo. Both Charlie and Tommo are very fond of Molly throughout their childhood, and she is kind, sweet, and loyal to them in return. In fact, she almost immediately becomes part of the Peaceful family because she visits so much. The boys and Molly are inseparable until Charlie and Molly fall in love, causing a rift between them and Tommo, as Tommo is also madly in love with Molly. In fact, Tommo's love for Molly endures throughout the novel. This is why Charlie asks Tommo to go back and look after Molly after he is executed, because he knows that Tommo still loves her. Even when Tommo at one point meets and falls in love with another girl named Anna, he often imagines Molly's face in his mind instead of Anna's. Molly's mother and Molly's father are both cold and harsh, as they throw their daughter out of the house upon learning of her pregnancy. Mrs. Peaceful warmly welcomes Molly into their home, and she becomes an instrumental part of the family. At the end of the novel it is implied that after Charlie's death, Tommo will try to go back and live with her and the baby.

The Colonel – One of the novel's antagonists, the Colonel is a mean-spirited man who owns the grand estate in the village. The Peaceful family live in a cottage he owns (prior to his death, Mr. Peaceful worked for the Colonel), and Mrs. Peaceful, Molly, and Charlie all work for him at some point. He is cruel and spiteful to the Peacefuls, just as he is cruel to everyone else around him. Unfortunately, because of his powerful position, he largely gets away with everything he does. He knows he can force Charlie to enlist in the army, for instance, because he can evict the Peacefuls from their cottage and fire Mrs. Peaceful and Molly from his employment if Charlie should refuse. When Charlie earlier dares to steal the Colonel's dog, Bertha, the Colonel fires Charlie, and later kills Bertha out of spite. There is nothing the Peacefuls can do about his actions, because he owns their home and supports their livelihoods. He also has a lot of power and influence within the wider community, meaning that at one point he manages to turn Molly's mother and Molly's father against Charlie by telling them that Charlie is a thief. Molly is banned from seeing Charlie another as a result, just as the Colonel intended. He is also particularly full of himself: Mrs. Peaceful later reports in a letter that if one were to listen to everything The Colonel says, you'd think "he could win [the] war all by himself."

Grandma Wolf – Grandma Wolf, one of the novel's antagonists, is technically Tommo's great aunt, but she likes to be called "Grandma" instead. Tommo, Charlie, and Big Joe, however, prefer to call her "Grandma Wolf," because she reminds them of the wolf in *Little Red Riding Hood*, thanks to her vicious nature. She moves in briefly with the Peacefuls when the children are young, and is consistently cruel to them, killing Big Joe's beloved pet mouse and making snide remarks about the boys'

mother, Mrs. Peaceful. Eventually she moves up to the estate, when the Colonel asks her to return as a live-in housekeeper. She had worked for the Colonel before, but had been fired by his wife when it was discovered that Grandma Wolf and the Colonel were actually having an affair. After the Colonel's wife dies, she becomes the Colonel's mistress again, and starts practically running the whole estate as a result, making everyone who works there miserable.

Sergeant "Horrible" Hanley – One of the antagonists in the novel, Sergeant Hanley is a vicious and cruel man, who is in charge of Tommo and Charlie's company at their training camp, and then later again in the war. He instantly takes a dislike to Charlie, because Charlie refuses to "jump through hoops" for Hanley like the other men do. Charlie boldly tells Hanley what he thinks of Hanley's malicious and often ridiculous orders, and Hanley continues to attack Charlie for his so-called disobedience. He also mistreats Tommo because he is Charlie's brother. Tommo later claims that it was Hanley, rather than the war itself, that broke the men's spirit. Hanley is ultimately responsible for Charlie's execution: Charlie refuses to abandon a gravely injured Tommo on the battlefield and follow Hanley's suicidal order to attack a German trench, even though the men are completely vulnerable to attack. Charlie stays with Tommo, and Hanley orders his execution because of it, purely out of spite. Hanley is eventually killed, but it is too late for Charlie to be saved from his execution.

Tommo's Father / Mr. Peaceful – Mr. Peaceful is Tommo, Charlie, and Big Joe's father, who is tragically killed in an accident when Tommo is a young boy. Not much is revealed about Mr. Peaceful, but he was a woodchopper and died as he saved Tommo from a falling tree in the forest, which ended up crushing him instead. Due to the positioning of his body when he died, it seemed as though Mr. Peaceful's finger was pointed directly at Tommo, as if blaming Tommo for his death. Tommo certainly interprets it in this way, and blames himself for his father's death until the very end of the novel, when Charlie reassures him that it wasn't his fault and dismisses his guilt as "nonsense." It is also revealed that Mr. Peaceful loved **birds**, and every time Tommo sees a bird throughout the story he is reminded of his father.

Captain Wilkes / "Wilkie" – Wilkes takes over as captain of Tommo's company for a while, and treats the men very well, earning their respect. He was a choirmaster in England, and thus encourages the men to sing in order to keep their morale up. He also keeps their trenches clean and looks after the men well. Eventually he is injured in battle, but Charlie loyally carries him all the way back to the English trenches. Wilkes later dies from his injuries, but leaves Charlie his special watch in gratitude. Captain Wilkes is a complete contrast to the company's earlier commander, Sergeant Hanley. Wilkes is respectful and considerate of his men, and they all respect him in return, especially Charlie. Hanley on the other hand treats

his men despicably, so Charlie constantly defies him as a matter of principle.

Anna – Anna is a teenage girl whom Tommo meets in France. Anna's father owns the *estaminet* (a small pub) near the soldiers' camp, and Anna and Tommo take an instant liking to each other when he visits. She smiles at him when she brings his food, and eventually Tommo plucks up the courage to speak to her. Upon his next visit, however, he learns that Anna has been killed by a stray explosion while gathering eggs. Tommo goes to visit her grave and kisses the earth where she is buried. He finds that as a result partly of Anna's death, he can no longer believe in heaven. Her death seems too arbitrary and too cruel to suggest the existence of any god. Instead, he feels that all that is left of Anna is buried in the "cold earth" beneath his feet.

Little Tommo – Molly and Charlie's child, who is born towards the end of the novel. Charlie briefly gets to meet his son when he returns to England briefly due to injury, but tragically dies before he meets his son again. The baby is called Thomas to honor Tommo. Tommo promises Charlie that he will try to survive the war so that he can return home and care for the baby and Molly.

Nipper Martin – Tommo and Charlie know "Nipper" from home, and he ends up in the same company as them in the war. He has a slightly cruel yet jovial streak, but he is a comforting presence nonetheless thanks to his familiarity. He is eventually killed in a gas attack, which Tommo narrowly survives.

Jimmy Parsons – Tommo and Charlie know Jimmy Parsons from school, where Jimmy was always a bully. As a child, he once taunted Big Joe, and both Charlie and Tommo attempted to fight him for it. Mr. Munnings then gave Jimmy and Charlie the cane for fighting. Jimmy cried out "Ow, sir!" as he was punished, whereas Charlie endured his punishment in silence. Jimmy is the first character mentioned who signs up for the war, and Tommo claims that he Jimmy only enlisted in an effort to "show off." At the end of the novel it is revealed that he has died in battle.

Pete Bovey – A boy from the village who ends up in Tommo and Charlie's company in the war. He was a thatcher at home, and a great fan of drinking cider. He is a loyal friend and soldier. Pete doesn't receive letters from his own family, because they don't know how write, so he asks Tommo if he can read his out for him instead. Eventually Pete goes missing in action when attacking a German trench, under Sergeant Hanley's suicidal orders.

Little Les James – A friend of Tommo's from his village, who ends up in the same company as him in the war. At home he is a rat-catcher, a skill that comes in handy in the war when he is able to clear the company's trench of rats. He is killed in action not long after the company arrive in France, when they are ordered to investigate a German trench.

Lieutenant Buckland – The second commander of Tommo's

company during the war. Buckland provides another stark contrast to Sergeant Hanley. He is mild-mannered, but respectful of his soldiers. At first, the soldiers think he seems young and inept, because he has arrived straight from England and is thus inexperienced. As soon as battle arrives, however, Buckland proves his bravery and integrity, winning respect from his men. He loyally stays with Tommo when Tommo is injured, trying to support him back to the home trenches. Buckland is fatally wounded in the process and dies by Tommo's side.

Anna's Father – Anna's father is the owner of the *estaminet* (pub) near the soldiers' camp. When Tommo can't find Anna, he goes to her house, where her father somberly explains that she has been killed while gathering eggs. Anna's father is normally a well-presented and jolly man, but when Tommo meets him after Anna's death, he smells of alcohol and looks completely unkempt in his grief. He then shouts at Tommo, telling him to go to hell and to take the war with him. He is not normally an angry man, but the war and his daughter's resulting death have left him distraught.

Mr. Munnings – Mr. Munnings is Tommo and Charlie's school teacher, who is very strict and has "raging tempers." On Tommo's first day of school, Mr. Munnings tells Tommo that he is now his "lord and master." His inflated sense of his own self-importance and his love of punishment makes him similar to the character of Sergeant Hanley later in the novel. One day, Munnings gives Charlie the cane for defending Tommo in a fight on the playground. Charlie is silent as he is struck, and Tommo is amazed at this show of bravery against the wrath of Munnings. Tommo is later inspired by Charlie's courage when Munnings strikes Tommo for bringing humbugs to school. Tommo, too takes his punishment with great dignity. Mr. Munnings thus in a way teaches Charlie and Tommo how to courageously deal with a cruel superior.

Miss McAllister – Miss McAllister is briefly mentioned as Tommo's infant school teacher. She is relatively kind, but embarrasses Tommo by telling him to tie his shoelaces when he doesn't know how to. However, her telling Tommo to tie his shoes inadvertently brings Tommo and Molly together, as Molly helps him with his laces.

Molly's Father – Much like Molly's mother, Molly's father only appears in the story when he is trying to prevent Molly and Charlie from continuing their romance. Molly's parents despise Charlie because of the spiteful things the Colonel has said about the boy, and Molly's father even threatens to shoot Charlie if he ever sees him around his daughter. He is very strict and eventually throws his daughter out of the house when she becomes pregnant.

Farmer Cox – The owner of the farm where Charlie and Tommo briefly work, which is just outside of the boys' village. Working at the farm brings Tommo and Charlie closer together,

and it is when they are working this job that Charlie starts to see Tommo as being more of an equal than a little brother. Farmer Cox likes to drink, sing, and play skittles.

MINOR CHARACTERS

Molly's Mother – Molly's mother is strict and domineering, just like Molly's father. She tries to ban Charlie from seeing her daughter, believing him to be a bad influence on her. Molly's mother eventually kicks Molly out when she falls pregnant, but Molly takes refuge in the Peaceful family.

Lambert – The Colonel's gruff old bailiff. He captures Charlie and Tommo when they poach on the Colonel's land.



THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don't have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.



THE INJUSTICE OF WAR

Private Peaceful is a novel committed to overturning the view that war is something glorious or distinguished. Instead, Morpurgo makes a point of illustrating that the First World War was characterized by tragic injustices that should never happen again. Morpurgo demonstrates this primarily through the characters of Tommo and the other soldiers, many of whom seem to sacrifice their lives for no tangible reason or result. That Tommo himself is underage reflects another aspect of Morpurgo's criticism of the British Army: it should never have accepted boys too young to be involved in the first place. The worst injustices of all in Morpurgo's novel, however, are the executions imposed upon British soldiers at the hands of their own army. Charlie's execution in particular is presented as cruel and unnecessary—the result of a deeply unjust legal system and a spiteful superior, Sergeant Hanley.

The novel's initial impression of war is one of glory and excitement. When the British Army comes marching into his village, Tommo is so struck and enthralled by its "scarlet uniforms" and marching band that he feels compelled to fight. As the novel progresses, however, and as Tommo's friends begin to die beside him, this heroic image of war evaporates—and in its stead are the seemingly pointless deaths of millions of soldiers.

This is starkest at the end of the novel, when Sergeant Hanley orders the men to go over the top of their hiding place in the dugout to face the German guns because their "orders are to press home the attack." As Charlie rightly points out, and as

everyone around him knows, this will be a futile mission: the men are completely vulnerable to German attack and will be killed as soon as they leave. Charlie says, “No point in going out there and getting ourselves killed for nothing, is there, Sergeant?” Still, the sergeant effectively insists that the soldiers sacrifice themselves—not for the sake of victory, but of “orders.” The injustice of these orders and of the sergeant’s actions is made all the clearer when only “remnants” of the company return alive.

The losses of war are made all the more tragic by the fact that many soldiers are too young to have enlisted in the first place. Tommo is not even sixteen when he and Charlie go to sign up, and the soldier who takes their names, Tommo notes, is “eyeing [him] a little,” as if he is suspicious of Tommo’s age but happy to accept him anyway. After a few weeks, all of the soldiers in Tommy’s company, even the sergeant, know that Tommo is younger than Charlie, but they turn a blind eye to this fact. In fact, there are “dozens” more underage soldiers in Tommo’s company alone. The deaths of these young men seem all the more cruel and unfair in comparison to those of older men who had a better idea of what they were doing as they signed up, and Morpurgo is thus deeply critical of the British Army for letting underage soldiers enlist.

The worst injustice of all in the novel comes at its very end, with Charlie’s execution at the hands of his own army. Charlie is executed simply for “disobeying” a ridiculous, suicidal order and refusing to abandon his gravely injured brother on the battlefield. He is persecuted because Sergeant Hanley has a personal vendetta against him: Charlie doesn’t readily submit to Hanley as the others do, and Hanley can’t handle any question to his authority. Charlie, really, has done nothing wrong. In fact, he has been brave and loyal, and pays the price for this with his life. His trial isn’t really “a trial” at all, as the men judging him have “made up their minds [that Charlie] was guilty” before he even enters the room. The only other person at the trial is Sergeant Hanley, to whom the clearly biased jurors listen closely, without then bothering in the slightest to listen to anything Charlie has to say in his defense. For a man to be mercilessly killed for a minor offence at the hands of his own army, when he has already willingly given his life to them, is presented the greatest injustice of the novel and the war at large.

In the postscript to the novel, Morpurgo notes that his story is intended to bring some justice to these men who were executed as Charlie is. The British government still refuses posthumous pardons for these men, and, as such, Morpurgo seeks to redeem them in fiction. He uses his story to destroy any glorified image of war, and instead to point out the injustices of the army so that they may never be repeated.



COURAGE

Private Peaceful is a book that celebrates bravery and standing up for one’s beliefs. While it may seem that the courageous characters in the book, in particular Charlie, Tommo, and their mother, Mrs. Peaceful, are not always explicitly rewarded for their bravery (in fact Charlie is executed for his), it does always earn them with the respect and admiration of those around them. Morpurgo thus implies the inherent value of courage and suggests that people must always strive for bravery even in the face of potential consequences.

Mrs. Peaceful is one of the first characters in the book to exemplify bravery and integrity, and she undoubtedly inspires Charlie and Tommo to be courageous in their own lives. There are two primary moments of Mrs. Peaceful’s bravery in the narrative, the first occurring when Charlie and Tommo are caught poaching on the Colonel’s land. Though Mrs. Peaceful admits that the boys have done wrong, she knows that they only did so in order to help provide food for the family. As such, she cannot abide the Colonel’s promise to physically beat the boys as punishment. She instead tells the Charlie and Tommo that she “won’t let that man lay a finger on you, not one finger, no matter what” and proves true to her word, convincing the Colonel that cleaning the stables will be sufficient punishment. Even though the Colonel could take her house and livelihood from her if he wanted to, Mrs. Peaceful’s loyalty to her family is stronger than her fear of any threat. The boys, in turn, feel a great deal of appreciation and respect for their mother after this.

A similar episode occurs later, when Charlie “steals” the elderly dog that the Colonel is about to kill anyway. Even though the Colonel has the power to evict her from her home, Mrs. Peaceful stands up for her son, coolly paying the Colonel for the dog, claiming that if it’s been paid for, it’s not stolen. Her bravery pays off as the Colonel eventually leaves, and her family are once again “overwhelmed with gratitude and admiration” for their mother. She is again rewarded for her courage with the respect of her family.

Charlie, too, is an unequivocally courageous character who earns the respect of those around him. As a child, he defends Tommo from Jimmy Parsons, the school bully, even though both he and Jimmy get the cane for it. Tommo is “so proud” and thinks to himself that he has “the bravest brother in the world,” especially when everyone hears Jimmy “crying out” as he receives his punishment whereas Charlie is silent—a sign of his stoic bravery and willingness to accept the consequences of his actions when he believes he is in the right.

Charlie will continue to exemplify these characteristics throughout the novel. Later in life, for example, Charlie is happy to lose his job to save Bertha the dog from being shot by the Colonel, claiming, “I won’t tell [the Colonel] where she is. I don’t

care what he does, I won't tell him." In the army, Charlie again sticks up for Tommo against Sergeant Hanley, telling the overbearing Sergeant "exactly what he thought of him" when he causes Tommo to faint from exhaustion. Charlie is punished again, this time by "Field Punishment Number One," yet again accepts his fate with quiet dignity, even smiling. Everyone in the company respects Charlie for this. They cheer as he stands up to Hanley, and it's clear that "there isn't a man in the company who doesn't look up to him." Later on, Charlie refuses to leave his captain, Wilkie, when he is injured, and carries him "on his back the whole way" to their trench. Wilkie leaves him his precious watch out of respect for Charlie's bravery.

The greatest instance of Charlie's bravery, of course, comes at the end of the novel, when he refuses to obey Hanley's suicidal order and abandon Tommo, who is gravely injured. Charlie is executed for his disobedience, but again faces his punishment with immense courage. He walks to his execution "with a smile on his face," refuses to wear the hood, and even sings as he dies. In admiration for his bravery, all of the men in camp stand to attention in respect.

Charlie also inspires Tommo to take courage. He learns on the day that Charlie protects him from Jimmy Parsons that "sometimes you've got to stand up for yourself and fight for what's right, even when you don't want to." When Charlie later signs up for the army, Tommo is inspired to join him. In a later attack, Tommo stays strong and "[does] not run, only because of Charlie." Eventually, as he awaits Charlie's execution, Tommo bravely sits through the night, refusing company or comfort, and standing by his brother in solidarity. He wills himself to survive the rest of the war so that he can keep his promise to Charlie to look after his wife Molly and their baby. Tommo therefore comes out of the story a braver man because of Charlie's influence. Courage, according to Morpurgo, is not only admirable, but a force that inspires invaluable bravery, dignity, and strength in those who bear witness to it.



CRUELTY AND POWER

From the vicious Grandma Wolf, to the hard-hearted Colonel, to the vindictive Sergeant Hanley, bullies are a constant presence throughout *Private*

Peaceful. The bullies in this novel are spiteful characters who seem incapable of kindness and whose actions—if left unchecked—can have devastating consequences: Hanley's cruelty for instance, when combined with his position of power, directly leads to Charlie's death. The novel thus underscores the danger in placing a cruel and manipulative person in a position of power.

Grandma Wolf is the first bully in Tommo's life. She is always cruel to Mrs. Peaceful's children, calling them names and making "nasty quip[s]" about their mother. She is especially mean to the innocent Big Joe, killing his beloved mouse and all of his other treasured pets. Even on happy occasions, such as

the birth of Molly's baby, Little Tommo, Grandma Wolf finds a way to make a spiteful comment, in this instance claiming that the baby has pointed ears.

Unfortunately for the Peaceful family, and for the inhabitants of their village, Grandma Wolf continues to gain more and more power throughout the story. When she leaves the Peaceful home, she moves up to the Colonel's grand estate and becomes the Colonel's mistress. She ends up in charge of much of the running of the estate, making the Colonel himself seem "gentle as a lamb," and using her power to make everyone on the estate miserable. Molly, who works at the estate, claims that she "hates it" because of the way the "Wolfwoman" treats everyone. She spends most of her time "ranting and raving" at everyone and punishing them for minor offences such as putting "salt in her tea instead of sugar."

The Colonel is another bully within the story who is nevertheless afforded a position of power, but the consequences of his authority are worse than those of Grandma Wolf's. A spiteful man from the beginning of the novel, he calls the children "lousy vermin" and "young ruffians," and fires Charlie from his job just for rescuing Bertha, an old dog who was going to be killed anyway. Eventually he shoots Bertha purely out of spite, just because he can, because he knows he holds sufficient power over the Peaceful family, in owning their cottage, that there is nothing they can do about it.

Perhaps the worst of his offences, though, is forcing Charlie to go to war, which will ultimately be the cause of Charlie's death. The Colonel orders Charlie to enlist, claiming that if he doesn't, he will kick the Peacefuls off the estate and fire them from their jobs working for him. Charlie cannot believe it, saying in shock, "He can't do it. He just can't," to which Molly, his girlfriend, replies, "he can. You know he can. And when the Colonel gets it into his head to do something, and he's in the mood to do it, he will."

The reader is aware at this point that the Colonel has a personal vendetta against the Peacefuls and is likely ordering Charlie to war just to hurt the family because he knows that Molly has just fallen pregnant. The malicious Colonel is able to enforce his spiteful will on the slightest of whims, illustrating the danger of awarding such a spiteful man with such apparently untouchable power.

The most serious case of abuse of power, however, comes in the form of Sergeant Hanley, who is horrifically cruel to Charlie and is ultimately personally responsible for Charlie's execution. Hanley instantly dislikes Charlie because he won't "jump through hoops" for the Sergeant like everyone else, and he forms a personal vendetta against Charlie that won't end until Charlie's death. Hanley is able to personally orchestrate Charlie's execution because no one questions his authority, and the other men involved in the trial listen only to Hanley's accusations, taking his word as gospel, instead of considering Charlie's defense. Through the figure of Hanley, Morpurgo

demonstrates the terrible consequences of allowing a bullying, malicious person into a position of utmost and official authority. Army officials were, and indeed remain, responsible for millions of lives. If the wrong person is awarded this power, sometimes the consequences can be fatal.



GRIEF, GUILT, AND FAMILY

Private Peaceful is in many ways a book about dealing with loss. As characters throughout the story find methods of coping, Morpurgo suggests

that the best way to work through loss is not to linger but to find some means of moving forward. Family is presented as an especially potent source of comfort and support in times of grief throughout the novel, yet the most important factor in healing is to stop blaming oneself for events beyond one's control. This is demonstrated through Tommo and his guilt for his father's death. Morpurgo shows that guilt is often a natural accompaniment to grief, but that healing is only possible when one rids oneself of this guilt—just as Tommo eventually learns that he must accept that his father's death was not his fault in order to move past it.

The death of Tommo's father is the first great loss of the novel. He is killed as he protects a young Tommo from a falling tree, which crushes him instead. At first, Tommo's family all find reassurance in their faith, in particular in their belief that their father has been reincarnated as the spirit of a swallow that appears in the church at the funeral. Big Joe in particular is deeply comforted by his unquestioning faith, believing indubitably that heaven exists and that his father will be "happy as the **birds**" in the afterlife.

Tommo, however, feels guilty for his father's death because he knows that he jumped under the tree to save Tommo. Tommo therefore cannot share in his family's comfort; instead, he feels he has a "horrible secret" and cannot bring himself to believe that his father is at peace nor to grieve properly for him as the rest of his family does. His guilt, then, directly inhibits his ability to heal.

Importantly, it is the reassurance and support of his family that ultimately helps relieve Tommo's guilt. After Charlie tells him that he was not to blame for their father's death ("It was the tree that killed Father, Tommo, not you"), Tommo is finally move past this early loss, one which had been haunting him since he was a child.

Tommo's own healing, in turn, helps him become a stronger source of comfort for others. Shortly before Charlie's own death, for example, Tommo does what he can to soothe his brother by telling him that he is not a coward, and certainly not "worthless" as the jury had claimed. This allows Charlie to face his death with dignity and peace and reiterates the power of accepting loss that is out of one's control.

Towards the end of the novel, Tommo proves his ability to move

past death without blaming himself. When he finds that the girl he is in love with, Anna, has died, he goes to mourn her, but then leaves once he has done so appropriately: "I knelt down and kissed the earth, then left her there." He could blame himself, as Anna's father in his grief blames Tommo for the war and tells him to leave him alone and "go to Hell." This time, though, Tommo understands that Anna's death is not his fault, and so despite his grief he is able to work through it.

The same is true when Charlie's death finally arrives. Again, Tommo could blame himself. After all, Charlie dies partly because he was trying to protect Tommo, who was injured at the time. But once again, Tommo is able to accept Charlie's death as being beyond his control, and after mourning his brother he again "turn[s] away and leave[s] him." Once Tommo is able to rid himself of guilt, he is able to move on from loss, and this is of great importance to Morpurgo's depiction of healing. There will always be ways to move on from grief, as long as one does not wrongly blame oneself for what has happened.



RELIGION AND FAITH

Private Peaceful begins with an optimistic impression of religion and spirituality. While Tommo is at home in England, he and his family

seem assured in their Christian faith—faith that, in turn, comforts them through times of loss and grief. Over the course of the book, however, Tommo's religious faith proves inadequate to deal with or explain the horrors of war. Eventually he decides that there is only earth and mankind after all, and that there is no point in trying to believe otherwise. Yet however initially traumatic, the dissolution of Tommo's religious faith is also accompanied by a newfound appreciation for his own experiences and memories—ultimately suggesting the value in focusing on and drawing strength from earthly life rather than some spiritual beyond.

At the beginning of the novel, at Tommo's father's funeral, the Peaceful family find comfort in their faith. Tommo's mother assures Big Joe that his father is "up there," pointing to heaven, and "as happy as the **birds**." The whole family believe that their father has moved into the afterlife in the form of a swallow which is present in the church at his funeral. Big Joe in particular carries his faith with him throughout the novel, which Tommo eventually envies. When Joe's dog, Bertha, is killed, he finds comfort in going to the **church tower** in his innocent and unwavering belief that this is the site of heaven itself. Tommo's home life is therefore associated with this simple belief in religion and spirituality.

When he journeys to France, however, and changes his "world of home for [a] world of war," Tommo's faith is shaken. This is exemplified in his early mention of the fact that even the church towers in France are mostly destroyed, and he has seen one in particular "hanging down like a broken promise." If church

towers at home in England are representative of the Peacefuls' faith, particularly of their belief in heaven, here in the war zone this faith is literally being destroyed.

At the moment when he believes that Charlie has just died in battle, Tommo admits that he has completely lost his faith. He claims that he can "no longer even pretend to [him]self that [he] believed in a merciful God, nor in a heaven, not any more." He admits that he envies Big Joe and his unrelenting faith. Instead, he can "believe only in the hell [he is] living in, a hell on earth, and it was man-made, not God-made."

Later, when Anna is killed, Tommo again confirms his lack of belief in any afterlife, but still wishes he could believe, just as he earlier envied Big Joe's faith. He wishes he could imagine Anna in "Big Joe's happy heaven," an innocent and naive "Sunday-school Heaven," but he knows that "she was lying in the cold earth at [his] feet." Once he has kissed the cold earth, he leaves Anna behind. The image of Tommo kissing the earth itself again demonstrates this transition from having faith in a mystical world beyond his own to one in the earthly reality before him.

Notably, as Charlie actually does die, both boys sing "**Oranges and Lemons**." The song, though technically about churches, is a non-religious prayer for them, evoking comforting thoughts of Big Joe, their family, and their home. That they prefer to focus in the end on these elements of their lives rather than any sort of spirituality points to the value and meaning to be found in secular life. Tommo even sends away the padre (the military chaplain who has been sent to offer comfort to Tommo) in an ultimate rejection of religion.

Eventually, Tommo stops wishing that he could maintain his prior religious faith altogether. Instead, he devotes himself solely to the earthly—that is, to his memories of Charlie. He wills himself not to wish: "Don't wish, Tommo. Remember. Remembrances are real." Where before religion may have been a crutch, it is now a hindrance to honoring the life his brother left behind. Tommo thus devotes his attention to the real, tangible memories of his brother, rather than fantasies about his life after death.



SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.



BIRDS

Throughout the novel, birds represent hope and belief in an afterlife. This symbol originates with the death of Tommo's father. He is killed as he rescues young Tommo from a falling tree, but at the funeral, the whole Peaceful family believe that he has been reincarnated as a swallow, which is swooping around the church. Big Joe gets up

to release the trapped swallow, and when he has done so, the whole family feel that the spirit of their father is now free and has moved into the afterlife. After the funeral, Mrs. Peaceful tells Big Joe that Mr. Peaceful is "up there" and "as happy as the birds." Tommo's father said more than once that "in his next life he'd like to be a bird, so he could fly free wherever he wanted." Thus, the symbol of the bird becomes a symbol of heaven to Tommo and his family.

Tommo carries this symbol with him into war. Even on the battlefield, Tommo still notices the birds in the midst of so much chaos and death. He notes that he has "even seen larks over no-man's land," and that he "always found hope in that." Later in the novel, in the aftermath of a horrific attack, Tommo realizes that the birds still sing: "There is one [dead soldier] lying in the wire with his arm stretched heavenwards, his hand pointing. He is one of ours, or was. I look up where he is pointing. There are birds up there, and they are singing. I see a beady-eyed blackbird singing to the world from his barbed-wire perch." Even in the midst of the dead, and from a barbed-wire perch, the birds still sing and consequently spread hope. In this passage they are also very clearly associated with heaven. The dead soldier who is pointing "heavenwards" is also, notably, pointing towards the singing birds.

Tommo loses his religious faith during the course of the war, but he still consistently mentions the fact that he finds hope in the birds he sees. During the war, the birds gradually come to represent something slightly different for Tommo than just a religious form of "heaven." Instead, the birds imply a different form of life after death, free of the dogma and ritual of organized religion. Every time that Tommo sees a bird, he is reminded of his father. In this sense, his father lives on with Tommo. This form of life after death is not religious, but it is still a significant source of comfort and hope for Tommo.

The symbol becomes particularly poignant upon the occasion of Charlie's death. Tommo hopes that there will be birds present at Charlie's execution, claiming that "it will be easier if there are birds." The birds, presumably, will help Tommo (and Charlie) to believe that there is hope for Charlie after his execution, and that he will happily and freely transition in a new life of some kind after his death, religious or otherwise. When Charlie has been executed, the novel touchingly ends with mention of the fact that "the birds are singing." The singing birds, as is the case earlier in the story, present a glimmer of hope at redemption for Charlie. They are a promise of hope at the end of an otherwise very bleak tale.



CHURCH TOWERS

Church towers in *Private Peaceful* symbolize heaven. This originates with Big Joe, because Mrs. Peaceful tells him at his father's funeral that Mr. Peaceful is "up there," pointing to the church tower, which Big Joe then

innocently takes to mean that heaven is situated in the tower itself. When Big Joe's beloved dog Bertha is later killed by the spiteful Colonel, Big Joe flees to the church tower because he thinks that this is where Bertha will be. It is therefore significant that when Tommo goes to France to fight in the war, the church towers he encounters are all destroyed. The warzone has literally eradicated the church towers, one of which hangs down "like a broken promise." This symbolically represents Tommo's lost belief in heaven. The things he has seen in the war have broken his faith, just as the war has broken the church towers themselves.



"ORANGES AND LEMONS"

The song "Oranges and Lemons" is a symbol of hope and strength, and most importantly a reminder of family. Big Joe always sings the song to himself for comfort, so it ends up comforting Tommo and Charlie too, because it reminds them of Big Joe and their home. The song also becomes a symbol of strength and solidarity for the Peaceful family, because it allows them to feel connected as a unit when they sing it. An early example is when the Colonel comes to the Peaceful cottage to try and fire Charlie for stealing his old dog (whom the Colonel was planning to shoot the next day), but is shown up by Mrs. Peaceful, who pays for the dog so that it is technically no longer stolen. As he leaves, the whole family sings "Oranges and Lemons" in their collective victory, and in defiance of the Colonel, making sure to sing loud enough that he will be able to hear them on his way out.

Later, Charlie and Tommo sing the song as they leave for the First World War in an effort to comfort themselves in their fear. It connects them not only to each other, but also to the family they have left behind, reminding them to be strong for everyone's sake. Most importantly, just before Charlie is executed, he and Tommo sing the song together. It reassures them both and affords Charlie the courage to face his death. At the moment of Charlie's execution itself, both boys sing "Oranges and Lemons" at the same time, knowing that they are connected because of this. It is all they can do in the face of Charlie's inevitable fate, but it seems to offer both some comfort and strength.



QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the HarperCollins edition of *Private Peaceful* published in 2003.

Chapter 1 Quotes

☞ He is on his back, his face turned away from me as if he doesn't want me to see. One arm is outstretched towards me, his glove fallen off, his finger pointing at me.

Related Characters: Thomas "Tommo" Peaceful (speaker), Tommo's Father / Mr. Peaceful

Related Themes:

Page Number: 9-10

Explanation and Analysis

This passage recounts Tommo's father's death, as he jumps in front of Tommo who is about to be crushed by a falling tree. Tommo's father is tragically killed instead. What is significant about the positioning of the body is that Tommo's father's finger is left pointing directly at Tommo. This is just an unfortunate coincidence due to the tree pinning him in a certain position (or perhaps Tommo's father was pointing for Tommo to get out of the way), but Tommo interprets his father's pointing finger as a symbol of Tommo being to blame for his death. If Tommo had only moved out of the way of the tree, his father would still be alive.

Throughout his later life, Tommo is haunted by the image of this pointing finger. He always feels personally responsible for the death of his father, and feels so guilty about it that he doesn't even dare to tell his family. Eventually he shares his secret guilt with Charlie, on the day before Charlie's execution. Charlie dismisses Tommo's guilt as "nonsense," and assures Tommo that he was not to blame for the death of their father.

☞ A swallow swoops over our heads all through the prayers, all through the hymns, flitting from window to window, from the belfry to the altar, looking for some way out. And I know for certain it is Father trying to escape. I know it because he told us more than once that in his next life he'd like to be a bird, so he could fly free wherever he wanted.

Related Characters: Thomas "Tommo" Peaceful (speaker), Tommo's Mother / Mrs. Peaceful, Big Joe Peaceful, Charlie Peaceful, Tommo's Father / Mr. Peaceful

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 10

Explanation and Analysis



At his father's funeral, Tommo spots a swallow flying around the church. He feels that the swallow is the spirit of his dead father, trying to escape the church and move into his next life, so that he can "fly free." All members of the Peaceful family smile knowingly at one another when the swallow flies out of the church, each wordlessly understanding that Mr. Peaceful is now free and happy in his next life. Later, Mrs. Peaceful tells Big Joe explicitly that his father is no longer in his coffin, but "in heaven up there (and) happy as the birds."

Because Tommo and his family all believe that Mr. Peaceful has become a bird in his next life, birds throughout the novel become a symbol of life after death. Mr. Peaceful wanted to be a bird so that he could fly free and happy, so this is what birds come to represent to Tommo. When Tommo goes to fight in the war, he always notices birds on the battlefield. This initially gives him hope that even amongst all the terrible deaths of war, there is still some chance of freedom and happiness in the next life. At the end of the novel, as Charlie is executed, there are birds singing. Morpurgo thereby seems to be suggesting that even though Charlie has met a tragic end in this life, he will be "happy as the birds" in his next existence.

Chapter 2 Quotes

☝☝ Big Jimmy gets it first, and he keeps crying out: "Ow, sir! Ow, sir! Ow, sir!" But when it's Charlie's turn, all we hear are the whacks, and then the silences in between. I am so proud of him for that. I have the bravest brother in the world.

Related Characters: Thomas "Tommo" Peaceful, Jimmy Parsons (speaker), Mr. Munnings, Charlie Peaceful

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 20

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Jimmy and Charlie are both punished for starting a fight. As they receive their punishment, Jimmy cries out, but Charlie remains stoically silent. Tommo is incredibly proud of Charlie for being so dignified and brave. This is the first time in the novel that the reader gets to witness Charlie's bravery. Charlie maintains this bravery throughout his entire life. He is never afraid to stick up for what he thinks is right, so he doesn't even think twice about protecting Tommo from Jimmy, even though he ends up getting the cane for it. Not only is he not afraid to stand up


for himself and others, but he is also always extremely dignified and brave as he receives punishment for his actions. As he is caned he is completely silent, whereas the more cowardly Jimmy cries out as he is struck.


Charlie will continue to bravely stick up for Tommo throughout the novel, even though he is often punished for it. When Sergeant Hanley causes Tommo to collapse from exhaustion, Charlie screams at him. He receives Field Punishment Number One for his insubordination, which involves being tied to a gun wheel, but as he is punished he does not complain. When Charlie is ultimately executed, it is because he refuses to leave Tommo's side when he is injured on the battlefield. As he dies, Charlie maintains his dignity and keeps his head held as high as ever.

Chapter 6 Quotes

☝☝ He told me once [...] that your father was up in Heaven and could still see us easily from where he was. He was pointing upwards, I remember, and I didn't understand exactly what he was trying to tell me, not at first. I thought he was just pointing up at the sky in a general sort of way, or at the birds maybe. But then he took my hand and made me point with him, to show me. We were pointing up at the church, at the top of the church tower. It sounds silly, but I think Big Joe believes that Heaven is at the top of the church tower.

Related Characters: Molly (speaker), Big Joe Peaceful

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 82

Explanation and Analysis



In this passage, Molly explains that Big Joe might believe that heaven is situated at the top of the church tower, and that he might be there looking for their dead dog, Bertha. The boys run to the tower, and sure enough, they find Big Joe curled up in a ball right at the top. It is a sign of Big Joe's endearing innocence that he believes that he might find heaven itself at the top of a church tower, and this belief represents his simple and unquestioning faith in everyone and everything. He thinks that heaven is in the church tower because his mother once vaguely pointed upwards to the church tower as she was telling Joe that his father was in heaven. Joe trusted his mother so wholeheartedly and simply that he took this to mean that his father and heaven were located in the church tower itself. Church towers


subsequently become a symbol of heaven throughout the novel.

Chapter 7 Quotes

☝ I was once told in Sunday school that a church tower reaches up skywards because it is a promise of Heaven. Church towers are different in France. It was the first thing I noticed when I came here, when I changed my world of home for my world of war. [...] There are not many steeples left now. I have seen the one in Albert, hanging down like a broken promise.

Related Characters: Thomas “Tommo” Peaceful (speaker)

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 87-88



Explanation and Analysis

When Tommo leaves England for France to fight in the war, one of the first things he notices is that the church towers in France are not only different to those in England, but also largely destroyed by the war. Church towers are a symbol of belief in heaven throughout the novel. This symbol originates with Big Joe, who innocently believes that church towers are the site of heaven itself after his mother tells him at his father’s funeral that Mr. Peaceful is “up there,” pointing coincidentally to the church tower.

The symbolic significance of church towers reappears when Tommo goes to France to fight in the war and finds that all of the church towers he sees there have been destroyed. The war has reduced the church towers, one of which hangs down “like a broken promise,” to nothing but rubble, stripping them of their former glory. This foreshadows the way that the war will constantly challenge and eventually destroy Tommo’s own Christian faith and belief in heaven.

☝ Suddenly someone prodded me hard in the small of my back. It was a toothless old lady pointing at me with her crooked finger. “Go on, son,” she croaked. “You go and fight. It’s every man’s duty to fight when his country calls, that’s what I say. Go on. Y’aint a coward, are you?”

Related Characters: Thomas “Tommo” Peaceful (speaker)

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 97

Explanation and Analysis

Tommo has stopped in a nearby village to watch the British Army march in. When Tommo hesitates to enlist (he is only fifteen), an old woman harshly accuses him of being a coward. During the First World War, young men received immense pressure to go and fight for their country and their dignity. This scene illustrates this pressure, which is depicted as being an unfair burden on young and innocent boys. The old woman is a complete stranger to Tommo, but still she feels compelled to instruct Tommo to risk his life in the war. Worse still, she then accuses him of cowardice when he chooses not to enlist. Tommo is too young to enlist in the first place, so she really has no right to be telling him to fight anyway, but it is shocking to a reader that she could happily place such a heavy burden on a young man’s shoulders. Her callous words remain in Tommo’s mind for a long time, and actually end up compelling him to fight. He later says that the main reason he signs up for war is “that toothless old woman taunting me in the square.” The old woman makes Tommo believe that he is a coward, and he vows to prove her wrong: “I had to prove myself. I had to prove myself to myself.”

☝ “He wouldn’t do that, Moll. It’s just a threat,” Charlie said. “He can’t do it. He just can’t.”

“He would,” Molly replied, “and he can. You know he can. And when the Colonel gets it into his head to do something, and he’s in the mood to do it, he will. Look what he did to Bertha. He means it, Charlie.”

Related Characters: Molly, Charlie Peaceful (speaker), The Colonel

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 101

Explanation and Analysis

The Colonel has just spitefully decided that Charlie must enlist for war, and in this passage, Molly explains to Charlie that the Colonel certainly can and will follow through with forcing Charlie to fight. The Colonel’s combination of having plenty of power over the Peacefuls and plenty of spite towards them proves deadly in this case. He is a cold-hearted man, and it is well understood that he hates Charlie, because Charlie stole the Colonel’s dog. The Colonel has had it in for Charlie ever since, and now he finally gets the


chance to send Charlie away. Unfortunately, because the Colonel holds so much power over them, there is nothing the Peacefuls can do about it. The Colonel is able to act on the slightest of whims, as Molly points out, because there is nothing or no one to hold him accountable for his cruel actions. In this case, Charlie will ultimately die in the war, and it is technically the fault of the Colonel. He well understands the risk of death when he sends Charlie away.

Chapter 9 Quotes

☝☝ We had a brew up with our prisoner in the dugout before they came for him. He smoked a cigarette Pete had given him. He'd stopped shaking now, but his eyes still held their fear. We had nothing to say to one another until the moment he got up to leave. "*Danke*," he said. "*Danke sehr*."

"Funny that," Nipper said when he'd gone. "Seeing him standing there with not a stitch on. Take off our uniforms and you can hardly tell the difference, can you? Not a bad bloke, for a Fritz that is."

Related Characters: Thomas "Tommo" Peaceful (speaker), Nipper Martin, Pete Bovey

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 137-138

Explanation and Analysis

Tommo and his company bring back a German prisoner when they go to attack the German trenches. As they spend time with the prisoner, the British soldiers realize that he is not so different from them as they might have first thought. Morpurgo implies throughout the novel that the German soldiers who were supposedly the British enemy were actually not so different from the British themselves. Many German soldiers, and many British soldiers for that matter, were just frightened young men like this German prisoner, who perhaps never wanted to fight in the first place. All the young men enjoy a cup of tea together, and Pete and the German share a cigarette. They seem relatively happy in each other's company, and as the German leaves, he thanks Tommo and his friends for looking after him, even though they technically just took him prisoner. Nipper comments on the fact that the German was naked when they first captured him, noting there was no visible difference between the German and the British without their uniforms on. Earlier, Tommo also notices that the German is praying, and that he calls God "by the same name" as Tommo does. The British and the Germans therefore also have religion in common. In other words, these young men are not so

different from each other at all. They simply happen to have been born in different countries.

Chapter 10 Quotes

☝☝ I feel a surge of triumph welling inside me, not because we have won, but because I have stood with the others. I have not run.

"*Y'aint a coward, are you?*"

No, old woman, I am not. I am not.

Related Characters: Thomas "Tommo" Peaceful (speaker), Charlie Peaceful

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 146



Explanation and Analysis

Tommo has just fought in a battle against the German soldiers, which the British won. After the battle, Tommo is exceedingly proud of himself for his own bravery. His concern is not with winning or losing the fight; in fact, he never mentions wanting to win the war at any point during the book. His primary reason for enlisting in the first place was to prove the old woman wrong who accused him of cowardice for hesitating to enlist in the war. This is why he now imagines himself answering her, telling her that he is not a "coward" after all.

Tommo is haunted throughout the novel by the idea that he is a coward, but this particular incident helps to reassure him otherwise. Throughout the novel, Tommo's bravest moments stem from either proving the old woman wrong, or to proving himself to Charlie, whose courage has always inspired Tommo. Tommo enlists for war when Charlie does, for example. Here, it seems to be a mixture of the two: he is directly inspired by Charlie, but is glad to have proved the old woman wrong in the process.

☝☝ From then on, every waking hour of every day, Hanley was at us. [...] By the time we went back up into the line, Hanley snapping at our heels, his voice had become a vicious bark inside each of our heads. Every one of us hated him like poison, a great deal more than we had ever hated Fritz.

Related Characters: Thomas "Tommo" Peaceful (speaker), Sergeant "Horrible" Hanley

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 156

Explanation and Analysis

This quote is about Sergeant Hanley, who has just become the new commander of Tommo's company. Hanley is a vicious and heartless man, who constantly punishes and berates the men. They are only supposed to be at rest camp at the moment, so there is really no need for punishment. By the time they leave to head back to the front line, Tommo claims that they actually hate Hanley far more than they ever hated the enemy they were supposed to be fighting against (Fritz is a derogatory term for Germans).


Hanley is so heartless that he is portrayed here as being non-human. He certainly seems to have very little humanity in him. Tommo portrays him first as a vicious dog, "snapping" at the men's heels and barking inside their heads. Then Hanley is likened to poison, which is a fairly dark and disturbing image given poison's associations with death. This image of Hanley as poison might therefore hint at Charlie's later execution, which Hanley orchestrates. Of course, it is also deeply ironic that a company commander should be more hated than the enemy itself. A war hardly seems worth fighting if the men hate their own sergeants more than they hate the enemy soldiers.

Chapter 11 Quotes

☝☝ I looked up at the church steeple, a dark arrow pointing at the moon and beyond, and tried with all my heart and mind to believe she was up there somewhere in that vast expanse of infinity, up there in Sunday-school Heaven, in Big Joe's happy Heaven. I couldn't bring myself to think it. I knew she was lying in the cold earth at my feet. I knelt down and kissed the earth, then left her there.

Related Characters: Thomas "Tommo" Peaceful (speaker), Big Joe Peaceful, Anna

Related Themes:   

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 171-172

Explanation and Analysis

Tommo has just discovered that Anna, the waitress he has a crush on, was killed by a stray explosion while she was collecting eggs. Her death seems to be the last straw in

destroying Tommo's religious faith. He desperately wants to believe that Anna is in heaven, but finds he can't bring himself to think such things anymore. The idea of heaven now seems naïve and foolish to Tommo, demonstrated when he calls it "Sunday-school Heaven" and "Big Joe's happy Heaven." This innocent idea of heaven simply cannot face up to the horrors that Tommo has witnessed in the war. Anna's death in particular seems so cruel and arbitrary that Tommo struggles to imagine a God who would allow such a thing to happen. When Tommo claims that he "couldn't bring himself to think" of Anna in heaven, it is almost as if he feels that pretending Anna is in heaven would be a disservice to the tragedy of her death. There is nothing happy or hopeful about Anna's death, so Tommo refuses to pretend otherwise. This is why he respectfully kneels and kisses the earth, and then leaves Anna behind.

Chapter 12 Quotes

☝☝ "The whole court martial took less than an hour, Tommo. That's all they gave me. An hour for a man's life. Not a lot, is it? And do you know what the brigadier said, Tommo? He said I was a worthless man. Worthless. I've been called a lot of things in my life, Tommo, but none of them ever upset me, except that one. I didn't show it, mind. I wouldn't have given them the satisfaction."

Related Characters: Charlie Peaceful (speaker), Sergeant "Horrible" Hanley, Thomas "Tommo" Peaceful

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 188

Explanation and Analysis


Charlie has been sentenced to death at a court martial (a military trial) for disobeying Hanley's orders and instead staying with the severely wounded Tommo. The court martial, however, was completely unfair and cruel, and this passage reflects Morpurgo's sharp criticisms of the British Army's legal system. All of the judges had already decided that they would declare Charlie guilty before Charlie even had a chance to sit down, or speak in his own defense. The only other person present at the trial was the terrible Sergeant Hanley, because Charlie's only possible witness was Tommo, and as Charlie's brother this was deemed too biased. The whole process, as Charlie says, took less than an hour. As Charlie rightly points out, the fate of a man's life should not be decided in less than an hour. These judges treated Charlie's life as disposable, and now he will die for

their heartlessness.

The worst thing about Charlie's account of the court martial is that he claims one of the brigadiers called him a "worthless man." The brigadier had already sentenced Charlie to death, and he had absolutely no need to then torment Charlie even further. This demonstrates not only the unprofessionalism of the men in power, but also their undeniable cruelty.

☞ It is the moment. I have to do it now. It is my last chance. I tell him about how Father had died, about how it had happened, what I had done, how I should have told him years ago, but had never dared to. He smiles. "I always knew that, Tommo. So did Mother. You'd talk in your sleep. Always having nightmares, always keeping me awake about it, you were. All nonsense. Not your fault. It was the tree that killed Father, Tommo, not you."

Related Characters: Charlie Peaceful, Thomas "Tommo" Peaceful (speaker), Tommo's Father / Mr. Peaceful, Tommo's Mother / Mrs. Peaceful

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 189

Explanation and Analysis

On the day before Charlie's execution Tommo finally reveals to Charlie how guilty he feels about their father's death. Tommo has carried this horrible secret with him throughout his entire life, and it has plagued him with guilt. He has never been able to properly move on from his father's death. In fact, he felt so guilty that he never dared tell anyone, until he finally plucks up the courage to confess to Charlie in this scene.


Charlie's reaction is everything that Tommo needed to hear. He needed someone to dismiss his guilt as "nonsense" and to reassure him wholeheartedly that it was not his fault that his father was killed. Charlie even smiles when Tommo tells him his secret, illustrating that he clearly doesn't think Tommo is to blame for the death. With the support of Charlie, Tommo feels a great burden lifted, and can finally begin to move past his father's death. Morpurgo thus demonstrates just how vital family can be in helping to recover from guilt and grief.

Chapter 13 Quotes

☞ They tell me he walked out with a smile on his face as if he were going for an early-morning stroll. They tell me that he refused the hood, and that they thought he was singing when he died.

Related Characters: Thomas "Tommo" Peaceful (speaker), Charlie Peaceful

Related Themes:    

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 194-195

Explanation and Analysis

This quote is a description of Charlie's execution. Charlie was as characteristically brave as ever, and faced his death with utmost dignity. He even walked out with a smile on his face, just as he once endured Hanley's Field Punishment Number One while still smiling at Tommo. He wouldn't wear the executioner's hood as he died, as he wanted to look up at the sky instead. Tommo also looks up at the sky as Charlie dies, as he knows Charlie will be doing the same, and he wants to feel connected to him in his final moments. Perhaps most remarkably and courageously of all, Charlie was singing as he was killed.

Tommo knew that this is how Charlie would die. He understood his brother well enough to know exactly how he would face his death. When Tommo is told that Charlie was singing as he died, he knows that Charlie was singing "Oranges and Lemons." Big Joe always used to sing the song at home, and over the years it became something of a Peaceful family anthem. The Peacefuls often sang the song in times of fear or sadness, and it helped them all to feel comforted by its associations with their family. Tommo sings the song as Charlie dies, so the two boys are connected right up until Charlie's final moments. Charlie's bravery and resolve in the face of his death inspire Tommo to be brave too. After Charlie dies, Tommo becomes determined to survive the war so that he can go home and look after Molly and her baby (aptly named Little Tommo), just as he promised Charlie he would do.



SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

CHAPTER 1: FIVE PAST TEN

An unnamed man (later revealed to be named Tommo) decides that he must stay awake for the whole night. He can't dream or sleep because "every moment" is "far too precious" to waste. Instead, he wants to remember "everything, just as it was." He claims to have lived for nearly "eighteen years," and he wants to remember them all on this particular night.

Many years earlier, when Tommo is about five years old, Charlie (Tommo's brother) is walking Tommo to school for the first time. Tommo is dreading going to school. He has not only heard all about the terrible teacher Mr. Munnings and his "raging tempers," but to add to Tommo's discomfort, he is being forced to wear a stiff new collar and heavy boots as part of his new school uniform.

Big Joe (Tommo and Charlie's other brother) has never had to go to school, which Tommo thinks is very unfair, given that Big Joe is much older than him and Charlie. Instead, Big Joe gets to stay at home with the boys' mother. He spends most of his time sitting "up in his tree singing **Oranges and Lemons**, and laughing." Tommo says that "Big Joe is always happy, always laughing," and that Tommo wishes he could be as happy as Big Joe.

Charlie offers Tommo a piggyback ride to make him feel better. Charlie always understands when Tommo is feeling upset, and he "always knows how it is." He is three years older than Tommo, so Tommo thinks that "he's done everything and knows everything." Charlie is also very strong, giving Tommo a piggyback all the way to school.

Tommo sees a dead crow "hanging from the fence" and guesses that it has been shot. He doesn't pity the crow. He doesn't like crows, because a crow killed the robin eggs that Tommo had been looking after in his garden a few months ago.

The narrative does not explain why this particular night is so special, or why Tommo should want to stay awake for every second of it. The reader does gather, however, that an eighteen-year-old named Tommo will be telling this story, and that it will likely be based on the events of his life so far.



This transition back into Tommo's childhood is quite sudden within the narrative, encouraging readers to fully immerse themselves in this earlier tale of a young Tommo heading to school with his brother.



It is not clear at this point in the book exactly who Big Joe is, or why he doesn't have to go to school, but he seems like a sweet and happy boy. Tommo later explains that Big Joe has had brain damage since he was a baby, but at this point, Morpurgo wants to introduce Big Joe simply as the happy young man that he is.



Charlie and Tommo obviously have a very deep level of understanding between one another. Charlie doesn't need to ask Tommo whether he is upset; Charlie just knows. What's more, he knows that a piggyback will make Tommo feel better, adding a playful dynamic to the boys' relationship.



The dead crow hanging from the fence is a disturbing image in the midst of what is otherwise quite a sweet story of two brothers heading to school. This suggests that there will be a bit more darkness in this story than perhaps otherwise expected.



Tommo then thinks about his garden, and remembers burying his dead father's belongings in the ground there. All of Tommo's father's things were buried in the garden after he died, including his pipe, boots, scarf, and gloves. Tommo buried the gloves, but looking at them made him feel terrible and guilty, because they reminded him of a secret about his father's death, which Tommo claims he can "never tell" the rest of his family.

The narrative slowly reveals the details of Tommo's father's death. At first, all the reader knows is that the father's belongings are buried in the ground, but soon it becomes clear that this is because he has died. Morpurgo doesn't yet reveal why the sight of his father's gloves makes Tommo feel so guilty, building the suspense of the novel.



Back on the journey to school, Charlie tells Tommo that the first day of school will be tough, but in general school is "not so bad. Honest." Tommo doesn't believe him—every time Charlie says the word "honest," it's because he's lying. However, Charlie promises to look after Tommo when they get there. Tommo believes that part, because Charlie "always has" faithfully looked after Tommo.

It becomes clear here just how close the brothers are. Tommo knows Charlie well enough to guess when he is lying, but he also trusts Charlie completely when he promises to look after Tommo. He has no reason not to believe Charlie when he tells Tommo that he will look after him, because he has always protected him.



They arrive at school, and the children line up in two rows in the schoolyard. Mr. Munnings "cracks his knuckles," and everyone falls silent. He spots Tommo, the only new boy, and warns him that at school, Mr. Munnings is Tommo's "lord and master." Tommo nervously mutters that he understands.

The cruel Mr. Munnings is the first example of a bullying presence in Tommo's life. Mr. Munnings' belief that he is Tommo's "lord and master" seems ridiculous, but it illustrates the corrupting influence of power.



The children are ushered into their respective classes, with Tommo in the younger "Tiddlers" class and Charlie in the older "Bigguns" class. When he is separated from his brother, Tommo feels "truly alone."

Tommo feels "truly alone" for the first time in his life when he is separated from Charlie at school, once again emphasizing the tight-knit bond that the brothers share.



Tommo's shoelaces are undone, and his teacher, Miss McAllister, tells him to tie them. Tommo doesn't know how to tie his own laces, so the teacher asks the girl sitting next to him, Molly, to help. Molly ties up Tommo's laces, and then smiles at him. Tommo finally relaxes, as he can already tell he will be friends with Molly.

Molly is a great source of comfort to Tommo from the moment they meet. Tommo knows from one smile that they will be friends, suggesting a special understanding between Tommo and Molly from the very beginning of their friendship.



Tommo remembers his father. He recalls how it was just the two of them in the woods on the day of his father's death, the day "when the tree came down." Tommo's father was a woodcutter, and sometimes Tommo would join him when he went to work. Tommo would ride on the back of his father's horse with him, and when they arrived in the woods, his father used to tell Tommo to run off and enjoy himself. Tommo would play with the insects and plants. On this particular day, he started carefully burying a dead mouse under a tree.

This passage, which recounts the death of Tommo's father, is suspenseful and poignant. This scene in the woods seems fairly idyllic so far, but the reader knows that something bad is about to happen, because this is the fateful day of Mr. Peaceful's death.



Suddenly, Tommo hears a sound above him and realizes that a tree has started to sway. It is going to fall. His father tells him to “Run, Tommo!” but Tommo finds that he is paralyzed by fear. Tommo sees his father running towards him, grabbing Tommo and throwing him out of the way of the tree. Tommo loses consciousness, and it is only when he wakes up that he realizes his father has been crushed by the tree and is dead. Because of the way his father is positioned on the ground, it seems like his finger is pointed directly at Tommo. Tommo interprets this as a sign that he is to blame for his father’s death, as if the finger is pointing the blame at Tommo. Tommo takes his father’s gloves from his hands and goes for help.

At the funeral, Tommo, his mother, Big Joe and Charlie sit on the front row. Their father’s coffin is placed in front of them. A swallow swoops around the church throughout the funeral service, and Tommo claims that he knows that the spirit of his father is contained inside the **bird**, and that it is “trying to escape.” His father had often told him that he wanted to be a bird in his next life “so he could fly free wherever he wanted.” Big Joe gets up and opens the door to release the bird. Once he has done this, and the swallow has escaped, Tommo knows that “Father is happy now in his next life.” Tommo knows that all four members of his family “are thinking the very same thing,” because they all smile at each other knowingly.

The Colonel steps up to the pulpit to make a speech about Tommo’s father, James Peaceful. During the speech, Tommo thinks of all the things his father used to say about the Colonel: mostly that he was a “silly old fart,” and sometimes names that were “much worse.” Tommo’s mother had always warned the family that the Colonel paid their father’s wages, so they should respect the Colonel if they “knew what was good” for them.

When everyone is gathered round the grave, Tommo wishes that the vicar would stop talking so that Tommo’s father could hear the **birds** singing one last time. Tommo’s mother tells Big Joe that his father is “not really in his coffin anymore” but “in heaven up there,” and “happy as the birds.”

As the family walks home after the funeral, Tommo reflects on his “horrible” secret: that he has “killed [his] own father.” If his father hadn’t been trying to save Tommo from the falling tree, he wouldn’t have died. Tommo decides that he can never tell anyone the truth, because he feels too guilty.

The reader experiences events through Tommo’s eyes, feeling his terror as the tree begins to fall towards him, and then his ensuing horror as he realizes what has happened to his father. Because the reader has experienced Tommo’s emotions alongside him, it makes it easier to understand why he might later feel guilty for his father’s death. If Tommo had been able to move out of the way of the tree, his father wouldn’t have had to sacrifice his life in order to save his son. Tommo’s guilt is illustrated in the fact that he sees his father’s finger pointed directly at him, as if pointing to Tommo as the cause of his death. The book implies that the pointed finger is just an unfortunate coincidence, but it compounds Tommo’s guilt and trauma.



The idea that birds might be representative of happiness and freedom after death is referred to throughout the book, but it is first introduced here. The notion originates with Tommo’s father, who always claimed that he wanted to be a bird in his next life, because to him, birds represent freedom and happiness. It is remarkable that the whole Peaceful family seems to be thinking the same thing in the church, all believing that the spirit of Mr. Peaceful is within the sparrow without even having to explain it to one another. This collective thought emphasizes that the family is incredibly close, even in the midst of tragedy.



It is ironic here that the Colonel, whom Mr. Peaceful hated, is making the speech at Mr. Peaceful’s funeral. The scene demonstrates that people in positions of power (such as the Colonel) are often the ones who people listen to, even though they might not be the best person for the job at hand.



Tommo cares more about the birds singing than he does about the vicar’s prayer, demonstrating that Tommo’s version of religion at this stage has less to do with dogma and ritual and more to do with nature.



This is the first time that it is made explicitly clear just how responsible Tommo feels for his father’s death. His guilt is hinted at before, with the image of Mr. Peaceful’s finger pointed at Tommo, but here Tommo expresses it himself for the first time.



CHAPTER 2: TWENTY TO ELEVEN

The present-day Tommo isn't hungry. He thinks to himself that it is a good job that Grandma Wolf (Tommo's great aunt) isn't with him, because she would be angry at him for not finishing his dinner.

When Tommo and Charlie were a bit older, their mother revealed to them that Big Joe had suffered from meningitis soon after he was born. The disease nearly killed him and left him with permanent brain damage. Tommo describes how when he was growing up, all he and Charlie knew was that Big Joe "was different," but they still loved him unconditionally. His differences didn't matter to them; he was "just Big Joe," regardless of the fact that he couldn't speak very well, read or write, or think like the other children. Big Joe loved "everything and everyone," especially animals, and was "totally trusting, always forgiving." Their home and their lives "always revolved around Big Joe," and the boys would form their opinion of other people based on how kindly those people treated their big brother.

Tommo recalls one evening when the three boys, Charlie, Tommo, and Big Joe, had just gone fishing and were walking home afterward. The Colonel rode by on his horse, and completely ignored Big Joe, who was trying to say hello to him. Charlie blew a raspberry at the Colonel in response, and Big Joe innocently copied Charlie, but got carried away and started blowing lots of raspberries because "he liked rude noises." The Colonel stopped and shouted at the boys: "I'll teach you, you young ruffians!" Tommo claims that he thinks this was "the moment the Colonel began to hate us," and that the Colonel had wanted to get revenge on the boys ever since.

Back at school, a boy named Jimmy Parsons has just insulted Big Joe in front of Tommo, for which Tommo has tried to start a fight Jimmy. Tommo is losing the fight, but Charlie swoops in and grabs Jimmy Parsons and starts fighting him instead. Mr. Munnings finds Charlie and Jimmy fighting and orders them both "six strokes" of the cane. Everyone in the schoolyard listens as Jimmy Parsons cries out "Ow, sir!" Charlie, on the other hand, bravely endures his punishment in silence. Tommo thinks that he has "the bravest brother in the world" because of this. Everyone in the school admires Charlie, too.

Exactly why Tommo is not hungry is still unclear, but he must be nervous, or dreading something that will be happening the next morning.



Big Joe's "differences" are hinted at in the first chapter of the novel, because the reader is told that he doesn't attend school with Tommo and Charlie. Here, however, they are made explicitly clear. Nevertheless, it is not Big Joe's differences that are important to Tommo and Charlie. Instead, he is simply their kind, happy, and loyal brother. They didn't need to ask questions about his condition; they just accepted him for who he was. Anyone who treated him badly was not worth their time.



Big Joe has been described as an innocent and sweet-natured boy in the opening of this chapter, so it makes the Colonel seem all the more cruel when he ignores Joe. The Colonel then shows even less understanding and acceptance of Joe when he shouts at him for blowing raspberries. Everyone else can understand that Big Joe never means any harm, he just gets carried away with the fun of the rude noises.



Tommo does not seem like one for picking fights, but he clearly loves Big Joe so much that he can't stand anyone making fun of his big brother. Much like Tommo tries to protect Joe, Charlie also comes to protect Tommo from Jimmy, underscoring that the brothers are all fiercely loyal to one another. When Charlie and Jimmy are punished, the difference in their reactions proves just how brave Charlie really is.



Molly comes over to Tommo after the fight and carefully cleans up his wounds. She then tells Tommo that she likes Big Joe, because he's kind. Tommo is thrilled and knows at this point that he "will love [Molly] till the day" he dies.

Again, Tommo and Molly seem to implicitly understand one another without really having to explain themselves. Molly knows that Tommo will be happy to hear someone sticking up for his brother, and Tommo loves her for this.



From this moment on, Molly practically becomes one of the Peaceful family. She comes home with Tommo and Charlie nearly every day after school, and it seems like she never wants to go home. Even the boys' mother loves Molly "like the daughter she'd never had."

It seems remarkable that Molly becomes an honorary member of the Peaceful family so quickly, making the reader wonder why she never wants to go back to her own home. It also demonstrates the special kindness of the Peaceful family in accepting Molly.



One day there is a knock at the door, and Tommo's mother seems to be expecting it. The Colonel arrives, and asks to talk to Mrs. Peaceful in the garden. The boys eavesdrop as he tells Mrs. Peaceful that the cottage, strictly speaking, was tied to Mr. Peaceful's job, and that technically the Peacefuls "have no right" to live there anymore in the wake of Mr. Peaceful's death. The Colonel offers a solution: if Mrs. Peaceful comes to work for his wife as her lady's maid, the family can remain in the cottage. As the Colonel leaves, Mrs. Peaceful cries, and the children gather round to comfort her, singing "**Oranges and Lemons**" loudly so that the Colonel can hear them.

This incident demonstrates how cold the Colonel can be. It is only days after the death of Mr. Peaceful, but the Colonel is still happy to come around and tell Mrs. Peaceful that he will evict her family from their home if she does not come and work for him. The children, however, stick up for their mother. They can see how upset she is, so they sing the song "Oranges and Lemons" as a means of defiance against the Colonel. Big Joe sings the song all the time, so it becomes something of a family anthem, and when they all sing it together, they prove to themselves and the Colonel how strong they can be as a family.



Tommo's mother has no choice but to take the job, so the only relative the Peacefuls have is called on to help look after the children. Grandma Wolf moves into the cottage to look after the house and children. She is technically Mrs. Peaceful's aunt, but insists on being called "Grandma" because she doesn't like the term "Great Aunt." The children secretly call her "Grandma Wolf," after the wolf posing as a grandmother in *Little Red Riding Hood*, because they think it suits her cruel and vicious personality. She is extremely strict, but what the children really can't stand is how "nasty" she is to Big Joe. She treats him "as if he were a baby," always telling him not to sing at the table (which he loves to do), and smacking him if he disobeys her.

The children take their hardship in their stride, injecting a sense of humor into the situation with Grandma Wolf by giving her this comical nickname. This is their way of coping with her cruelty. Like the Colonel, Grandma Wolf doesn't seem to understand Big Joe. She treats him cruelly, whereas the other children understand that the best way to deal with Big Joe is to be kind to him and accept his idiosyncrasies and little rituals, such as singing "Oranges and Lemons" at the dinner table.



The family's "whole world change[s]" when Grandma Wolf moves in. The boys barely see their mother because she was working so much, and Big Joe and everyone else are miserable because of Grandma Wolf's cruel regime. Grandma Wolf even seems to be pushing Mrs. Peaceful aside, and goes so far as to criticize Mrs. Peaceful in front of the children, telling them that she has been "nothing but trouble" her whole life, for instance.

The fact that Grandma Wolf is happy to criticize Mrs. Peaceful in front of her own children proves how nasty she really is. The situation for the Peaceful family seems especially hopeless at this point in the novel, as Grandma Wolf seems to be gaining more influence than ever.



CHAPTER 3: NEARLY QUARTER PAST ELEVEN

In the present day, the teenage Tommo finds that there is a mouse sitting next to him. The mouse leaves, and Tommo wishes it would come back but resumes the recollections of his childhood.

Grandma Wolf “hate[s] mice.” She is terrified of them, and so the boys are happy in winter when the house becomes home to lots of mice sheltering from the cold. Grandma Wolf fights an endless battle with the mice by setting traps for them, but Big Joe loves the mice and leaves food out for them. Grandma Wolf punishes him, but he never understands what he is doing wrong, so he carries on, and the mice continue to seek shelter in the house.

All autumn, Grandma Wolf only catches one mouse, and the children throw a grand funeral for it. They all sing hymns and “**Oranges and Lemons**” and bury the mouse at the bottom of the garden.

While Grandma Wolf seems to hate the boys, she likes Molly. She claims that Molly has been raised well, by which she really means that Molly has been raised “strictly.” Tommo says that Molly’s mother and her father are indeed very strict, and often send her to her room or beat her for minor reasons.

On Big Joe’s birthday, Molly brings him a special present. It is a little brown box with air holes in it, and when Big Joe finally opens it, he finds a perfect harvest mouse inside, which he immediately falls in love with. The children tell him that he must keep it very safe and away from Grandma Wolf, in a drawer in his room. Big Joe loves collecting pets, but the mouse is his favorite of all the pets he has ever had.

Not long afterwards, the boys come home from school one day to find Big Joe crying, and his drawer empty. Grandma Wolf is screaming that she will not allow “any nasty dirty animals in her house,” and the children realize that she has killed Big Joe’s beloved mouse. Molly shouts at Grandma Wolf, telling her that she is a “cruel, cruel woman” who will “go to Hell.”

Tommo is so desperate for company that even a mouse seems a better option than remaining alone.



The children take great pleasure in seeing Grandma Wolf fighting a losing battle against the mice. It is uncommon to see her afraid of anything, but the mice seem a rare exception to this rule. Grandma Wolf continues to demonstrate how little she understands Big Joe by continually punishing him for feeding the mice, when he has no idea what he is doing wrong.



“Oranges and Lemons” again acts as a symbol of defiance for the children against their enemies—in this case, the cruel Grandma Wolf.



Molly’s parents seem much like Grandma Wolf in their approach to raising children. They both punish children for the slightest of reasons and are constantly strict. This is clearly not a good way to parent, as Molly spends as much time away from her own house as she can.



Molly not only demonstrates her genuine kindness, but also her special understanding of Big Joe when she gives her birthday present to him. The children also demonstrate how well they understand Grandma Wolf when they warn Big Joe never to let her see the mouse, as they know that she will kill it if she does.



Grandma Wolf finally demonstrates the extent of her cruelty when she kills Big Joe’s beloved mouse. She doesn’t even try to sympathize with Joe, as even when he is completely distraught, she continues to shout. Molly seems to have picked up the characteristic Peaceful bravery, and isn’t afraid to stand up to Grandma Wolf about what she has done.



Soon, though, “a miracle happen[s],” and Grandma Wolf leaves the children for good. The Colonel’s wife dies, so Mrs. Peaceful has no reason to keep working for the Colonel anymore. Grandma Wolf moves back out to the village, and the children’s mother can finally be home to them.

For a period of time, however, the family has no income, given that Mrs. Peaceful is no longer working. Everyone is getting hungry, so Charlie, Molly, and Tommo decide to go poaching on the Colonel’s land. It is Charlie’s idea, and he knows how to catch fish (and some land animals if they happen to be lucky), so he sets the traps while Molly and Tommo keep watch. They don’t tell their mother where they get the food from, but they catch a lot of rabbits and fish, and the family is much better fed.

Eventually the Colonel turns up at the cottage again, but this time he has good news: because the Colonel’s wife had been so fond of Mrs. Peaceful, she had made the Colonel promise to look after the Peaceful family if anything should happen to her. The Colonel is therefore obliged to let the Peacefuls keep their cottage. He also employs Mrs. Peaceful to do his linen and sewing work, most of which she can easily do from the comfort of her own home. Everyone is thrilled that not only will Mrs. Peaceful remain at home, but that they will finally have some money and a secure place to live.

The best news of all is that the Colonel asks Grandma Wolf to go back to work at the “Big House” as a live-in housekeeper, which keeps her far away from the children. Grandma Wolf had previously been fired after a disagreement with the Colonel’s wife, but now that his wife has died, the Colonel wants Grandma Wolf back. Grandma Wolf is thrilled, and feels very full of herself because of her job offer.

Tommo, Charlie and Molly often roam the countryside after school. They swim and race through the fields, but Tommo often feels left out, given that he is the youngest by two years. Molly and Charlie sometimes leave him behind and run off without him, which makes him feel miserable.

One day, Molly and Charlie take off all their clothes and go swimming together, but Tommo feels too embarrassed to join them. Eventually, a few days later, Tommo decides to take the plunge and join them, and it never bothers him after that. All three of the children generally have great fun together, and Molly declares that they should never leave each other.

Tommo and the other children hate Grandma Wolf so much that they regard her leaving as a “miracle.” Tommo often uses religious language like this throughout the narrative, gesturing back to his religious upbringing.



The children are resourceful in hatching this plan to poach on the Colonel’s land. Even though it is technically wrong, they know that the Colonel has more than enough food on his land to be able to spare a little going missing, not to mention the fact that they hate the Colonel by this point, so they don’t mind doing wrong by him occasionally.



This turn of events demonstrates that Mrs. Peaceful’s kind and caring nature sometimes rewards her with the kindness of others. Because the Colonel’s wife was so fond of Mrs. Peaceful, Mrs. Peaceful won her affections, and is now rewarded for this by getting to keep her house. Morpurgo therefore implies that it is always good to be kind to others, as this unconditional kindness can be repaid in unexpected ways.



The narrative does not explain quite why Grandma Wolf was previously fired from her position as housekeeper at the estate, but the job offer certainly inflates her ego this time. It was likely something to do with the Colonel’s wife, given that not long after her death the Colonel invites Grandma Wolf back into her position.



Charlie and Molly running off without Tommo is a very literal illustration of their growing up without Tommo and leaving him behind. Because the narrative is told from Tommo’s perspective, the reader also gets a sense of feeling left out, making it easier to empathize with him.



Although all of the children are still very young when this event occurs, it is the first slight hint at a more grown-up kind of love that might be developing between the children.



Everything goes well for a year or two, until Molly falls ill. The boys learn that she has scarlet fever and try to visit her at her home, but Molly's parents turn them away. They seem angry at the boys for some reason, and Tommo thinks how miserable Molly must be in "that dingy little cottage with a mother and father like that." They all pray that she will recover soon.

When Tommo and Charlie go to visit Molly's cottage, they realize why she never liked going home for all those years, preferring to stick around at the aptly named Peaceful cottage instead. Even her house seems miserable, let alone her parents.



CHAPTER 4: TEN TO MIDNIGHT

Back in the present, the teenage Tommo claims that he's "not sure [he] ever believed in God," even as a child in Sunday school. He would look at Jesus on the cross and think how much he must be hurting, and couldn't understand why God wouldn't help him. Still, Tommo decides that he shouldn't think these thoughts, because tonight he "very much" wants to believe in God and in heaven.

This is the first occasion that Tommo expresses any major religious doubt in the novel. His background seems thoroughly religious, so it is surprising to learn that even as a child he was not sure whether or not he believed in God. The narrative still doesn't explain what is so special about this particular night, or why Tommo now so desperately wants to believe in heaven.



One evening, Charlie and Tommo go poaching, but they have to go without Molly, as she is still ill with scarlet fever. It is the first time they have gone without her, and Tommo finds being on lookout so dull without her company that he falls asleep. The next thing he knows, a dog is at his face, and old Lambert, the Colonel's bailiff, is pulling him up and shouting at him. Lambert marches Tommo and Charlie up to the Big House "at the point of a shotgun" and takes them to the Colonel and Grandma Wolf. Grandma Wolf calls the boys "a downright disgrace," and "common thieves," and then the Colonel calls them "young ruffians" and promises to beat both of the boys the next day as punishment.

It is perhaps telling that the first and only time that the boys go poaching without Molly, they get caught. It was apparently only Molly's constant company that meant that Tommo could stay awake on lookout before. Now that Molly is no longer there, he is bored and falls asleep. Again, both Grandma Wolf and the Colonel show a lack of understanding and sympathy for the boys, and the Colonel's proposed beating of the boys seems disproportionately cruel for their minor (and well-intentioned) crime.



Charlie and Tommo return home and tell their mother everything, to which she promises that the Colonel will not beat the boys, not "over [her] dead body." She is upset and angry, but she knows deep down that the boys were trying to help, and decides that cleaning out the Colonel's kennels will be punishment enough. The next day she visits the Colonel's house, and true to her word manages to persuade him against beating the boys. Instead, they will clean out the kennels every weekend until Christmas.

Mrs. Peaceful is fiercely loyal and protective of her children. She also has enough common sense to realize that the boys didn't mean anything terrible by poaching on the Colonel's land, they were just doing it out of necessity. No one knows how she manages to persuade the Colonel not to beat the boys, but it is a remarkable achievement given the Colonel's usual stubbornness.



The boys take to their punishment quite happily, as they like the company of the hunting hounds in the kennels. They have a particular favorite, a dog named Bertha. Tommo claims that Bertha's big eyes are the same color as Molly's, so she reminds him of her.

It is telling that one of the reasons that Tommo gives for liking Bertha so much is the fact that her eyes are the same color as Molly's. It also proves that he has studied Molly's eyes rather closely.



On the last weekend of their punishment, the boys return home to find Molly waiting in their house. Her hair is shorter, and Tommo says that “she wasn’t a girl any more. She had a different beauty now, a beauty that at once stirred in me a new and deeper love.”

Again, Tommo starts feeling left out with Charlie and Molly, because they are outgrowing him. Molly moves up to Charlie’s older class at school, and eventually, both Charlie and Molly leave school altogether. Tommo is stuck in class, but both Charlie and Molly start working up at the Colonel’s “Big House,” which is where most people from the village work. Molly is an “under-parlor maid,” and Charlie starts working in the hunt kennels full-time.

Tommo barely sees Molly anymore because she works so much, and when he does see her she seems different, “more like a little mother to [him] than a friend.” All Molly and Charlie talk about now is the Big House, and Tommo realizes that he is no longer part of their world. One day, he sees Charlie and Molly walking away from him while holding hands, and feels “a sudden ache” in his heart, which he claims is a “pang” of “deep grief.”

Tommo recalls one rare occasion when he felt like a “threesome” with Molly and Charlie again. The three have just been fishing in a field, when suddenly they hear an engine. In amazement, they realize that a yellow airplane is flying above them, and they watch the pilot waving at them from the cockpit. The plane then lands in the field, only “fifty yards” away from them, and the pilot asks where he is. Charlie directs him to the next village, and as thanks, the pilot gives the children some humbugs candies. After he flies off, the three sit in the grass in shock. They can’t believe what just happened, but they suppose that at least they have the humbugs to prove it. Molly says that every time she eats a humbug from now on, she will think of “the three of us, and how we are right now.”

Tommo has his humbugs confiscated at school, and the spiteful Mr. Munnings gives him six strokes of his ruler as punishment for having them in class. Tommo is very proud of himself because he is brave as he is punished, looking Mr. Munnings “in the eye” and staring him down defiantly. He longs to tell Charlie about his little victory, but feels like Charlie doesn’t care about anything that happens at school anymore.

Molly’s new and “different” beauty is illustrative of her becoming more of a woman. The new and “deeper” love that Tommo feels is a more grown-up kind of love as a result of this.



It is unfortunate for Tommo that he is stuck in school while Charlie and Molly move into jobs at the Colonel’s estate. This change in the children’s lives demonstrates how a lot of relationships are based on convenience—simply being able to see a lot of one another, and being in the same place at the same time. It is not that Molly or Charlie like Tommo any less, it is just that they are transitioning into different stages of their lives while Tommo has to remain a little way behind them.



When Tommo sees Molly and Charlie holding hands, he understands that they have truly grown apart from him, and the “deep grief” he feels is not only for the loss of his childhood, but also for his dreams of being in love with Molly. He realizes Molly and Charlie are falling in love with each other instead.



Only a remarkable adventure with a yellow airplane is enough to bring Molly, Charlie, and Tommo back together again, because it distracts them from the realities of their actual lives and allows them to escape into a land of fun and frivolity, like they did when they were younger. The airplane is also notably a very early hint of war in England. At around this time, the First World War was getting underway, but it was yet to reach the rural countryside lives of Tommo and his family.



Just as Charlie once bravely endured his punishment by Mr. Munnings, Tommo now faces his punishment with bravery, too. He is silent as he is struck by the ruler, just as Charlie was silent when he was getting the cane a few years before. It seems that Charlie inspired Tommo to be brave in facing Munnings, foreshadowing the way Charlie will inspire Tommo to be brave in an even more significant way.



That night, Charlie tells Tommo that he's in big trouble. He has stolen Bertha the dog, because the Colonel said that he was going to shoot her the next day. Apparently, Bertha is too old and slow to be of use anymore. Charlie asked the Colonel to save Bertha, but he refused, so Charlie rescued her instead, and hid her in a shack in the woods.

This incident demonstrates that Charlie is not afraid to stand up for what he believes in if he feels that it is right. Even though the Colonel will inevitably punish Charlie for stealing Bertha, he cares for her strongly enough that he rescues her anyway.



CHAPTER 5: TWENTY-FOUR MINUTES PAST TWELVE

Back in the present, the teenage Tommo remarks that since he's "been out here," he hasn't seen any foxes, though he's heard plenty of owls. He has "even seen larks over no-mans'-land," and this has always given him hope. He resumes narrating the stories of his childhood.

The reader knows from the first chapter of the novel that birds represent the promise of life after death for Tommo, which is why they give him hope here. The mention of "no-mans'-land" is one of the first explicit clues that Tommo might currently be fighting in a war.



Charlie wakes up the next morning, insistent that he won't tell the Colonel of Bertha's whereabouts, no matter what happens. Suddenly there is a knock on the door. Mrs. Peaceful opens it to find an angry Colonel. She is confused, because Charlie hasn't yet explained to her what he has done. The Colonel rants at the family, calling Charlie a "despicable thief" and accusing him of stealing Bertha. He demands to know where Bertha is, but Charlie doesn't tell him. Mrs. Peaceful realizes that Charlie has taken Bertha in order to save the dog, so she calmly defends Charlie by offering the Colonel some money for the dog. She claims that if it has been paid for, it's not stolen. The Colonel begrudgingly agrees and retreats, but fires Charlie from his job. The boys all celebrate wildly when the Colonel leaves, and are full of praise for their mother.

Again, Charlie proves his bravery by refusing to tell the Colonel where Bertha is. He knows that the Colonel will kill the dog if he finds her. Even though he loses his job for it, Charlie isn't afraid to stand his ground. Mrs. Peaceful is also courageous in this scene, perhaps demonstrating where Charlie got his own courage from. Mrs. Peaceful sticks up for her son even though the Colonel holds a lot of power over her family. The Colonel could even evict them from their cottage if he wanted to, but Mrs. Peaceful, like Charlie, won't bend to his bullying, and eventually she succeeds in getting him to leave. The boys respect their mother for her courage, celebrating with her as the Colonel leaves.



Charlie shows his family where Bertha is hidden, and the dog immediately takes a liking to Big Joe. In fact, after that day, she follows him everywhere. Big Joe is thrilled to have a new friend.

Big Joe seems to have a natural affinity with animals, demonstrated by Bertha's particularly dedicated love for him. Bertha sweetly following Big Joe around darkly foreshadows Big Joe trying to follow Bertha to heaven after her death.



Charlie eventually finds a new job at Farmer Cox's farm, which is just past the village. The teenage Tommo interjects that Charlie should have been happy there, as he loved the animals and the freedom from the Colonel. However, Charlie isn't happy, and neither is Tommo, because Molly has stopped visiting. Mrs. Peaceful is sure that someone must have told Molly's parents about the situation with the Colonel and Charlie, and warned them not to let Molly see Charlie anymore.

Molly is apparently the main source of happiness in both Tommo and Charlie's lives, as neither boy is happy when she stops visiting them. Unfortunately, Molly's parents seem to have minds as narrow as the Colonel's, as they will all happily turn against Charlie even though he was only doing what he thought was right in stealing Bertha.



Charlie keeps trying to see Molly. He visits her cottage, but Molly's parents won't even answer the door. One day, Charlie sends Tommo with a letter instead. Molly's mother opens the door and shouts at Tommo, telling him to leave and claiming that they don't want his "kind" anywhere near their daughter.

As he is turning to leave, Tommo spots Molly frantically waving to him from a window. She sneaks out, and they meet down the hill by the brook. Molly is crying and tells him the whole story about how the Colonel came to their cottage and called Charlie a thief, and told Molly's father that they shouldn't let Molly see Charlie anymore. She tells Tommo how miserable she is, but her father said he would kill Charlie if he ever goes near Molly. Tommo kisses her on the cheek, and Molly hugs him as she sobs.

Tommo gives Molly the letter, which she opens, and tells Tommo to say "yes" to Charlie in response. Suddenly she looks excited again, and she kisses Tommo quickly and says goodbye.

Over the next few months, Tommo delivers dozens of letters between Molly and Charlie, which he doesn't mind as it means he gets to see Molly frequently again. During most of Tommo's visits, Molly talks about Charlie, though she also talks about the news of war. She read in the paper that England might be going to war with Germany, and everyone is talking about it, although Molly doesn't understand what any of it means.

Soon, Tommo leaves school, and his mother arranges for him to go and work on Farmer Cox's farm with Charlie. Tommo is much happier; he gets to see more of Charlie, and Charlie no longer treats him as a little boy, but as more of an equal.

Charlie is certainly persistent and never afraid to stand up for what he wants and what he feels is right. Molly's mother proves herself to be very judgmental of the Peacefuls, given that she won't even let Tommo speak before turning him away.



Molly's parents are perhaps even stricter than first imagined. Molly seems too afraid of them to leave the house unless she does so in secret, and she seems like a prisoner in her own home as a result. When she tells Tommo that her father has threatened to shoot Charlie, Tommo and the reader realize just how grave the situation is. If Charlie wants to see Molly he will perhaps be risking his life to do so.



Molly's sudden reaction to the letter is unexplained, as neither Tommo nor the reader know what the letter said. It must have been a question, but the reader is left to consider what the question may be, though it probably won't be good news to Tommo.



Tommo is deeply trusting of Charlie and Molly. He unquestioningly goes along with their letter-sending, just because it means that he gets to see Molly again and be involved in his brother's life. Tommo never seems the least bit interested in what their letters might say. Again, war seems to be creeping in on the village, but still seems very removed from the characters' personal realities.



Leaving school seems to be the key to improving Tommo and Charlie's relationship. The moment that Tommo leaves, he somehow seems more of an adult, and thus more of an equal to Charlie.



One day, Tommo and Charlie return home to find Molly and Molly's mother waiting for them at their house. Molly looks as though she has been crying, and her mother presents Charlie with a stack of letters he has sent Molly. She found them in Molly's possession, and both Molly's father and mother have read them all. She calls Charlie's behavior disgusting, and then declares that she knows that Charlie and Molly have been meeting, too. Tommo feels completely betrayed, as he had no idea about these meetings. Mrs. Peaceful sticks up for Molly and Charlie, saying she doesn't see anything wrong with them meeting, and that they're old enough to decide for themselves if they want to see each other. Molly's mother angrily storms out, claiming that she won't have Charlie lead Molly into "wickedness and sin."

Tommo is so angry and hurt at the news that he doesn't speak to Charlie all night, at least until Charlie admits to him that he should have told him about meeting Molly. The reason he couldn't tell Tommo, Charlie says, is that he knows, as Molly knows, that Tommo is also in love with Molly. Charlie tells Tommo that he loves Molly as well, and that he intends to carry on seeing her. The two boys never talk about Molly again.

Shortly after this, Bertha the dog starts going missing occasionally. No one knows why, but everyone gets worried about her and tries to keep her from wandering off. One afternoon, Bertha goes missing for a long time, and Tommo, Big Joe and their mother go looking for her. As Tommo is about to give up, he hears a gunshot "ringing out across the valley." He races up the path and sees the Colonel standing over a blood-soaked Bertha with a gun in his hand. He has killed her. The Colonel is standing outside Mr. Peaceful's disused shack, from which Charlie and Molly have now emerged together. Molly screams at the Colonel, asking him in horrified disbelief why he would do such a terrible thing.

CHAPTER 6: NEARLY FIVE TO ONE

Teenage Tommo remembers how when he was younger, he would turn coins in his hand because he thought that this would grant him a wish. He now wishes that he could still "believe" "in all those old tales." Instead, he reminds himself that it is better not to wish, but to "remember" instead, because "remembrances are real."

Molly's mother and father seem exceedingly judgmental of Charlie and Molly's relationship, and have no respect for their daughter and how she might feel. They even read all of Molly's love letters to Charlie, which seems like an exceptional breach of privacy. Mrs. Peaceful is far more reasonable and sensible about their relationship, and seems to correctly realize that if Molly and Charlie want to meet each other, very little can be done to stop them. Tommo comes out of the situation seeming quite naïve, as it hadn't even crossed his mind that Charlie and Molly might be meeting up without him.



Charlie, Tommo, and Molly all understand each other so well that they know without even discussing it that Tommo is in love with Molly as well. Charlie also knew how upset Tommo would be at the news of Molly and Charlie's relationship, although he could have handled the situation better and broken it to Tommo sooner.



It is clear that the Colonel has killed Bertha the dog out of spite, just because he knows he can get away with it. He never forgave Charlie for stealing the dog, or Mrs. Peaceful for making him look foolish by paying for the dog. His bitterness has now led him to kill Bertha, because he knows how fond the Peacefuls are of her. If there was ever any doubt as to the Colonel's cruelty, there is none now. Another notable detail of this scene is that Charlie and Molly are discovered in Mr. Peaceful's old shack, where they have obviously been meeting together in secret.



Tommo hints here that he has lost faith in anything which he can't be certain is real, implying that he has lost his spiritual faith. Instead, he feels that he should now place his faith into memories, because he knows that at least some good will come from remembering.



The family buries Bertha on the same day that she is killed. It is not like the animal funerals of their childhood, because everyone is silent, horrified, and “too angry to grieve.” Mrs. Peaceful assures Big Joe that Bertha is up in heaven now.

Bertha's funeral provides a striking contrast to the relatively sweet funerals the children used to throw for animals in their childhood. This funeral is representative of a new, bleaker reality, and a transition away from their childhood innocence.



That evening, Big Joe goes missing. Everyone is beside themselves with worry, and they desperately try to find him, but to no avail. The whole village eventually joins the search, but they don't find Big Joe overnight, and by the next afternoon everyone is on the brink of giving up hope. Molly suddenly has a thought about where Big Joe “would most want to be,” which, she concludes, would be with Bertha. Molly explains that Big Joe told her once where “Heaven” was. He was pointing upwards, at the sky she thought, but now she realizes that he might have been pointing at the **church tower** itself. She now thinks that Big Joe believes that heaven is literally inside the church tower.

Bertha's earlier disappearance is a dark foreshadowing of Big Joe's later disappearance. It is only thanks to Molly's perceptiveness and keen understanding of Big Joe that she manages to solve the mystery of his whereabouts. Only those close to Big Joe would know that he might be innocent and trustful enough to believe that heaven itself was actually located within the church tower, and that he would want to go there to be with his beloved Bertha after her death. From this point on, church towers become a symbol of the afterlife within the novel.



Everyone races to the **church tower**. Charlie falls over, so Tommo goes up first, and eventually reaches the top of the stairs, where he finds Big Joe curled up under the parapet. He is “deathly cold,” and doesn't move when Tommo shakes him. Tommo thinks he has died, but suddenly Big Joe wakes up and smiles at him. Tommo calls down to Charlie, and the boys all cheer ecstatically. Then Big Joe starts singing “**Oranges and Lemons**,” and they all join in, “crying and singing at the same time.” The boys ring the church bells to let everyone know that Joe has been found.

Morpurgo builds up the suspense in this section of the narrative, leading the reader to believe that Big Joe has died. Big Joe appears dead in the church tower because he is so cold and still. It is not until he wakes up and smiles that it becomes clear that he is in fact alive. Because the reader only views events through the eyes of Tommo, they share in his terror that his brother might have come to a tragic end, and then in his relief when he is reunited with Big Joe.



CHAPTER 7: TWENTY-EIGHT MINUTES PAST ONE

Tommo remembers how he was once told in Sunday school that a **church tower** is “a promise of Heaven,” because it reaches up towards the sky. When he came to France to fight in the war, however, the church towers he encountered were mostly destroyed. One of them hung down “like a broken promise.”

It is significant that when Tommo arrived in the warzone of France, he found the church towers destroyed like a “broken promise.” Church towers represent heaven in the novel, so these broken towers represent the fact that the war will shatter Tommo's belief in the afterlife.



After Big Joe is found, everyone in the village (or so it seems) flock to the pub to celebrate. Everyone seems to suddenly be friends with one another, brought together through their shared relief and joy. Even the Colonel and the “Wolfwoman” (Grandma Wolf) join in, and later give the Peacefuls a lift home in the Colonel's Rolls Royce. Everyone is shocked by this act of rare kindness.

It is remarkable that everyone in the village comes together so harmoniously when they find Big Joe. Big Joe and the Peaceful family are obviously well-loved within the village, and everyone is therefore thrilled when he is found. Even the Colonel and Grandma Wolf seem miraculously mellowed by the celebrations.



On an evening a few weeks later, Tommo and Charlie come home from work to find Molly crying in their house, being comforted by the boys' mother. The boys are surprised and confused. Their mother explains that Molly has "come to stay." Her parents have thrown her out of her house, because she is pregnant. Mrs. Peaceful has told Molly that she's family now, and that she can stay however long she likes. Charlie doesn't say anything for a while as he takes in the news, but then he promises Molly wholeheartedly that he will stand by her and the baby.

Charlie and Molly are married shortly afterwards in the village church, although only the close family and the vicar show up. News of Molly's pregnancy has spread through the village, and there is no celebration after their wedding, just a "cup of tea and some fruit cake" at home.

Tommo finds that he avoids spending time with both Charlie and Molly after the wedding, as he no longer knows what to say to them. He wants to hate them, but finds he can't. He feels instead that he no longer has a place in his own home, and would be "better off away, and away from them in particular."

One day, Tommo is in a nearby village when he comes "face to face with the war for the first time." Up until then, Tommo and his home have remained largely untouched by the war. On this particular day, however, the army comes into a nearby village, hoping to recruit soldiers for the war. Tommo is entranced by the display: by the soldiers in "scarlet uniforms" and their grand marching band. He stops to watch, and the sergeant major points to all the young men, Tommo included, and encourages them to enlist.

When the display is over, Jimmy Parsons, the bully from Tommo's school days, goes up to enlist. Others follow him. Suddenly a toothless old woman standing behind Tommo jabs him and tells him to enlist, saying "Y'aint a coward, are you?" Tommo quietly leaves, hoping no one will notice, but the old woman spots him and shouts "Chicken!" after him.

At this point it becomes clear just how heartless and cruel Molly's parents truly are. They are willing to kick their own daughter out of their house and reject her completely due to her accidental pregnancy. Nevertheless, while Molly's family demonstrate their cruelty, the Peaceful family demonstrate their kindness by welcoming and supporting Molly with open arms. Charlie is obviously shocked at first, but he overcomes his fear to support Molly.



The village is deeply disapproving of Molly's pregnancy, because she has conceived so young and out of wedlock. This story is set in the early twentieth century, when such traditional views were the norm.



Tommo seems to feel more sad than angry at Molly and Charlie. He is sad because he feels abandoned by his childhood companions, and because he also loves Molly but now will never get the chance to be with her.



The army display in the village is the first real and inescapable sign of war in Tommo's life. The army is deliberately portrayed here as being impressive and grand, with the soldiers in their "scarlet uniforms" and the big band playing. It seems very enticing to Tommo as a result of this, which is why he stops to watch. Morpurgo will gradually overturn this grand image of the army as the novel progresses.



Young men at the time of the First World War faced an immense amount of pressure from other people to enlist, as is demonstrated here. Even an old woman whom Tommo has only just met combatively criticizes Tommo for not signing up.



As Tommo runs away he reconsiders what he's just seen. He is filled with shame at himself, and thinks how impressed everyone would be if he did enlist to fight. By the time he arrives home, he has decided that he will enlist in the army. But as he sits down for dinner, and mentions the fact that he saw men enlisting that day, his family immediately dismiss his ambitions before he's even had a chance to voice them. Charlie offhandedly criticizes the enlisting soldiers, pointing out that he's "never even met" a German, so he feels no desire to kill a German. Mrs. Peaceful tells Tommo that he's too young to fight anyway. Tommo is a little disappointed, but secretly quite relieved that he won't have to go to war.

A few weeks later, the Colonel shows up at the Peaceful cottage again. The boys don't know what the Colonel has said until Molly tells them that he has decided that every able man on his estate should enlist for war. More specifically, he has decided that Charlie must enlist, otherwise he will evict the Peacefuls from their cottage, and fire Molly and Mrs. Peaceful from their jobs. Charlie can't believe the Colonel would do such a thing, but Molly reminds him that he "can," and he will. As she tells Charlie, "When the Colonel gets it into his head to do something, and he's in the mood to do it, he will."

Charlie accepts his fate, saying that he's been feeling guilty about not enlisting recently anyway. Tommo immediately decides that he will go with Charlie. At not even sixteen, Tommo knows he is technically too young to fight, but thinks he could pass for the required age of seventeen if he tried.

Tommo doesn't know why he made this decision looking back on it, but he supposes it was a mixture of things: partly that he couldn't stand being apart from Charlie, and partly the "spark" of patriotism ignited within him by the marching band. But most of all, he thinks it was because of the old woman calling him a coward. He felt the need to prove that this wasn't the case, and to prove his own bravery to himself.

Only two days later, Charlie and Tommo leave for the war. Charlie thanks Tommo for coming with him as they leave, and they never mention Tommo's joining him again.

The old woman's words clearly resonate in Tommo's mind and make him feel guilty about not enlisting. Calling Tommo a "chicken" makes him see himself as a coward, and he now feels the need to prove otherwise by enlisting into the army. It is clear that he doesn't really want to enlist, because he actually feels quite relieved when he realizes that his family wouldn't expect him to fight anyway. He would only have been signing up for the sake of proving the old woman wrong, which perhaps doesn't seem like the best reason to risk one's life.



The Colonel is a prominent example in this story of a cruel person who abuses their power. Just because he has control over the Peaceful family (he owns their cottage and employs Molly and Mrs. Peaceful), he feels he can tell them to do and force them to bend to his whims. Unfortunately, the Peacefuls know that there is nothing they can do about this. What's worse is that the Colonel is likely forcing Charlie to enlist purely out of spite, because he has a personal vendetta against Charlie after the Bertha incident.



Charlie is courageous as ever, and bravely accepts his fate. Tommo then demonstrates that he, too, is becoming a very brave young man, by deciding that he will join Charlie in the war. This is especially brave given that Tommo has a good excuse not to fight if he didn't want to, as he is technically too young to enlist anyway.



The old woman in the village has shamed Tommo into risking his life in the war. Here, Morpurgo demonstrates how much of an impact words can have on people. Tommo is even willing to risk his life to prove the old woman wrong: he needs to prove to her that he is not a coward.



Once again, Charlie and Tommo don't need to speak much to be able to understand each other. Both boys already know how much it means to Charlie that Tommo is coming to fight with him.



CHAPTER 8: FOURTEEN MINUTES PAST TWO

Tommo looks closely at his watch. Charlie once told him that it was a “wonderful watch,” but Tommo doesn’t think it is; if it were a truly wonderful watch, it would “make the time” instead of just counting it. Tommo wishes time would stop, instead of just ticking away.

Tommo and Charlie meet Sergeant “Horrible” Hanley at their training camp in France. Hanley “ha[s] it in for Charlie” from the very moment that the Peacefuls arrive, because Charlie refuses to “jump through hoops” for the arrogant Hanley as everyone else does. As a result, Hanley often calls Charlie names (such as “lousy vermin”) and punishes him for his behavior.

Tommo remembers when he enlisted with Charlie. He stood up tall, trying to pass for seventeen, and Charlie introduced them as twins. The soldier eyed Tommo a little suspiciously, but allowed him to sign up anyway.

After enlisting, Tommo and Charlie are sent to an initial training camp at Salisbury Plain in England, where they are reunited with a few familiar faces from their village: Nipper Martin (a “little fellow” who was a turnip farmer), Pete Bovey (a well-built thatcher and avid cider drinker), and Les James (a rat-catcher). They have fun at the training camp, as nothing is taken too seriously, and the thought of real war seems very distant. The officers try to warn the trainee soldiers of the danger they are about to face, but none of it seems real. In hindsight, Tommo describes the camp as feeling like a “dress rehearsal” for some distant play, with all the soldiers as actors.

From the moment the boys boarded the ship for France, “the good times ended.” Even the journey is hellish, as Tommo and Charlie and most of the others are struck with violent seasickness. As they finally get off the boat, they see thousands of the “walking wounded” waiting to be taken back to England. Some of them smile and give words of encouragement, but most of them are silent and grim-faced. At this moment, the boys never again doubt the gravity of what the war will hold. Tommo realizes that all of their lives are at stake.

It is still yet to be revealed what is happening to Tommo on this particular night, or why he might want time to stop instead of passing him by. Morpurgo continues to build the suspense.



Sergeant Hanley is another example of an arrogant and spiteful man in a position of power, much like the Colonel. In further similarity with the Colonel, the Sergeant cannot stand Charlie, because Charlie is not afraid to stand up for himself. He refuses to submit to the Sergeant as the other men do.



Morpurgo here seems to be criticizing the British Army for knowingly allowing underage soldiers to enlist for war. The soldier suspects that Tommo is too young, but lets him in anyway.



The fact that Tommo and Charlie run into a few of their friends from home makes their first training camp seem almost cheery, like a fun reunion of some kind. They certainly don’t seem too removed from their home at this point, and the thought of war in France seems a long way off. In fact, Tommo feels so detached from any real sense of the danger of the war that he later imagines all of the soldiers as being like actors in some grand play.



It is notable that from the very moment the soldiers embark on their journey to France, their world becomes hellish. If the journey in itself is terrible, this is surely a bad omen for what is to follow. The true sense of the horror of war only sinks in properly, however, when Tommo sees the battle-worn soldiers waiting to return to England. These soldiers were probably once young and eager just like Tommo, but are now leaving with their spirits completely crushed.



The boys then arrive at their French training camp in Etaples, and this is where they meet Sergeant Hanley, who is in charge of their company. He is “not a big man” but he has “eyes of steel that bore into [them], and a lashing snarl in his voice that terrifie[s] [them].” Everyone is scared of him, and does whatever he commands for fear of what would happen if they refused. Everyone, that is, except for Charlie, who won’t even laugh at Hanley’s jokes.

One day, Hanley tells Charlie that he is a “blot on creation” and then asks him, “what are you?” Charlie replies, “Happy to be here, Sergeant,” for which he gets put on extra sentry duty, meaning he barely gets any sleep. After this first incident, Hanley maintains a personal vendetta against Charlie. Charlie, however, refuses to back down.

As a result of his profound dislike of Charlie, Hanley starts picking on Tommo, too. By now, everyone in the company knows that Tommo was not Charlie’s twin, but his little brother, and that Charlie is very protective of Tommo as a result. Hanley must know this too, because he keeps finding reasons to punish Tommo unnecessarily.

Tommo soon becomes exhausted from all the punishments and extra sentry duty. One day, Hanley accuses him of having a dirty rifle barrel, and orders Tommo to run five circuits of the ground with his rifle above his head. Tommo is so exhausted that collapses after only a few circuits, but he recalls hearing a shout before losing consciousness. When he awakes, he is told that Charlie broke ranks and charged at Hanley, shouting at him and letting him know “exactly what he thought of him.” “Everyone cheered” when Charlie finished, but Charlie was immediately “marched off to the guardroom under arrest.”

As punishment, Charlie is ordered to “Field Punishment Number One,” which means being tied to a gun wheel and left there. The brigadier claims that Charlie got off lightly, and that mutiny can be punished by death. Charlie takes his punishment with dignity, making a point of holding his head high and smiling at Tommo whenever he passes. Tommo is upset seeing Charlie being punished. Charlie reminds him of Jesus hanging on the cross. Tommo sings a hymn that he used to sing in Sunday school: *What a friend we have in Jesus*, to “banish his tears as [he] marched. He replaces any mention of Jesus with Charlie’s name, singing “What a friend I have in Charlie.”

Morpurgo here demonstrates that it is not necessarily physical size or strength that is significant in a bully. Sometimes their personality can be vicious enough to scare anyone. Charlie is characteristically defiant in dealing with Hanley, however. He never gave in to bullies in his youth, and he doesn’t seem inclined to start doing so now.



Charlie’s unwillingness to go along with Hanley’s “joke” might seem a little pointless here, as he gets himself into trouble for no good reason, but his defiance of Hanley is a point of principle for Charlie. Charlie clearly feels it is important that people like Hanley are put in their place once in a while, so their power doesn’t go completely to their heads.



Here Morpurgo again implicitly criticizes the British Army. If soldiers were too young to fight, they shouldn’t have been let into the army, and they certainly shouldn’t have been allowed to stay if it was obvious that they were underage.



It becomes clear here that Hanley is an excessively spiteful man. He is happy to take out his personal anger towards Charlie on Tommo, just because Tommo is Charlie’s brother, and despite the fact that Tommo has barely done anything wrong. Charlie clearly despises Hanley for this, and this is why he feels the need to break ranks to go and scream at Hanley when Tommo collapses.



Charlie is presented as a martyr in this scene, to the extent that Tommo is reminded of Jesus himself hanging on the cross when he sees Charlie hanging from the wheel. Again, Charlie demonstrates his commendable bravery and dignity, and makes a point of taking his punishment with his head held high. In comparing Charlie to Jesus, Morpurgo explicitly presents his courage as being especially admirable.



CHAPTER 9: A MINUTE PAST THREE

Tommo finds himself falling asleep, but wills himself not to. “After this night is over,” he tells himself, “you can sleep forever, for nothing will ever matter again.” He then decides to keep himself awake by singing “**Oranges and Lemons**” the way Big Joe always used to.

Back at training camp, the company are told that they will be going up “to the front”; they are all relieved because this means that they will be leaving “Etaples and Sergeant Hanley forever.” Their new captain is called Captain Wilkes, and he often encourages the men to sing to boost their morale. Wilkes was a choirmaster at home. As they march to the front line in Belgium, the boys become almost cheery from the singing. Soon Tommo and Charlie start singing “**Oranges and Lemons**,” and everyone else joins in. Tommo can’t believe the contrast between Wilkes and Hanley. Wilkes is very considerate and kind to the men, so they treat him with equal respect.

The company are heading for a quiet sector, so everyone is quite relieved. In fact, all Tommo has seen of the enemy so far is a group of disheveled German prisoners. He claims they “seemed much like us, only dirtier.”

The company are released from camp one evening, and they head to the nearby village of Poperinghe (“Pop”) to an *estaminet*, which is like a pub. Wilkes claims it serves “the best egg and chips in the entire world,” and all of the boys have a wonderful time there, eating and drinking “like camels filling up at an oasis.” The daughter of the owner smiles at Tommo as she serves him, and the others tease him for it, but he continues to think about the girl that night. Still, he finds that her face keeps turning into Molly’s in his mind.

The next night, the company go up to the front line. They have to be silent as they crawl through the mud towards their dugout. Other soldiers are heading back the other way, and the “haunted, hunted look in their eyes” says everything that Tommo needs to know about what he is going up against.

Tommo’s experience on the front line is, at first, a quiet one. Day after day, his company waits for a sign of German shelling, but it never seems to come. Tommo is “almost disappointed” by the lack of action.

It is still unclear what has happened to Tommo in these opening passages of each chapter, but “Oranges and Lemons” here reminds Tommo of his home and Big Joe, and comforts him because of this.



It is deeply ironic that the soldiers are so happy to be going into the battlefield because they know it will be better than facing Sergeant Hanley one day longer. Captain Wilkes, in contrast to Sergeant Hanley, brings the best out of the soldiers, demonstrating that a strict regime is not always the most effective one. Instead, Wilkes demonstrates that respecting and nurturing his subordinates can actually be a much more positive approach to leading. No one disobeys Wilkes—not even Charlie—because they all respect him.



Tommo already sees the similarities between himself and the German soldiers he is fighting, showing his capacity to empathize with others.



The visit to the estaminet provides a rare treat for the soldiers, but Tommo seems most excited about the beautiful girl he meets there. It is significant, of course, that when he tries to think about the girl, her face keeps turning into Molly’s in his mind. It is clear that Molly is the girl whom Tommo really can’t stop thinking about, and the girl he truly loves.



Tommo can understand the other soldiers just from looking into their eyes, just as earlier in the novel the Peaceful family all seem very good at guessing what each other are thinking without even having to ask.



It seems somewhat ridiculous that Tommo could be “disappointed” at not seeing any enemy attacks, and demonstrates how naïve Tommo is in his attitude towards war.



The trench and dugouts are a mess from their previous inhabitants, so Captain Wilkes sets the men to work cleaning them up to avoid rats. The rats inevitably arrive anyway, and Tommo is the first to discover a nest of them. Luckily, Little Les from their village was a rat-catcher at home, and he easily kills the rats until they stop coming so frequently. Lice are another problem in the trench, and one which no one can seem to get rid of. The men try to burn them off, but the only thing that would really help would be to have a bath: a luxury that they are not entitled to. Most of all, though, the rain is the men's "greatest scourge." They are always wet and cold, every one of them has trench foot (a condition in which the foot begins to rot away due to being constantly wet), and the mud never dries out, so they can barely walk through it. Only "sleep and food" bring any "real relief."

Captain Wilkes and Charlie also help to keep morale up with their positive attitudes, and Tommo claims that there isn't a "man in the company who doesn't look up to" Charlie after how he handled the field punishment in Etaples. Tommo is prouder of his brother than ever before.

The men eventually return to the rest camp, but even there they are kept busy. Nevertheless, there are a few comforts. The Peacefuls have received letters from their mother and Molly, who have also sent "knitted woolen scarves and gloves and socks." The men also have "communal baths in great steaming vats in a barn down the road and, best of all, egg and chips and beer at the *estaminet* in Pop." Tommo particularly enjoys these visits because he gets to see the "beautiful girl with the doe eyes" who smiled at him before.

Winter arrives and brings snow with it. Tommo is actually pleased about this, as the snow is no colder than the rain, but at least allows the men to stay relatively dry. The company have still faced little action: only a few men have been injured, but none so far have been killed. Tommo suspects that they are in "just about the luckiest sector" they could possibly ask for.

Eventually, an order arrives that the company must go out and investigate the German regiments that have just arrived in the trenches opposite them. Tommo points out that this seems fairly pointless as there "are spotter planes doing that almost every day," but the men obey their orders, and every night a few go out on patrol to try and reach the German side in secret.

This passage illustrates just how dreadful life in the trenches in the First World War would have been. Even small, seemingly basic requirements, such as being able to get dry and have a bath, are luxuries the men can only dream of. Most people would shudder to think of living amongst rats and lice, but this was the everyday reality for most of the soldiers fighting in this war. Only the most basic of human needs, food and sleep, can offer the men any consolation. Most of these men would probably have taken sleep and food for granted in their lives at home.



Just as everyone looked up to Charlie in school for being brave as he was punished, people still look up to Charlie for braving his punishments now. The soldiers cannot help but admire his courage.



A warm bath, food, and some knitted scarves and gloves make the soldiers incredibly happy. This makes the reader realize just how terrible life in the trenches is. Even the simplest of treats seem like a luxury. Tommo is even happier, of course, because he has also met a beautiful girl in the local pub.



Tommo actually welcomes the chance to live in the freezing snow, proving how awful living in constant rain must have been. For most people, the thought of living in snow would not be an especially appealing one, but for Tommo it is actually a relief.



This is one of many examples in this book of a military order seeming pointless and arbitrary. If there are spotter planes already assessing the area, it seems pointless for men to risk their lives in doing the same thing. Morpurgo is very critical of the way the British Army treated their soldiers' lives so carelessly.



Tommo's turn for patrol comes, and he is slated to go with Charlie, Nipper Martin, Pete, Little Les, and Captain "Wilkie" Wilkes. Tommo finds he is "not so much frightened as excited" for the task ahead. He feels like he's poaching again at home.

The fact that once again Tommo is almost excited by the prospect of war demonstrates how naïve and immature he is. He even claims that he feels like a child going poaching again, which seems a long way from the reality of the situation.



The men wriggle their way to the German wire on their stomachs, and they head into the German trench in silence. They make their way to the source of some music and light, where they can hear voices. Just as they approach, a German soldier leaves the dugout. He sees the men, and runs back inside screaming. Tommo says that the man should have surrendered and gone with the British, and that he made the wrong decision by turning back. One of Tommo's company throws in a grenade behind the soldier, and suddenly there is chaos and the firing of guns from all sides. When Tommo edges closer, he sees Little Les lying dead on the ground. All of the Germans except one are also dead.

It is interesting that Tommo claims that the German soldier who runs back into the dugout made the wrong decision in doing so. Tommo thinks that the soldier should have surrendered, implying that this sacrifice would have spared more of his fellow soldiers' lives. Tommo's claim makes it clear that Tommo himself has a very strong sense of duty and loyalty to his fellow soldiers. He thinks it would be better to sacrifice one's own life instead of risking the lives of the other men.



The one remaining German soldier is "beside himself with terror." He is whimpering, "naked, blood-spattered and shaking," and Tommo notes that he himself is also shaking. The British men give the German a coat and get him out of the dugout, and then start frantically trying to escape before they attract further attention.

The surviving German soldier is presented as a sympathetic figure rather than a hated, dehumanized enemy. He is clearly nothing more than a terrified and friendless young man, who perhaps never wanted to fight in the first place. Morpurgo begins to demonstrate that not all of the enemy were necessarily "bad" people.



Tommo's company manage to escape the German trench, but as they start heading back towards their own trench, they are caught by a flare. Tommo presses himself into the ground and finds himself thinking of his father, and imagining himself apologizing to him for causing his death.

It is telling that when Tommo thinks he is about to die, his thoughts turn to his father and the guilt he feels for his father's death. This guilt is clearly a heavy burden on Tommo's mind, and it will linger throughout most of the story.



Further shelling begins, and the British soldiers hurry to a crater to shelter themselves from the attack. Wilkie is stuck further up a slope, and tells the boys that he can't move his legs, so Charlie carefully drags Wilkie into the crater for protection. When the shelling stops, Charlie carries Wilkie "on his back the whole way, until the stretcher bearers came for him in the trench." Wilkie makes Charlie promise to come and see him in hospital.

Charlie demonstrates his trademark loyalty and a great deal of courage when he risks his own life to help Wilkes. It is very noble of him not to abandon his injured captain, and Wilkes clearly appreciates this, which is why he tells Charlie to come and visit him in hospital.



Tommo hears the German prisoner praying to himself and realizes that they both call “God by the same name.” Soon, the German stops praying and starts rocking himself “like a child, like Big Joe.” When they arrive back at the British trench, the company has a cup of tea and a cigarette with the prisoner before he is taken away. They don’t speak, but as he leaves, he thanks the men. Nipper remarks how strange it was to see the man “with not a stitch on,” because without uniforms “you can hardly tell the difference” between the German and the English. Later that night, Tommo finds himself not thinking of Little Les, as he supposes he ought to be, but instead of the German prisoner. He feels that from the short time they spent together, he “somehow knew him better than [he’d] ever known Little Les.”

Tommo and Charlie go to see Wilkie at the hospital. Wilkie has already been transported back to Britain because he was “in a bad way,” but he left a golden watch for Charlie. Charlie thinks the watch is “ruddy wonderful” and promises Tommo that he can have it if anything ever happens to him.

CHAPTER 10: TWENTY-FIVE PAST THREE

Earlier, the other soldiers came and asked Tommo if he “wanted someone to stay with [him] through the night,” but he refused. He “even sent the padre away” (the military chaplain). Tommo now regrets his decision, and wishes to “have them all here” for company, for “singsongs” and drinking. Instead, he has had nothing but a mouse for company all night.

Tommo remembers how the next time the company were sent up to the front line, it was to the area of Ypres itself, which had been the target of relentless attack for months. There was nothing quiet about this new assignment. The defense around the town was constantly shrinking under the “almost constant bombardment” from the enemy. As they walk through Ypres (or “Wipers,” as the British men call it) Tommo “wondered why it was worth fighting for at all.” There was essentially no town left.

Their new company commander is a man named Lieutenant Buckland. He is straight from England and seems young and inexperienced as a result, and everyone misses Captain Wilkes. Tommo comments that Buckland seems even younger than Tommo does.

The German prisoner becomes a very poignant figure in this passage. He is clearly just like Tommo and the other British soldiers: young, scared, and forced into fighting. He doesn’t seem to want to fight the British at all, he has just got caught up in a war beyond his control. Tommo realizes they are no different from one another: not only does the German share the same Christian faith as the British, but he is also just as grateful for a cup of tea, and in the most pitiful image of the scene he rocks himself just like Big Joe used to. Joe is such an innocent and sweet character that comparing the German to Joe cements the German as a sympathetic figure.



This watch is perhaps connected to Tommo’s watch, which he is looking at in the opening passage of the previous chapter. If so, perhaps this implies that something will happen to Charlie.



The reader still has no idea what is happening to Tommo in the present. A padre is a military chaplain, and so when Tommo sends the chaplain away it is symbolic of Tommo’s ultimate rejection of his religious faith.



Ypres is perhaps the most significant example of the sheer destruction that accompanied the First World War. The town was the center of the fighting between the British and the German forces for years, and was left almost completely destroyed as a result. The town still stands today and is home to a daily remembrance ceremony for the fallen soldiers of the war.



Tommo himself is very young: the reader knows that he was only fifteen when he enlisted (and only eighteen when he’s narrating in hindsight), so for him to suggest that Buckland seems even younger than he does is a significant claim.



The new trenches they are assigned to are poorly constructed, in some places “little more than shallow dilapidated ditches affording [them] precious little protection,” and with even deeper mud than in their last trench. The dugout itself is better, but Tommo still finds that he can’t sleep for fear of what lies in store.

The next morning, Tommo is on stand-to duty, and observes no man’s land all around him. There is barely anything left but the remains of the dead, some mud, and some barbed wire, but he notices some **birds** still singing. A corpse on the ground has his hand stretched out “heavenwards.” His hand is pointing towards the birds.

Soon, a bombardment starts, which lasts for two full days. Everyone wants “nothing more than for it to stop, for the earth to be still again, for there to be quiet.” Tommo knows that when the bombardment stops, the enemy will attack, but he would rather that than have the bombardment last a moment longer. “Let them come,” he says.

When the bombardment stops, Tommo sees the enemy approaching in the thousands, with their “bayonets glinting.” Charlie reassures Tommo that Tommo will be fine, and to stay with him. Tommo does “not run,” but “only because of Charlie.” He keeps shooting at the approaching enemy, and eventually the attack is over. Most of the enemy have been killed, and the remaining few have turned around. Tommo feels “a surge of triumph,” “not because [they] have won, but because [he has] stood with the others.” He has not run, and for this he is proud. He thinks back to the old woman calling him a coward, and imagines telling her “no, old woman, I am not, I am not.”

The British troops take the opportunity to start an attack on the German line, but the Germans are nowhere to be seen. Suddenly, the first of many German shells flashes in the air, starting their surprise counter-attack. Tommo looks frantically around for Charlie but can’t see him. Tommo flattens himself into the mud for protection, and is deafened by an explosion. When he manages to lift his head, he sees chaos all around him. The British line is being pushed back, and they are completely surrounded by German guns and shells. Men start to turn back, and Lieutenant Buckland grabs Tommo and shouts at him to retreat. Tommo finds that he can barely move his legs, but the lieutenant stays with him. Buckland is then killed as he helps Tommo. Tommo somehow manages to get back to the dugout, but Charlie is still nowhere to be seen.

Shallow ditches are not enough for a man to live in, especially in a warzone. Morpurgo here illustrates the lack of adequate preparation and provision that was typical of the First World War. Countries and armies simply weren’t aware of what they were getting themselves into, so they weren’t able to prepare sufficiently.



The image of the birds singing is a particularly significant one, because Tommo claimed earlier that his family felt that birds were a promise of heaven. Even in this deadly warzone, then, there is still some promise of an afterlife, which is symbolized by these singing birds.



Tommo’s willingness to face a full-blown attack from the German forces instead of enduring another moment of bombardment underscores the gravity and hopelessness of his situation.



Charlie is the main inspiration for Tommo to be brave and stand by his fellow soldiers. Charlie’s courage has always inspired Tommo, and now Tommo has a chance to prove himself to Charlie. It is not the fact that he has won the battle against the Germans, but the fact that he has won a battle against his own fear that makes Tommo so proud and relieved. He knows now that he has proved himself against the old woman who once called him a coward.



Lieutenant Buckland proves that he is not as naïve and insipid as the soldiers had previously believed him to be. He bravely accompanies Tommo when Tommo is injured, just as Charlie earlier accompanied Wilkie when Wilkie was injured. Buckland’s courage, however, ultimately leads to tragedy, as he is killed as he stands beside Tommo. The way in which Buckland’s death is reported in the text is very sudden and brief, which reflects the sudden shock and disbelief Tommo experiences as Buckland is shot down beside him.



Hours pass, and still Charlie does not return to the dugout. Tommo tries to reassure himself, hoping that maybe Charlie is just waiting for the right moment to crawl back, or that he's gotten lost and ended up in a different trench. Still, he can't shake the thought that Charlie might not have survived. By morning, Tommo is certain that Charlie is dead. He thinks about how his family will react to the news. He knows Big Joe will find comfort in his religious faith, and Tommo envies him for this. Tommo, in contrast, can "no longer even pretend" that he believes in God, heaven, or religion. He can believe "only in the hell [he] was living in, a hell on earth, and it was man-made, not God-made."

Tommo goes on sentry duty. He thinks about Charlie and his father, and tries to imagine them as stars in the sky. He wishes he had told Charlie his secret about causing his father's death, so he tells the star instead, and feels somehow that it has understood. He imagines Charlie's voice in his head saying, "Don't go all dreamy on lookout, Tommo." Then he sees something moving past the wire, and hears Charlie's voice again. Only then does Tommo realize that the voice is not inside his head, after all. It is Charlie, returning to the trench, and very much alive. The boys hug (Tommo isn't sure they've ever hugged before) and then they both break down in tears.

Charlie had been shot in the foot, and passed out "in some shell hole." When he awoke, everyone had left, so he had to wait until night to make his way back. He is taken to the hospital immediately, and Tommo manages to see him a few days later. Charlie looks very happy, and tells Tommo that he will be going home for a while, to recover in a British hospital. Tommo feels like he "should be pleased" for Charlie, but can't bring himself to be. He feels abandoned by Charlie, and furthermore, he is upset by the fact that Charlie seems so happy to be going home without him. Charlie seems to sense Tommo's sadness, putting a hand on Tommo's arm and telling him "I'll be back before you know it."

On the night Charlie leaves for England, Tommo goes to the *estaminet* and drowns his sorrows and his anger at Charlie. He is angry that Charlie abandoned him, and that Charlie gets to go home when he doesn't. Tommo even considers deserting the army, but decides to go back to camp instead, because "it was the easier choice—you can get shot for desertion."

Tommo's belief that Charlie has died is the final straw in destroying any ounce of religious faith he might have had left. If Charlie is dead, Tommo cannot believe that there is a god, or any form of afterlife, because Tommo can't believe that any god would be so cruel as to take his brother away from him. Still, he envies Big Joe and his enduring religious faith, as he feels that religion would be a comfort to him in his grief. Instead, the only reality Tommo can now comprehend is that of the man-made hell of war, and this is of no consolation whatsoever.



Because the narrative is told from Tommo's perspective, the reader is equally as baffled and amazed by Charlie's reappearance as Tommo is. Only when Charlie is close to death do the brothers realize just how much they mean to one another. They have never hugged before, or cried together, but they do now. They are so relieved and thrilled to be back together that all of their previous barriers are broken down, and all pretenses with one another are eradicated. They truly realize how much they mean to one another.



It is understandable that Tommo should feel somewhat betrayed and upset when he discovers that Charlie will be going home without him, especially when Tommo only signed up for war in the first place so as not to leave Charlie on his own. As ever, though, Charlie understands Tommo's thoughts without Tommo even having to voice them, and reassures Tommo, as he always has done, that he will be back by his side very soon. Tommo seems to trust that Charlie is telling the truth, as he doesn't say anything more about the matter.



Although Tommo feels angry at Charlie, he is really just miserable that he has to stay in the warzone while Charlie will get to experience the joys of returning home. Tommo hates being left behind by Charlie, as was demonstrated earlier in the book when Charlie left school without Tommo and Tommo was miserable.



When Tommo is outside getting some air, the girl from the *estaminet* comes out and speaks to him, asking if he is ill. Tommo says no, but suddenly feels overwhelmed with sadness and homesickness. She asks if she will see him again, and Tommo says yes; they part ways, and Tommo heads back to camp. He feels calmer, and decides that next time he goes to the *estaminet* he will be brave and ask the girl her name.

The girl provides Tommo with some distraction and helps him to level his head again. Small things, like talking to girls, probably would have helped soldiers who were so far away from home to feel like they were closer to normality than usual while they were fighting in the war.



Two weeks later, Tommo returns and does exactly that. The girl's name is Anna, and they talk for a while. Tommo tells her he worked on a farm at home, so she shows him her father's horse. While they are in the stables, Anna kisses him on the cheek. When Tommo heads back to camp, he sings "**Oranges and Lemons**" "at the top of [his] voice" all the way.

Tommo and Anna's visit to the stable is a comforting reminder of home for Tommo, and makes him feel much happier. When Anna kisses him, Tommo expresses his jubilation by singing the Peaceful family's favorite song: "Oranges and Lemons."



When he arrives back at camp, Tommo's good mood is shattered when Pete tells him that their new sergeant will be Sergeant Hanley. When Hanley arrives, every day becomes miserable. He is constantly breathing down the soldiers' necks and punishing them endlessly for the smallest offences. Tommo claims that everyone "hated him like poison, a great deal more than we had ever hated Fritz."

It is striking that the British soldiers in this company hate their own sergeant more than they ever hate the enemy that they are supposed to be fighting against. In fact, this almost makes the whole war seem paradoxical and pointless.



CHAPTER 11: NEARLY FOUR O'CLOCK

Tommo realizes that it is nearly morning now, and reflects upon the fact that all of his mornings since he's been a soldier have been a case of waking up with "the same dread in the pit of [his] stomach, knowing that [he] will have to look death in the face again." The only difference on this particular morning is that he knows "whose death it will be and how it will happen." He thinks to himself that if he considers it in this way, it doesn't seem so bad.

The fact that Tommo is able to consider death as being "not so bad," just because it is pre-meditated, is quite a shocking realization for any reader. The uncertainty of war, rather than the certainty of death, seems to be the phenomenon that has most traumatized Tommo as a soldier.



After Charlie left, a new batch of recruits joined Tommo's company. Many of the original company were either dead or wounded or ill by this point, so the new men were desperately needed. Tommo describes how the original soldiers seemed like "battle-hardened" warriors to the new recruits, and they all held Tommo and the others in high esteem because of this. Tommo quite enjoyed his new status, as it distracted him from his own fears.

The experiences of war are enough to make even young boys such as Tommo seem like experienced and hardy veterans. It seems that age loses meaning when fighting the war, and experience becomes more of a marker of maturity instead. This harks back to the soldiers earlier claiming that Buckland seemed "young" just because he had arrived straight from England.



Life at the front line is fairly quiet for a while, with few attacks. The spring sun has started to come out, and the men have a rare chance to get dry and warm. There are still rats and lice, but Tommo describes it as a "picnic" in comparison to what they had been through before.

Simple pleasures that would have been taken for granted at home, such as the spring sun warming their backs, become invaluable to the soldiers fighting in the war.



After this period of quiet comes a horrible and sudden awakening. Tommo is writing a letter when someone suddenly shouts, "Gas!" Everyone freezes momentarily in terror, even though they've trained countless times for a gas attack. Eventually Tommo gets his gas mask on and finds his rifle, and then looks out to see the gas cloud looming towards them. Tommo sees it coming straight for him, and starts to panic, even though he knows he should trust his gas mask. Someone told him once that a gas mask can work miracles, but he claims that he doesn't believe in miracles anymore. In just a few moments, the gas is all around him. He tries not to breathe, and runs, but finds that he can't run without breathing. He falls and accidentally knocks his mask off, and feels the gas in his eyes and lungs, and desperately tries to escape it.

At last, Tommo runs clear of the gas, only to find himself at the feet of an enemy soldier, who has a gun pointed at Tommo's head. Tommo knows that he is about to be killed, but instead, the soldier tells him to run, and lets him escape.

Later at the hospital, Tommo realizes how many men were injured and killed in the gas attack. He got off lightly, and is dismissed from the hospital, but as he leaves he sees Nipper Martin's body lying on the floor, along with countless other men.

Tommo returns to camp to find Pete alone in the tent. He, too, was very lucky in the attack. Pete gives Tommo two letters from home. Pete tells Tommo that he never gets any himself, and asks if Tommo can read his out to him instead. Mrs. Peaceful's letter contains news of Molly's newborn baby boy, who has been named Thomas, or Little Tommo, in honor of Tommo. Tommo's mother adds that Charlie is at home, and has told them all that he and Tommo are having a "fine time together over in Belgium." At this, Pete becomes angry. He can't understand why Charlie would lie about the conditions of the war, and says Charlie "should be ashamed of himself." Still, Tommo treasures the letters from his family, and keeps them safe. They buoy him through the tough times ahead.

This gas attack is one of the most terrifying experiences of war that Tommo has faced. Even countless hours of training are not enough to prepare him for the panic and terror he feels as the gas is looming towards him. It is particularly interesting that a gas mask is described here as being miraculous. This language seems almost religious, and suggests that one has to place near-religious faith in the mask for it to work. Tommo's claim that he doesn't believe in miracles aligns with the recent decline in his Christian faith. Because he doesn't have faith and fully trust the mask, he panics and falls, knocking the mask from his face and rendering it useless.



This act of mercy from a kind German soldier endears the German soldiers even more to Tommo and the reader. They do not seem like much of an enemy at all.



This scene is one of many illustrations in the novel of the sheer scale of lives lost in the First World War. The loss is made even more personal to Tommo by the fact that his friend from home is included amongst the dead.



Neither Pete nor Charlie have anything to be ashamed of in this passage, but Pete can't seem to understand that what Charlie has done is an act of bravery and kindness. It is understandable that Pete should want everyone to know about the horrors the soldiers are facing in the war, but it is also noble that Charlie should want to shield his family from these horrible details. Charlie wants his family to be reassured and happy, so he tells them a lie so that they won't worry about him. The story implies that it is admirable of Charlie to keep his pain to himself for the sake of sparing his family this burden.



The company soon discovers that Sergeant Hanley will never let up on them. He claims they “shamed the regiment” by acting like cowards in the gas attack, and he keeps finding ways to drive them into the ground as punishment. One soldier is caught sleeping at his post, and receives Field Punishment Number One, just as Charlie had before him. Tommo claims that these were the “darkest days we had ever lived through. Sergeant Hanley had done what all the bloody attrition in the trenches had never done. He had taken away our spirit, and drained the last of our strength, destroyed our hope.”

The company is given one night off before they are sent back up into line, so they head to the *estaminet* again. Tommo hopes to see Anna, but can’t find her anywhere, so he goes to her house. When the door opens, Tommo finds Anna’s father, the owner of the *estaminet*, looking like a shadow of his former self. He is no longer “dapper and smiling,” but “unshaven and disheveled” and reeking of alcohol. Tommo asks for Anna, and Anna’s father informs him that Anna is dead—she was caught in a stray explosion as she was collecting eggs. Anna’s father asks Tommo why he came to fight the war, and then says “you can go to Hell, all of you, British, German, French, you think I care? And you can take your war to Hell with you.” He slams the door in Tommo’s face.

Tommo goes to visit Anna’s grave. He wants to believe that she is in heaven, which he calls “Sunday-school Heaven” and “Big Joe’s happy Heaven,” but he finds he can only believe that Anna is “lying in the cold earth at [his] feet.” He kisses the earth, and then heads back to camp. By the time he arrives, he has “no more tears left to cry.”

The next day, the company is sent back into the trenches, and Charlie returns. Everyone feels “suddenly safer” having him back. Hanley on the other hand is not at all pleased to have Charlie back, and warns him that he’s got his eye on him.

A huge bombardment of shelling starts, which lasts for days. Tommo describes it as a “titanic duel.” All the soldiers can do is huddle in the dugout and hope that they don’t take a direct hit, as they know this would kill them all. To cope, they don’t mention the bombardment, and instead try to carry on life as “normally” as possible. At one point, Tommo lies screaming on the ground for it to stop, only for Charlie to lie next to him and start singing “**Oranges and Lemons**.” Soon, everyone is singing the song, but eventually they realize that even “Oranges and Lemons” cannot “drive away the terror.”

Sergeant Hanley is an awful man who is presented as being worse than the enemy or the war itself. It seems completely illogical that a commander should want to punish his company and destroy their morale for hardly doing anything wrong, as it will make the soldiers far less inclined to fight well or to respect Hanley’s orders. When Wilkes and Buckland were in charge, the soldiers went above and beyond the call of duty because they wanted to please their superiors, but no one has any desire to please Hanley.



Anna’s death is a reminder of the arbitrary tragedies of war. She was just an innocent young girl who never wanted to be involved in the war, just as her father was an ordinary man who never dreamed that thousands of soldiers would descend into his village and turn it into a battlefield. The effect that Anna’s death has had on her father is palpable enough to have completely changed his appearance and his personality. The pub owner Tommo had previously known would never have dreamed of shouting at Tommo, but the war has had its tragic and destructive way with him.



Anna’s death further consolidates Tommo’s loss of religious faith. He can no longer pretend that he believes in heaven, and feels instead that all that is left of Anna is buried in the earth beneath his feet. The terms “Sunday-school Heaven” and “happy heaven” also go so far as to make the idea of an afterlife seem naïve and foolish.



Charlie is clearly loved by the men in his company. In fact, he generally seems loved wherever he goes, except by arrogant people like Hanley and the Colonel, who can’t stand the fact that Charlie isn’t afraid to stand up to them.



The most effective means of coping for Tommo’s company is just to carry on as normal, and to deny to themselves that anything bad is happening. This is why singing “Oranges and Lemons” is such a powerful tool for Tommo and Charlie: it allows them to pretend for a little while that they are back at home with Big Joe and their family, and nothing bad has ever happened. In this instance, though, even singing can’t help the boys for long.



Eventually, the German troops attack, though they are mostly gunned down by the British before they can even make it to the trenches. All at once, Tommo and the others receive orders to go over the top of the trench. Tommo follows the others obediently, but suddenly finds blood pouring down his face and a “burning pain” in his head. He feels himself being “beckoned into a world [he has] never been to before, where it is warm and comforting and all-enveloping.” He knows he is dying, and “welcome[s] it.”

CHAPTER 12: FIVE TO FIVE

Tommo realizes that there are only “sixty-five minutes to go” and tries to decide how to live them. He decides nothing will do, because it has already been decided that “Private Peaceful will die, will be shot for cowardice,” and henceforth there is no point in anything else. Tommo doesn’t know where it will happen, but he wants it to be somewhere “where there is sky and clouds and tress, and **birds**. It will be easier if there are birds.”

Back in battle, Tommo wakes “to the distant shriek of shells.” He realizes he is not dead after all. He thinks he is looking at the dark sky, but then realizes that he is buried in earth, and screams. Suddenly he hears Charlie’s distant voice, and then people start digging and manage to pull him free. Tommo finds himself in a dugout with his fellow soldiers. Many of their company have been killed by the same shell that injured Tommo. Tommo is shaking and “weak as a kitten.” Charlie tells him to be still, because he’s lost a lot of blood.

Pete tells everyone that the Germans have got them completely surrounded, and that “all hell’s broken loose.” Even sticking a head out of the top of the dugout would make you “a dead man.” They decide that they are stuck in the dugout for now, until Sergeant Hanley declares that they will under no circumstances “stay put.” He orders all of the men to leave the dugout and attack the German trenches instead. Everyone knows this is a suicidal order. Tommo concernedly whispers to Charlie that he won’t be able to stand up because he is too injured, and Charlie promises him that he will stay with Tommo “no matter what.”

Tommo is an obedient soldier and always seems to follow orders even when they put his life in danger, such as is the case here. After Tommo is injured in this instance, he feels himself dying. The prospect of death is a surprisingly and perhaps alarmingly inviting one for Tommo. Although he has feared it constantly throughout the war, now that it has arrived, it seems like a relief.



It has been decided that “Private Peaceful will die,” explaining the title of the novel, but there are two Private Peacefuls: Tommo and Charlie. The reader still doesn’t know which brother has been doomed to die and which will survive. Still, whoever’s death it may be, it will be easier “if there are birds,” because birds represent hope in the afterlife for the Peaceful family.



The narrative follows Tommo’s point of view, so the reader is equally as disorientated as Tommo is when he wakes up underground. The reader naturally assumes that Tommo is dead, but once again Tommo proves very lucky and manages to survive. Fortunately, Charlie is nearby and on hand to help Tommo, as he always is. Tommo’s injury is severe, but the reader has every faith that Charlie will look after him.



Sergeant Hanley proves once and for all how senseless and heartless he is when he orders the men to leave the dugout. Everyone with an ounce of sense realizes that his order is not only absurd, but quite possibly suicidal. Hanley is happy to sacrifice his own men’s lives for the sake of his own pride. He always feels the need to prove his authority, even when his orders are senseless, cruel, and arbitrary. Luckily for Tommo, Charlie is willing to defy Hanley, and stays to protect his brother.



Hanley orders everyone to move out of the dugout, and everyone hesitates. Charlie tells Hanley what everyone is thinking: that there is “no point in going out there and getting ourselves killed for nothing, is there, Sergeant?” Hanley asks Charlie whether he is disobeying his order, and starts “ranting like a man demented.” He tells Charlie that if he disobeys him, Charlie will be sent to “the firing squad” and executed. Charlie tells him that he understands, but he can’t leave Tommo behind. Hanley calls him a “miserable little worm,” and threatens to kill him there and then. Instead, he turns away and orders the men to leave the dugout. Unwillingly, each man goes over the top. Pete tries to convince Charlie to join them, but Charlie says that he meant what he said—he is going to stay with Tommo.

Tommo drifts in and out of consciousness in the dugout. At one point, he wakes up to Charlie asking him to promise that Tommo will “look after things” for him if things go badly. He wants Tommo to take care of Molly and the family. Charlie also gives Tommo his watch, telling him to take care of it, and then reassures Tommo that he can go back to sleep.

Sergeant Hanley returns to the dugout, but barely any of the other soldiers do. Hanley sits glaring at Charlie with “cold hate in his eyes.” Eventually he decides it is time for them to leave. Charlie carries Tommo the whole way back to the trenches.

When Tommo is placed on a stretcher at the trenches, he looks up to see Charlie being arrested on the spot. After this, he says, everything “happened so fast.” Tommo is not allowed to see Charlie for another six weeks, by which time Charlie has already been sentenced to death.

Tommo is finally allowed to see Charlie on the day before his execution, but only for twenty minutes. The guard outside apologizes to Tommo for this. Charlie is being held at another camp, not far away, in a stable. He is thrilled to see Tommo. He reads Tommo a letter he has received from Molly all about their baby (Little Tommo). Molly and the family have no idea about Charlie’s impending death. Charlie wasn’t allowed to write to them until today, and they will receive an official army telegram before they receive Charlie’s letter. Charlie makes Tommo promise to tell them what really happened, “how it really was.” He says all he cares about now is that they don’t think he was a coward.

Every man hesitates as he is leaving the dugout, demonstrating that everyone doubts Sergeant Hanley’s orders. Only Charlie, however, is unafraid to voice these doubts. He is the only soldier who will stand up to Hanley. Hanley has as a result developed such a hatred of Charlie that he is happy to kill Charlie for disobeying his orders. Charlie is too much of a threat to Hanley’s authority, and Hanley can’t stand it. Charlie nevertheless refuses to be swayed by Hanley, and sticks with Tommo even though he is risking his life in doing so.



Just as Tommo trusts Charlie to look after him, Charlie trusts Tommo to look after his wife and baby if he dies. The brothers are immensely close. Charlie then gives Tommo the same golden watch that has appeared throughout the novel, explaining why Tommo has the watch in his possession in the opening of Chapter 8.



Ultimately, Hanley’s order leads to the death of many of his soldiers, demonstrating the terrible consequences of giving such a vicious and heartless person too much power.



The British Army’s approach to Charlie’s sentencing seems excessively insensitive and hurried. Anyone accused of a crime should be innocent until proven guilty, but it seems as if Charlie’s sentence has already been decided for him from the moment he is arrested, as he is immediately incarcerated and denied visitation.



It seems excessively harsh that Tommo is only allowed to see Charlie for twenty minutes on the day before Charlie is executed. It also seems excessively harsh that Charlie’s family will receive an official telegram informing them of Charlie’s death before they receive Charlie’s own letter explaining what has happened. The higher powers of the British Army are presented as being insensitive and out of touch with their soldiers. Even the soldier guarding Charlie says to Tommo that he is sorry he is not able to visit Charlie for longer, admitting the faults of his own army.



Charlie describes his court martial to Tommo. Charlie tried to tell the judges the truth, but they would only listen to the word of Sergeant Hanley. He claims that “they knew [he] was right, but it made no difference,” because “they’d made up their minds [that Charlie] was guilty before they even sat down.” Charlie wasn’t allowed a witness, because the only possible candidate left alive was Tommo. Given that Tommo was Charlie’s brother, they felt this to be too biased. The only other person present was therefore Sergeant Hanley, and Charlie was completely ignored. The whole court martial took “less than an hour.” One of the brigadiers concluded by telling Charlie that he was “a worthless man.”

Charlie tries to be optimistic about his fate, reminding Tommo that the thought of death is “no more than [they] were facing every day in the trenches.” Tommo and Charlie instead start talking about their home, but Charlie can’t bring himself to talk about their family, as he will get too upset if he does. He doesn’t want to cry. Tommo promises Charlie again that he will look after them when the war is over, and that he will give the golden watch to Little Tommo, the baby, as a memento of his father.

Tommo finally brings himself to tell Charlie about the guilt he feels for their father’s death. Charlie assures Tommo that it “was the tree that killed Father, Tommo, not you,” that it is “all nonsense” and not Tommo’s fault in the slightest.

Finally, in their remaining minutes, Tommo assures Charlie that he is not worthless. Then the boys start singing “**Oranges and Lemons**” together, singing “it out loud so that the whole world can hear.” They laugh, and cry “tears of celebration” instead of sadness. Charlie assures Tommo that come his execution, he will be singing “Oranges and Lemons” rather than the national anthem or any hymn: “for Big Joe, for all of us.” Tommo is then called away.

When Tommo returns to camp he expects sympathy, but instead finds people smiling, because Sergeant Hanley has been killed. Unfortunately, the news comes too late to help Charlie, but Tommo describes it as a “small consolation.” After the initial news, the regiment becomes subdued again as they think about Charlie’s impending fate.

The justice system of the British Army is presented as being biased and heartless. Not only does it seem wrong that Charlie is not allowed a witness, but the judges are also completely biased against Charlie from the beginning of the trial. Even when he tries to explain the situation honestly, he is ignored. Finally, the judge telling Charlie that he is “worthless” is not only completely unprofessional, but also completely unnecessary, proving that he is just being cruel for the sake of it.



Charlie falls back into his characteristic bravery, being optimistic for the sake of reassuring his brother. Charlie has sacrificed his life to save Tommo, and now he is even going out of his way to comfort Tommo when it is Charlie who is going to be executed in the morning. Charlie is always incredibly selfless, and puts his brother before himself at all times.



Finally, Tommo can begin to move past his guilt surrounding his father’s death. All he needed was the reassurance of Charlie that he wasn’t to blame for their father’s death to make him feel better, proving just how much comfort can be found in family in the face of grief.



Once again, the song “Oranges and Lemons” becomes a symbol of victory and defiance for the Peacefuls. The song bonds Charlie and Tommo, and reminds them of the rest of their family, helping them to feel strong in the face of Charlie’s death. In fact, the song means so much to Charlie that he assures Tommo he will be singing it as he dies.



Hanley’s death is no more than a small consolation now that Charlie has been condemned to death. Hanley’s damage has already been done, and it is bitterly ironic that he should be killed so soon after Charlie has been sentenced.



Tommo is stationed at an empty farmhouse close to where they are keeping Charlie. Everyone at the camp tries to support him in the face of Charlie's death, even the NCOs and officers, but no one can do anything to help. Tommo doesn't want company, and even sends the padre (the military chaplain) away. Instead, he has come to an empty barn to spend the night thinking about Charlie, and when the time of his execution arrives, Tommo will "go outside, and [he] will look up at the sky because [he knows] Charlie will be doing the same as they take him out." It is a way for them to be together in Charlie's final moments.

In the face of his brother's death, there is absolutely nothing that can be done to make Tommo feel better or to take his mind off the situation. Tommo refuses any company, and even sends away the chaplain, demonstrating his loss of religious faith. Instead, Tommo chooses to dedicate all of his thoughts to memories of Charlie on the night before his death. Tommo may have lost his faith in religion, but it seems he will never lose his faith in Charlie. Looking up at the sky together will allow the brothers to stay connected in their final moments together.



CHAPTER 13: ONE MINUTE TO SIX

Tommo imagines Charlie as he is led to his execution. "He is not stumbling. He is not struggling. He is not crying out. He is walking with his head held high, just as he was after Mr. Munnings caned him at school that day." Tommo likes to imagine there are **birds** there too. If they try to put a hood over Charlie's head, Tommo knows "he will not have it." Instead, "he looks up to the sky and sends his last living thoughts back home." As Charlie waits for the moment of his death, he is singing "**Oranges and Lemons**," as Tommo is now also doing.

Charlie has carried his courage with him throughout his life, from his school days to his adult life. Tommo imagines that he is facing his execution in exactly the same way as he faced his caning at school as a child: with dignity, and his head held high. Charlie's loyalty to his family also endures until his very last moments: Tommo imagines that he is sending his thoughts back home, and singing "Oranges and Lemons" as a reminder of Big Joe and the rest of the family as he dies.



Tommo hears the shot, and feels that part of him has died with Charlie. However, as he turns back to camp he finds he is "far from alone in [his] grieving." Everyone is standing to attention outside their tents, "and the **birds** are singing."

Everyone in the camp clearly shares the opinion that Charlie's death was a pointless tragedy. Everyone respected Charlie for his bravery, and they honor him now as he dies.



Later that afternoon, Tommo goes to collect Charlie's belongings. The men at the camp tell Tommo that when he was executed, Charlie "walked out with a smile on his face as if he were going for an early-morning stroll." They tell Tommo that Charlie "refused the hood, and that they thought he was singing when he died."

Tommo knew Charlie so well that he was able to correctly predict exactly how Charlie would die. The men at the camp confirm to Tommo that Charlie kept his head held high as he was executed, and sang "Oranges and Lemons" just as Tommo knew he would.



Tommo visits Charlie's grave, and decides that Charlie would like the place where he is buried. It is in the countryside, and next to open water. Six of the men who had been in the dugout with Charlie on "that day" stand vigil over Charlie's grave until nightfall. As each one leaves, they all say "Bye, Charlie."

The men who were with Charlie in the dugout clearly also agree that he was unjustly punished for his actions. They witnessed everything, and still have the utmost respect for Charlie, as demonstrated by their poignant vigil.



The next day, Tommo's regiment leaves for the Somme. All he can think of now is that he "must survive." He has "promises to keep."

Charlie's death has resolved Tommo in his will to survive the war, so that he can return to care for Molly and her baby.





HOW TO CITE

To cite this LitChart:

MLA

Rainbow, Sophie. "Private Peaceful." *LitCharts*. LitCharts LLC, 5 Jan 2019. Web. 21 Apr 2020.

CHICAGO MANUAL

Rainbow, Sophie. "Private Peaceful." LitCharts LLC, January 5, 2019. Retrieved April 21, 2020. <https://www.litcharts.com/lit/private-peaceful>.

To cite any of the quotes from *Private Peaceful* covered in the Quotes section of this LitChart:

MLA

Morpurgo, Michael. *Private Peaceful*. HarperCollins. 2003.

CHICAGO MANUAL

Morpurgo, Michael. *Private Peaceful*. New York: HarperCollins. 2003.