

REVOLUTIONARY BLUES

by

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Complete text
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CHAPTER 1

The morning sun rose over the horizon on the battlefield of the Arden Forest, attempting to shine some light through the midst. It was only 1916, barely two years after the Great War began, yet the landscape bore witness to a conflict that dragged on for a decade. A once lush forest was reduced to a plain of muddy stubble which was all too good at nurturing the seeds of human suffering. There seemed to be no shortage of soil to produce the crops of pain, helplessness and despair. Indeed, this was the devil's heartland, upon which suffering could go on forever and thwart the natural delivery of death.

A look into the eyes of the soldiers, both living and dead, gave even the most insensitive observer hard proof that the futile struggle for victory - or even survival - had lasted for at least a century. The dead were at peace, or so the living chose to believe.

An expatriate American in a British officer's uniform, with well developed muscles distributed around his perfectly proportioned Herculean body woke up early that morning. Unlike his native country, Charlie O'Brien had been involved in the Great War since its beginning. He would gladly die to save any one of his men, yet after each battle it was those privates and corporals who lay dead or wounded, and it was Charlie who emerged without a scratch.

Charlie looked over the long trenches of soldiers emerging from yet another night of restless sleep. He moved to a spot as isolated from human suffering and human companionship as he could, so that he could perhaps make sense of the day which was about to come.

Charlie remembered when the Arden Forest was a forest, teeming with life. This time of the day was particularly alive then. The rising of the sun would be nature's cue for all the animals in the forest to sing songs of their own composition, resulting in a symphony more beautiful than any that could be composed by the hand of man. As the final coda came to a close, there would be a total silence, a communal prayer from life to its Creator. Then the miracle of another day would begin full of surprises that challenged the spirit but did not break the heart. The forest air in those times somehow smelled freshest at that magical hour of the day.

The trees and animals were gone now. The smell of wonderment was replaced by the stench of rotted flesh from dead carcasses and the decaying toes of soldiers with trench foot. Charlie knew that the disease was caused by bacterial decay, small microbes easily killed all-too-scarce medical supplies. To those afflicted, it was more deadly than any German bullet.

A run or even a hobble home would be the best cure, yet this was not an option. The high command in the back-line villas was very good at convincing their men in the trenches that desertion was cowardice. To ensure esprit d'corp, the French military police were everywhere, their bullets seldom missing the backs of fleeing deserters.

Charlie took a pouch of tobacco from his pocket and rolled himself a cigarette. Its shape was that of the OB-446 torpedo, designed by him in 1905. The OB-446 was originally intended to transport medical supplies between ships during squalls and hurricanes. A small number were

made. Fewer were used. By 1914, generals were very effective in dictating scientific priorities to civilian politicians. The British found that OB-446 torpedoes were deadly against German supply ships when attached to any kind of explosive. The Germans were fast to duplicate the innovative design. Both sides honored its original inventor.

Charlie took out his last three matches. They were still firm and dry, not yet dampened by the stagnant trench water that permeated everyone and everything. He struck the matchsticks hard and firm, with skill and determination. Small victories were essential in large stalemates, and Charlie was determined to keep his tobacco away from the rats and the matches away from the elements. Each flick of Charlie's match was answered with a burst of wind from the treeless landscape, extinguishing each in turn. The bolder he struck, the harder the wind. Most curvy mornings he could outguess the wind but not today.

He reluctantly reached into his pocket and pulled out a gold lighter. On it was an inscription, "Happy Birthday, Charlie, from your commanding officer and friend, L.L. Wentworth." Charlie gazed at it reflectively, then flicked the lighter. The flame came up tall and stood up boldly against the oncoming wind. Charlie hesitated. He found his hand moving closer to the cigarette tip. He went into a trance.

"Sir...Major O'Brien," said a young Scottish Lieutenant in a quiet, compassionate voice that came from a wrinkleless face miraculously not hardened by war.

"Huh?" Charlie replied with a reverence for sloppy diction consistent with his American heritage.

"The men. They're ready," the Lieutenant informed his superior officer, and friend.

Charlie put away his unlit cigarette and walked with the Lieutenant toward the observation post. His eyes remained fixed on the lighter, oblivious to everything else around him. Charlie knew that all human misery was somehow hooked onto that gold lighter and to his reflection in it. He was sure of this. He also knew that no one would believe him if he said why this was so. It was a divinely designed punishment.

They passed a long line of men loading their rifles and cleaning the mud out of the short range artillery that bore the "OB" mark after its expatriate American inventor. "You prepared the men well. We'll win this one for sure," commented the Lieutenant.

"Yeah," Charlie said hoping that the Lieutenant would be right but knowing that he wasn't.

"Maybe today we'll end this stinkin' war altogether. So we can ALL go home. Them and us." The Lieutenant continued gazing at the German lines just visible over the fog clearing up, right on schedule.

"Yeah," replied Charlie with a small smile shown but not felt. He gave the lighter to the Lieutenant. "Happy Birthday," he said with as much optimism as he could muster.

"It's not my birthday. And you've had this for as long as I've known you, since this thing started," the Lieutenant answered, puzzled.

"Happy birthday, Lieutenant," Charlie repeated. He forced his head up and moved on with a bold stride befitting his appointed rank and station.

The whistle blew, signaling the men to their daily work of being slaughtered. A mass of British soldiers poured out of their trenches on the offensive, giving out a loud battle cry that clouded both fear and reason. The German command countered with an offensive charge of its own.

Metal clashed with metal on the scorched earth. Flesh was ripped apart in its wake. Everything was chaos - very deadly chaos. Then there came the sound of certainty from the trench guns. Artillery shells from both sides decimated whatever life was left on the field, as if by mutual consent.

Charlie looked on from his observation deck, powerless to stop it.

Powerless, helpless and responsible. The nightmare took on more absurd proportions when he heard applause. From out of the black smoke blanketing the battleground emerged a spectacle even more horrifying than Charlie had ever witnessed even in the worst of his nightmares.

High ranking officers and politicians representing all countries involved in the Great War came onto the field in full regalia, applauding the players who lay dead at their feet. Blindfolded waiters served red wine to the dignitaries from the detached limbs of soldiers who had made the ultimate sacrifice for King and Country. A marching band appeared, garbed in the finest uniforms available from the factories of London, Paris and Berlin. Their music was loud and boisterous and full of pride, played with an enthusiastic two-four time that demanded rather than requested the listener's attention.

Then from the blackened mist to the East emerged a tall man with cold, hard chiseled features. His uniform was spotless. The medals on his chest absorbed the sunlight and converted it to well defined beams that blinded the observer. His footsteps echoed like thunder but his bootheels left no footprints on the blood-soaked ground.

The ominous figure walked to a central point on the festival ground. The earth rose up from below his feet, raising him above the eyes of all in the crowd. The marching band stopped playing. Then silence. Then "God Save the King."

The officers took off their helmets. The politicians removed their top hats. The music echoed in the midst like a distorted prayer delivered to the wrong deity by the most devoted of subjects.

All heads were bowed to Wentworth, except Charlie's. The world knew this demagogue

as Lord Wentworth, a powerful industrialist who had more influence than any Prime Minister, King, Kaiser or, for that matter any other earthly ruler. Charlie knew who and what Wentworth really was. But contrary to what had been taught in the gold-laden churches owned by Wentworth, the truth did NOT set one free. Wentworth had absolute power here, and he would not be brought down by anything so trivial as "truth." This war was good for business, particularly Wentworth's business.

Charlie screamed out to the living, then the dead, begging them to leave the orchestrated madness glorified by the euphemism of war. This was clearly not the war to end all wars, but one which would ensure the perpetuation of that deadly, though profitable enterprise.

Even the Scottish Lieutenant had his head bowed to Wentworth as the music played on. A bowed head conferred blindness to the worshipper and the music demanded that heads be bowed.

It was a powerful piece of manipulation, "God Save the King." Beethoven used it to rouse internationalist emotions in his dedication to Wellington's victory over Napoleon. The rebellious American Republic was quick to keep the tune, changing the lyrics to My Country 'Tis of Thee. "God Save the King" had inspired Charlie in his youth and pre-cynical adulthood. It drove terror into his heart now. But part of him still stood at attention even as he screamed out begging for it to stop.

Finally the music ended. Hats and helmets went on heads filled with glory but depleted of judgment. A Captain stood up and announced in a loud and bold voice, "Gentlemen, His Excellency Lord Wentworth."

The crowd burst into applause. Wentworth lifted up his hand, slightly. He gave a condescending smile. Even the lowest private in the crowd felt like in.

Charlie's mind screamed "No, don't listen to him." His mouth could not utter a sound. The words were held hostage by his conscience. Charlie tried to run toward Wentworth to silence him with his bare hands, but he couldn't move. His boots were glued to the ground by red ooze coming out of the mud below his feet.

Wentworth commenced in an Oxford accent spoken with deadly precision, "Today is a special day. For today we honor accomplishment, tradition and a very special man. A man without whom today's festival of superiority would not have been possible."

The crowd applauded again, wildly. Charlie screamed "No, it's not true," but his words fell on the deafest of ears.

Wentworth continued, a proud smile on his face. "We have among us a man who I consider like a son, and whose contribution to our way of life has been immeasurable."

Bodies of soldiers who had fallen in battle came to life and stood at attention. Freshly polished tanks, artillery and transport vehicles of all kinds were brought on to the battlefield and

wheeled around in a choreographed display.

"No," Charlie screamed even louder. "I'm innocent. I was tricked. I was tricked."

Wentworth continued, "The visionary who created these technological miracles belongs among our ranks." The ovation was loud enough to be heard across the world. It was a proud day for Lord Wentworth. Perhaps his finest hour.

Charlie screeched out at the top of his lungs, "You told me it wouldn't be like this!!! You told me it wouldn't be like this!!!" He turned to the Scottish Lieutenant. "This was supposed to be a war to end all wars. Wentworth promised me that. He promised me that it was supposed to...."

Charlie gasped. The Lieutenant had been wounded near the heart, bright red blood streaming out of his chest. In the center of it the lighter Charlie had given him just minutes earlier, Wentworth's inscription on it more visible than ever.

The crowd got louder running drunker with ignorance, with each cheer, another spurt of blood from the young Lieutenant's heart and another knife through Charlie's tortured soul. Charlie grabbed the lighter, but it was embedded deep in the young man's chest. It burned hotter than fire itself, though the flesh around it was cold as ice.

Charlie went at it again, grabbing the lighter he once valued so much with the sole objective of destroying it so it would not take another victim. It would take the courage of a fierce lion this time, not the hands of a skilled surgeon. To make matters worse, the lighter was getting longer and more torturous by the second, creeping its way into the Lieutenant's body like a rapid snake.

Charlie could smell his own flesh burn as he pulled the tail of the serpentine lighter with all his might, maneuvering it around the chest wall and between two broken ribs with whatever anatomy knowledge his hands could retain. The Lieutenant's face turned pale and ghostlike. The ribs collapsed around the lighter, securing it in place like cooling lava. Charlie closed his eyes, screamed out a prayer of defiance, and pulled with all his might.

Only two seconds passed but it seemed like a lifetime. Charlie's tenacity hurled him into another dimension. He found himself on the ground, the lighter next to him, burning the residual flesh of a rat down to the bone. He grabbed a metal hammer which was so conveniently present and pounded the lighter. He only succeeded in mutilating the rodent's dying body. The lighter remained. His hands roasted, the pain of the third degree burns penetrating up his arms and into his tormented mind. But the stream of blood from the Lieutenant's chest stopped. Color miraculously came to his body but still no breath in it. Charlie breathed his own into the Lieutenant as hard as he could, hoping that desperation could change the inevitable laws of cause and effect that dictated his own doom and the death of those around him.

Suddenly, the Lieutenant started to breathe on his own. Charlie sat back, feeling enough strength in his young friend's carotid pulse to trust that nature could take over. Finally, relief. A

small victory and contentment. Barely a moment later a black cloud came over the Lieutenant's body leaving a lifeless skeleton in its wake. Then nothing. It was always like that. Death taking its toll in one moment, leaving Charlie an eternity of moments to relive it. Maybe if Charlie had taken the time to know Lieutenant John McGregor by name instead of rank, station or function, he could have saved him. Maybe not.

"Enough," Charlie shouted at Wentworth's display a few hundred yards to the east. He pulled his feet out of his boots and ran westward as fast as he could, hoping that it would somehow lead home. No one noticed which was both a blessing and a curse.

"And so," Wentworth continued, "It is my honor and privilege to introduce to you, general Charlie O'Brien." He turned to Charlie's observation post to find it empty. Wentworth's face turned beet red with anger and a subtly delivered flick of his finger sent the Captain off in search of the honored guest.

"Where's Charlie? We want Charlie." someone in the crowd asked. The congregation joined in. "We want Charlie! We want Charlie!"

Wentworth's anger was fueled by the embarrassment of losing his star prodigy. Charlie was like a son to him. Wentworth had gotten Charlie into university and arranged things so that his mental tenacity could be turned into genius both in science and politics. Wentworth's influence as an administrator of the Industrial Age gave Charlie the clout to grab the spotlight - something Charlie always wanted since he was a boy growing up in his uncle's house in Albany, New York. Albany was a pleasant place to grow up, for most of its residents. But for Charlie it was boring, and Charlie would do anything to avoid boredom. Wentworth was all too eager to grant that wish. There were times when "love" described what was going on between Charlie and Wentworth. But it was a love based in mutual need and privately kept agendas on both sides.

The Captain came back to Wentworth empty-handed and shivering in his boots. The crowd demanded that the festival continue as scheduled. "What have you to report, Captain?" requested Wentworth as he wavered between shedding a tear in regret and clenching his fist in vengeful anger.

"Major O'Brien is nowhere to be found, Sir," the Captain announced loudly. He stood rigidly at attention, praying that he would not be punished for being the bearer of such unexpected news.

Charlie had broken the chain of command by refusing to be one of its links. Wentworth was enraged, but held in his anger. He had to maintain the illusion of being in control. The crowd became bewildered, then frightened. A world without chains was the scariest thing imaginable to officers and enlisted alike.

Wentworth had to act - quickly and with a single-minded purpose. He unleashed his rage and disappointment in a loud cry commanding all available men to retrieve Charlie at any cost.

Charlie ran westward across trenches and scorched battlefields as fast as he could, peeling off his uniform enroute. He could feel the cold north wind penetrate his body, exposing his soul to the raw elements for the first time in years. It was painful, but Charlie needed some harsh pain to ease his spiritual suffering.

As he got further from the battlefield the earth became brown, then once again green. The blistering North wind gave way to warm gentle breezes from the ocean that lay just over the next hill.

Charlie kept running for what seemed like an endless climb up a treeless slope. Then at the top of the hill lay the big waters of the Atlantic. Beyond those waters was the Western horizon. Somewhere on the other side of that horizon there was a world Charlie knew before the war, in Sonora, Mexico.

A vision of those golden times appeared to him in the waters below the steep cliff. A canoe made with a bamboo frame. Guiding the craft through the rocky coastal waters stood a Yaqui Indian curandero shaman bare to the waist wearing a deerskin belt and cocoon-rattler anklets. He had a gentle smile framed by wrinkles that penetrated deeply into his sunbaked face.

The curandero waved to Charlie, beckoning him to jump off the cliff into the waters 400 feet below. Anticipating the fear anyone would have of such a jump, he pointed to his companion in the canoe to give Charlie extra encouragement.

It was a young woman with a Native heart and a universal soul named Diane Santa Anna-McFearson, the woman with whom Charlie shared his golden years in Mexico before he signed on to fight the Great War in Europe.

After being taken from her Yaqui mountain village at an early age, Diane was placed under the care of a Scottish-owned plantation in the Yucatan. Her small nose, chiseled jaw and narrow hips made her unattractive by Yaqui standards, but very desirable to John McFearson. Lord McFearson, as he was called everywhere in Mexico but never in his native Scotland, saw it as his sacred duty to help the "inferior races" by integrating them into the superior ones. For reasons no one except Diane knew, John McFearson saw to it that no expense was spared in her education. She crossed Charlie's path at Yale, where they instantly became traveling companions, each giving the other the courage to hit the road with grit and gusto.

During that golden time of invincibility, Charlie's passions were firmly entrenched in medicine and his aspirations not yet corrupted by politics. Both Diane and Charlie saw the inadequacies of science in the industrialized world and the vast potential of its humane application in the third world. A mutually agreed upon mission of self discovery led the pair to Mexico, Sonora, and then to the Yaqui.

That time in the northwestern Mexican desert was perhaps the only period when Charlie experienced real happiness. The Indians gave him a heritage he could believe in, and a belief in Christ which did not demand surrender of dignity or destruction of mother nature for salvation. Diane offered herself as a real friend, ally, and lover all at the same time. Such were the

demands of loners like Charlie who were born to make their mark on the world but to never live in it.

Charlie could go back to 1907 Sonora with a single jump off the French cliffs to the canoe below. But he hesitated. Perhaps it was the fear of being torn to shreds by the trees lining the cliff. Perhaps it was the fear of smashing onto the jagged rocks inches below the choppy waters. Perhaps it was the fear of finding out that he would sink the boat if he accepted the offer of these good friends to go home. Perhaps there was no home to come back to at all and these two comrades from the past were as lost as he was.

Charlie's fear was intensified by indecision and then panic. Behind him were the transport vehicles he designed, in hot pursuit, eager to take him back to the Great War and Lord Wentworth. All that would be required to have his sin of insolence erased clean would be an apology - a surrender of dignity. Dignity was a valueless currency in Wentworth's world. Besides, Charlie had not felt anything close to dignity in a long time.

The curandero waved his hand again, begging Charlie to break away from the world that had betrayed him. But fear still kept Charlie's judgment hostage. His lip quivered, his legs rigidly locked in place.

The curandero's smile turned downward, disappointed and silently angry. He would go the distance for Charlie, but the American expatriate would have to make the first step.

Diane made that step possible, as she had done so many times before in so many ways. She outstretched her arms like a Madonna more pure and virgin than any that could have been created by white Christianity. Charlie's shackles to death disintegrated as the light of Diane's warmth penetrated his cold heart and her passion breathed fire into her tired soul. He took a deep breath and took the plunge, smiling as he trusted gravity to pull him down to the canoe and up into the heavens.

Echoing in Charlie's ears was Diane's voice gently calling his name and the scent of Mexican sagebrush penetrated into his nostrils, filling his head with the smell of wonderment. Charlie's eyes were closed but his heart was wide open. His fingertips felt Diane's touch. Time slowed down and every second felt like a lifetime.

The warmth of Diane's hand melted the fog of bitterness that held his heart hostage for the better part of a decade. Her reassuring grasp of his hand turned his lips upward into a smile that felt awkward to his weather-beaten face. Her lips pressing against his hands instantly cured the third degree burns made by Wentworth's serpent lighter and sealed up the cuts inflicted by OB-1454A barbed wire.

Finally he breathed a sigh of relief. He prepared himself to wake up a lifetime away. Then a special type of pain he had never experienced.

Charlie opened his eyes. Around his chest was a rope. Attached to the other side, an O'Brien prototype helicopter pulling him up to the top of the cliff. Diane tossed up a shell, its

razor edge sharp enough to cut the rope. She pleaded to Charlie to let go. Charlie tried to cut the rope, his hand trembling with fear. The more he shook, the more the shell lost its edge, until it disintegrated in his hand. Charlie screamed out Diane's name, desperately reaching out his blood-soaked hand. It was decided. The curandero could only watch.

The offshore swells shifted the tide, pulling the canoe out to sea. The curandero used whatever power he had left to stop the boat from tipping over. He feared that this long journey would come to this. He was used to disappointment, but never found a way to not feel the pain it brought him. Diane would have to be returned home and he was needed elsewhere.

The chopper dropped Charlie on top of the cliff, cracking his back and leaving him looking up helplessly at the graying sky above. Aimed at his head, ten guns.

"Do it, damn it. Do it already!!!," Charlie cried out blinding himself from the faces of his executioners, his arrogance taken over by fear.

"Ready, aim," began the head executioner in a stern British accent.

Charlie closed his eyes tightly, repeatedly muttering under his breath, "Jesus...let me, let me in."

Charlie's pleas were answered with laughter. A look upward horrified Charlie more than the fear of any bullet.

They were the skeletons, clad in uniforms from both sides of the war. The ghosts of men who lost their lives because of Charlie's skill as a weapons designer and military strategist. Each wave of terror that went through Charlie's body gave more life to the skeletons. "Jesus, let me in...," Charlie kept repeating.

"We don't think so," replied the representatives of the dead elected to take revenge upon the living.

The young Scottish Lieutenant was amongst their number, his optimistic trust in humanity since replaced with vengeful sadism directed at the man who forced him to lose his life and, most importantly, his innocence.

Echo upon echo vibrated through Charlie's ears. He felt a bayonet thrust through his ear drum, twisting like a screw and slowly turning his brilliant mind into mince meat. The once-bold expatriate crumbled up in a fetal position, all dignity lost. It was a prelude to the worst kind of death possible. Then the end finally came.