Charles Yale Harrison (1898–1954) was born in Philadelphia and grew up in
Montreal. His independent spirit revealed itself early: in grade four he con-
demned Shakespeare’s The Merchant of Venice as anti-Semitic, and when his
teacher beat him he quit school. At 16 he went to work for the Montreal Star and
at 18 joined the Canadian army. As a machine gunner in France and Belgium
during 1917 and 1918, Harrison witnessed the gruesome front-line scenes he
was later to describe in fiction. He was wounded at Amiens and decorated for
bravery in action. After the war Harrison returned to Montreal but soon left for
New York, where he began a career in public relations for the labour movement
and for numerous humanitarian causes. He also wrote several books, both non-
fiction and fiction. By far the best is Generals Die in Bed, an account of trench
warfare that shocked the public and became the best seller of 1930. Spare in style,
biting and vivid, this autobiographical novel was described by the New York
Evening Post as “the best of the war books.” From it comes our selection.

We leave the piles of rubble that was once a little Flemish peasant
town and wind our way, in Indian file, up through the muddy
communication trench. In the dark we stumble against the sides of the
trench and tear our hands and clothing on the bits of embedded barbed
wire that runs through the earth here as though it were a geological
deposit.

Fry, who is suffering with his feet, keeps slipping into holes and crawling
out, all the way up. I can hear him coughing and panting behind me.

I hear him slither into a water-filled hole. It has a green scum on it.
Brown and I fish him out.

“I can’t go any farther,” he wheezes. “Let me lie here, I’ll come on
later.”

We block the narrow trench and the oncoming men stumble on us,
banging their equipment and mess tins on the sides of the ditch. Some
trip over us. They curse under their breaths.

Our captain, Clark, pushes his way through the mess. He is an Impe-
rial, an Englishman, and glories in his authority.
“So it’s you again,” he shouts. “Come on, get up. Cold feet, eh, getting near the line?”

Fry mumbles something indistinctly. I, too, offer an explanation. Clark ignores me.

“Get up, you’re holding up the line,” he says to Fry.

Fry does not move.

“No wonder we’re losing the bloody war,” Clark says loudly. The men standing near-by laugh. Encouraged by his success, the captain continues:

“Here, sergeant, stick a bayonet up his behind — that’ll make him move.” A few of us help Fry to his feet, and somehow we manage to keep him going.

We proceed cautiously, heeding the warnings of those ahead of us. At last we reach our positions.

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It is midnight when we arrive at our positions. The men we are relieving give us a few instructions and leave quickly, glad to get out.

It is September and the night is warm. Not a sound disturbs the quiet. Somewhere away far to our right we hear the faint sound of continuous thunder. The exertion of the trip up the line has made us sweaty and tired. We slip most of our accouterments off and lean against the parados. We have been warned that the enemy is but a few hundred yards off, so we speak in whispers. It is perfectly still. I remember nights like this in the Laurentians. The harvest moon rides overhead.

Our sergeant, Johnson, appears around the corner of the bay, stealthily like a ghost. He gives us instructions:

“One man up on sentry duty! Keep your gun covered with the rubber sheet! No smoking!”

He hurries on to the next bay. Fry mounts the step and peers into No Man’s Land. He is rested now and says that if he can only get a good pair of boots he will be happy. He has taken his boots off and stands in his stocking feet. He shows us where his heel is cut. His boots do not fit. The sock is wet with blood. He wants to take his turn at sentry duty first so that he can rest later on. We agree.

Clearly and I sit on the firing-step and talk quietly.

“So this is war.”

“Quiet.”

“Yes, just like the country back home, eh?”

We talk of the trench; how we can make it more comfortable.

We light cigarettes against orders and cup our hands around them to hide the glow. We sit thinking. Fry stands motionless with his steel helmet shoved down almost over his eyes. He leans against the parapet motionless. There is a quiet dignity about his posture. I remember what
we were told at the base about falling asleep on sentry duty. I nudge his leg. He grunts.

“Asleep?” I whisper.

“No,” he answers, “I’m all right.”

“What do you see?”

“Nothing. Wire and posts.”

“Tired?”

“I’m all right.”

The sergeant reappears after a while. We squinch our cigarettes.

“Everything O.K. here?”

I nod.

“Look out over there. They got the range on us. Watch out.”

We light another cigarette. We continue our aimless talk.

“I wonder what St. Catherine Street looks like —”

“Same old thing, I suppose — stores, whores, theaters —”

“Like to be there just the same —”

“Me too.”

We sit and puff our fags for half a minute or so.

I try to imagine what Montreal looks like. The images are murky. All that is unreality. The trench, Cleary, Fry, the moon overhead — this is real.

In his corner of the bay Fry is beginning to move from one foot to another. It is time to relieve him. He steps down and I take his place. I look into the wilderness of posts and wire in front of me.

After a while my eyes begin to water. I see the whole army of wire posts begin to move like a silent host towards me:

I blink my eyes and they halt.

I doze a little and come to with a jerk.

So this is war, I say to myself again for the hundredth time. Down on the firing-step the boys are sitting like dead men. The thunder to the right has died down. There is absolutely no sound.

I try to imagine how an action would start. I try to fancy the preliminary bombardment. I remember all the precautions one has to take to protect one’s life. Fall flat on your belly, we had been told time and time again. The shriek of the shell, the instructor in trench warfare said, was no warning because the shell traveled faster than its sound. First, he had said, came the explosion of the shell — then came the shriek and then you hear the firing of the gun . . . .

From the stories I heard from veterans and from newspaper reports I conjure up a picture of an imaginary action. I see myself getting the Lewis gun in position. I see it spurtting darts of flame into the night. I hear the roar of battle. I feel elated. Then I try to fancy the horrors of the battle. I see Cleary, Fry and Brown stretched out on the firing-step. They are stiff and their faces are white and set in the stillness of death. Only I remain alive.
An inaudible movement in front of me pulls me out of the dream. I look down and see Fry massaging his feet. All is still. The moon sets slowly and everything becomes dark.

The sergeant comes into the bay again and whispers to me:

"Keep your eyes open now — they might come over on a raid now that it's dark. The wire's cut over there — " He points a little to my right.

I stand staring into the darkness. Everything moves rapidly again as I stare. I look away for a moment and the illusion ceases.

Something leaps towards my face.

I jerk back, afraid.

Instinctively I feel for my rifle in the corner of the bay.

It is a rat.

It is as large as a tom-cat. It is three feet away from my face and it looks steadily at me with its two staring, beady eyes. It is fat. Its long tapering tail curves away from its padded hindquarters. There is still a little light from the stars and this light shines faintly on its sleek skin. With a darting movement it disappears. I remember with a cold feeling that it was fat, and why.

Cleary taps my shoulder. It is time to be relieved.

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Over in the German lines I hear quick, sharp reports. Then the red-tailed comets of the minenuerfer sail high in the air, making parabolas of red light as they come towards us. They look pretty, like the fireworks when we left Montreal. The sergeant rushes into the bay of the trench, breathless. "Minnies," he shouts, and dashes on.

In that instant there is a terrific roar directly behind us.

The night whistles and flashes red.

The trench rocks and sways.

Mud and earth leap into the air, come down upon us in heaps.

We throw ourselves upon our faces, clawing our nails into the soft earth in the bottom of the trench.

Another!

This one crashes to splinters about twenty feet in front of the bay.

Part of the parapet caves in.

We try to burrow into the ground like frightened rats.

The shattering explosions splinter the air in a million fragments. I taste salty liquid on my lips. My nose is bleeding from the force of the detonations.

SOS flares go up along our front calling for help from our artillery.

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\(^{6}\text{minenuerfer}: \text{mine-throwing trench mortars.}\)
The signals sail into the air and explode, giving forth showers of red, white and blue lights held aloft by a silken parachute.

The sky is lit by hundreds of fancy fireworks like a night carnival.
The air shrieks and cat-calls.
Still they come.
I am terrified. I hug the earth, digging my fingers into every crevice, every hole.
A blinding flash and an exploding howl a few feet in front of the trench.
My bowels liquefy.
Acrid smoke bites the throat, parches the mouth. I am beyond mere fright. I am frozen with an insane fear that keeps me cowering in the bottom of the trench. I lie flat on my belly, waiting.

Suddenly it stops.
The fire lifts and passes over us to the trenches in the rear.
We lie still, unable to move. Fear has robbed us of the power to act. I hear Fry whimpering near me. I crawl over to him with great effort. He is half covered with earth and débris. We begin to dig him out.
To our right they have started to shell the front lines. It is about half a mile away. We do not care. We are safe.
Without warning it starts again.
The air screams and howls like an insane woman.
"We are getting it in earnest now. Again we throw ourselves face downward on the bottom of the trench and grovel like savages before this demoniac frenzy."
The concussion of the explosions batters against us.
I am knocked breathless.
I recover and hear the roar of the bombardment.
It screams and rages and boils like an angry sea. I feel a prickly sensation behind my eyeballs.

A shell lands with a monster shriek in the next bay. The concussion rolls me over on my back. I see the stars shining serenely above us. Another lands in the same place. Suddenly the stars revolve. I land on my shoulder. I have been tossed into the air.
I begin to pray.
"God — God — please . . ."
I remember that I do not believe in God. Insane thoughts race through my brain. I want to catch hold of something, something that will explain this mad fury, this maniacal congealed hatred that pours down on our heads. I can find nothing to console me, nothing to appease my terror. I know that hundreds of men are standing a mile or two from me pulling gun-lanyards, blowing us to smithereens. I know that and nothing else.

I begin to cough. The smoke is thick. It rolls in heavy clouds over the trench, blurring the stabbing lights of the explosions.
A shell bursts near the parapet.
Fragments smack the sandbags like a merciless shower of steel hail.
A piece of mud flies into my mouth. It is cool and refreshing. It tastes earthy.

Suddenly it stops again.
I bury my face in the cool, damp earth. I want to weep. But I am too weak and shaken for tears.

We lie still, waiting. . . .