Joyeux Noel

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CHRISTMAS EVE, 1917. We were huddled about the little fire in the center of the smoky, damp dugout. Tomorrow was Christmas, but it seemed so lonesome, so far from home and the good old U. S. A. France—just cold, bleak trenches and white open spaces to the enemy’s line.

Someone broke the silence with a hollow laugh. “I never thought France could get so damn cold. Mud—rain—and then snow, and ice in the guns. How can we fight with ice in the breech?”

He got no reply. Everyone seemed to be thinking. I was thinking of back home on Christmas Eve—the tree with the flickering lights and the shining star at the top. It was strange to be killing or about to be killed if you stuck your head above the parapet. Christmas was always so peaceful.

A fellow lying in the corner on a pile of snow started to hum a song—“It Came Upon a Midnight Clear.” We all took it up in a breath with a low, soft humming. Funny—how it broke that brooding spell.

“COME on, Joe, join in. Forget that girl back home.”

“Oh, oh, yea.” Joe sort of shook himself and began to sing in a clear tenor that startled the boys. He had just joined
the outfit two days ago, and we hadn’t heard much from him before. His voice led us in “Silent Night, Holy Night,” then, “Hark! the Herald Angels Sing.”

A knock came on the door. Lieutenant Randall stepped through the low entrance.

“As you were, men. I want two men for a scouting party. I dislike sending anyone out tonight, but we must have information of the enemy’s position.”

I looked around the dugout. Every face was blank, sort of dreaming. “I’ll go, lieutenant,” I spoke up.

Joe turned and gazed up from the fire. “Here too, sir.”

“All right, men. Come with me.”

We followed him to the H. Q. dugout and entered into the dimly lighted room. A map before him, the lieutenant pointed out our position. “You men are to move across to the enemy’s wire, follow it to the right to this ravine, and then to this road. You are to observe any enemy movement, and locate, if possible, any gun positions. Stay together, and keep on the lookout for flares. Good luck, men.”

“Thank you, sir.” Joe seemed to snap out of his dreamy stupor. He had a new gleam in his eye.

“Are you ready, Joe?”

“O. K. Let’s go.” He climbed over the edge of the trench. I followed him and his squirming track in the light fallen snow.

We had to crawl under our own barbed wire. On our backs we worked through the entanglement. On the other side, I paused and looked up at the sky. Stars twinkled in the black heavens. Friendly, cheerful specks, which made one forget the grim business ahead. I glanced over at Joe’s dark figure, barely silhouetted against the white snow. He stretched out a hand in response. We moved on, over the hard ground, rolling into a shell hole when it came in our path, and then out again.

Joe never spoke, just glanced back and signaled me to come on. We couldn’t even whisper, for our voices would have carried to the enemy trenches ahead. It was peacefully, mysteriously quiet. The snow clung to the barbed wire and covered the ground like a cool white sheet, reflecting the twinkling stars.
JOE moved forward as from some inward impulse. It seemed as though he were trying to forget the grim business of war, and just go forward—onward, to reach some distant goal. The Big Dipper and the North Star shone over the dark ridge behind the twisted wire entanglement.

We crawled on, following the course they marked. The German lines were just across this forbidding, snow-draped barrier. Joe stopped, turned his head and listened. He crawled forward and slid into a ragged shell hole. I followed and lay beside him in the banked snow.

Faintly came the sound of voices, German voices singing carols—"Stille Nacht, Heilige Nacht—." A smile spread over Joe's face. He raised his head above the edge of the shell hole to hear better. A star shell burst suddenly overhead with its brilliant light.

"Rat-ta-ta-tat." Bright spurts of flame crashed from the left. Joe turned and slid slowly back into the shell hole. Little drops of red flecked the white blanket about him. He lay back in the soft whiteness with his eyes closed.

"Joe!"

He opened his eyes and looked up smiling. "It was like the Star of Bethlehem," he whispered. "I can still hear them singing." His lips moved, and faintly came the words—"Peace on earth—good will to men."