

Hieronimus Boche

CHRIS LAWSON

Chris Lawson is a doctor and writer. His award-winning fiction has appeared in *Eidolon* magazine, as well as *Asimov's Science Fiction*, *Event Horizon*, *Dreaming Down-Under*, *Gathering the Bones*, *Agog!*, *Realms of Fantasy* and *Spectrum*, and has been collected in several Year's Best science fiction anthologies and the Australian retrospective *Centaurus*. His stories have been translated into French, Bulgarian and Czech and one has been optioned for feature film adaptation. He has written non-fiction for journals such as *Borderlands* and *Ticonderoga Online*. A collection of his stories and essays, *Written in Blood*, was published in 2003. Most of his work is drawn from cutting edge biotechnology, although he sometimes lapses into fantasy and horror.

About 'Hieronimus Boche' Chris writes, "Simon Brown and I share an interest in World War One as a setting for existential horror stories and collaborated on 'No Mans Land' from *Gathering the Bones*. This story came out of a sudden visual image that struck me for no reason I can think of — that of the trenches arranged in a circle that Manchester the pilot sees from 20000 feet. It is a Dante reference of course, but it also says that the soldiers who ground each other's bodies into the Flanders mud were equal victims rather than natural enemies."

* * * *

DEAREST MATER & PATER,

P

lease forgive me for not writing, and for other things. We have been cut off for so long that we are all out of spare paper, so I am reduced to writing this in the margins of the prayer book you sent for my birthday. I do not know if this will reach you. You may find it unexpectedly amongst my effects, should you ever flip open this prayer book, perhaps to see what passages I've marked. There would be no purpose in sending this letter in the regular mail, even if I could. The Censor would never allow it through.

We are well behind the lines now. Our Bn. seemed so big when we were

first separated from the main body of the division, and now there are so few of us.

We were cut off by a German advance that ran right over the only trench back to HQ. So now we can't get back through the main trench, and it's suicide to go up and over, even at night.

We fight and we fight and it seems to go on forever. We live in an endless cycle of skirmishing, scrounging, and sleeping. Every night Fritz comes at us and pushes us further down the salient. The salient gets steeper and steeper the further we withdraw, which gives the Boche an even greater advantage over us for their next assault.

The winter fog is constant, morning, noon and night. We haven't had a clear day for goodness knows how long, and the fog gives the landscape a spectral quality, which is a fitting milieu for the thousands of bodies that have been ground into the mud.

When the Huns drop gas we can't even see it coming, and the first we know of it is when the mist around us turns green. There is so little warning that we keep our gas masks hanging on our necks at all times.

The fog comes up from the stream at the bottom of the salient. The stream is not marked on the Major's maps. We call it the Black Nile. Every day some of us head down to the Black Nile to carry water back. We fill our canteens, water bags and Dixies, and trudge back up the slope. The water tastes bitter, but at least we can drink and wash and shave.

There's no food. We ran out of rations a while ago and we're all starting to look terribly gaunt. There's nothing to eat except the rats, and they're too clever to be caught. After we roasted a few of them, they learned to keep their distance. Now they sit on the trench rim, just out of reach, watching us, whiskers quivering, until they see that we are asleep, and then they scuttle over and squeeze into our kits. Of course there's nothing left to eat in the kits, but the rats are in the same pickle as the rest of us and the smell of biscuits and Christmas hams is still in the canvas. The smell drives the rats mad with hunger and they gnaw at anything that resembles food. Leather straps are a particular favourite. We can't smell nearly so well, so it's not so bad for us as it is for them. This is the first time I've felt any sympathy for the wretched vermin.

It seems almost a sin to admit it, but I wish it wasn't just my sense of smell that was dull. I wish my ears were blocked and my eyes had cataracts. I wish I

could not feel the cold in the trenches at night, or the vibrations that shake the ground when the German guns pound the salient. I wish I could feel nothing at all.

I don't know how long we've been cut off. Nobody seems to be sure. Counting the days is more difficult than one might think, what with the shortage of paper to write on and the constant pounding of the shells making it impossible to concentrate long enough to figure out dates and times. Sometimes my head gets rattled so hard I can't remember what I'm doing here, and I have to pull out my name tag to remind myself of who I am.

Earlier today... At least I think it was earlier today... Yes. Earlier today I was with Kiltie and Lofty... You remember them from my letters? Kiltie is the Scot. I guess it goes without saying. I've forgotten his real name now, because we only ever call him Kiltie, and it's easy to remember because of his Scots accent. Lofty's the tall fellow, *naturellement*.

Kiltie and Lofty and I had the job of scrambling down the salient to get water for the lads when Kiltie saw a shape in the fog. "Look at this," he said, and he pointed to the outline of what turned out to be an aeroplane - a Bristol F.2b fighter.

We couldn't believe it. We hadn't seen or heard an aeroplane for ages. We thought that we had been driven too far from the main body of the division and been given up for dead, yet here was a plane behind our position, where no plane should have been.

"It's wrecked," said Lofty.

"No it isn't," said Kiltie.

We moved quietly to the Bristol. The fog makes us tread softly when we walk and whisper when we speak. You never know if there's a Boche just out of sight in the fog, so we get about as quietly as we can.

We approached the Bristol with all caution. There were bullet holes in the canvas of the fuselage and one of its landing wheels was a little bent, but otherwise it was in fine condition.

The pilot lay in the cockpit, white, motionless, and with flecks of saliva around his mouth.

"He must have lived just long enough to land the plane," said Kiltie.

Lofty went over to look at the pilot. He frowned, and then touched the pilot's skin.

"E isn't dead."

The pilot's eyes opened, flickered around to take in our faces, and then closed again.

"It's all right, mate," said Kiltie. "We ain't the Boche. We'll patch you up and get you right."

Lofty had more practical things on his mind. "Can you 'old a gun?" he asked the pilot. "We could do with another pair of 'ands this evening."

I thought someone had better introduce us to the pilot.

"The tall fellow's Lofty," I said. "The chap with the burr is Kiltie, and I'm Mo. They call me that because of my moustache." I pointed to my moustache to make the point. You'd be proud of my moustache, Pater; it's big and bushy and I'd wager you would never have guessed it possible when I enlisted.

The pilot didn't respond or move.

"Let's just see what's wrong with you before we get you out," said Lofty.

"There's nought wrong wi' him," said Kiltie. "Just look."

The pilot was in tiptop trim. There was no blood to be seen and not a hole in his uniform, not even a scrape.

"I'm not hurt," the pilot said. His voice was coarse and strained, as if he had never expected to speak again and was now surprised to find he had to.

"What the Dickens are you up to, then?" asked Lofty.

The pilot was quiet for a moment, and then said, "I don't want to say."

"Christ, man, we're not about to court-martial you."

"I should be dead," said the pilot. "I really should be dead. I don't know how I'm not."

Kiltie laughed and said, "Hell, I've been on the front for months now. I should be dead too, but you don't see me complaining about it."

"The plane went into a nosedive and headed straight down into the fog. I don't know how I'm not dead."

Lofty and Kiltie and I looked at each other, not knowing what to say.

The pilot said, "I must have managed to pull out of the dive at the last moment. I don't remember doing that, but I must have."

Lofty whispered to the two of us. "'E's lost 'is bottle. Let's get 'im back to the Major and 'ope 'e's useful for something."

Lofty was the strongest of us. He climbed up to the top of the cockpit, wrapped his arms around the pilot's chest, and lifted him out.

"There's no need," the pilot said. "I could have got out by myself."

"You weren't moving," said Lofty.

"You didn't ask me to."

The pilot was a queer bird, alright, but at least he wouldn't need carrying up the incline.

Lofty and Kiltie and I walked him back to the temporary HQ. He was slow, but didn't need any help. On the way back, Kiltie asked him why he'd wanted to crash the plane. The pilot didn't answer.

"Come on, mate. We've all seen too much to be shocked. I've seen men blown to shreds before my eyes. I've seen rats eating eyeballs. You won't have seen that from up in the sky, I bet. I've even seen an officer bugging one of the young privates as punishment for some minor indiscretion." Kiltie looked at me as he said it and against my will I blushed. "We took care of him toot sweet, but it left a nasty impression."

The pilot said, "You're a hard chap, I'm sure, but you don't want to know."

"Why not?"

“Either you’ll think I’m mad, or worse, you’ll believe me.”

“For Christ’s sake,” said Lofty. “Just tell us.”

He wouldn’t speak.

Kiltie said, “We’ll give him a cup of char back at base. That’ll loosen him up.” Kiltie was joking. The only tea on the line is made from leather boiled in Black Nile water, and it doesn’t make anyone chatty. The only loosening it does is at the wrong end of your gut.

We hoicked our way up to camp. Men were scattered about; most were asleep, but some were up and cleaning their Lee-Enfields or trading the baubles they’d scavenged.

First thing we got back, we took the pilot to the Major’s tent. The Major was trimming his moustache when we came in. He put down his mirror and scissors and came to see what we’d brought him.

Kiltie said, “We found a Bristol fighter out back of the salient, and this sky wallah was in it. He’s a bit shaky because he thought he was done for. He thought he was going to crash but he managed to land at the last moment. Apart from a case of the willies, he’s fine.”

The Major looked him over. The fellow was white as a vicar’s daughter. “What’s your name, man?” asked the Major.

“Let me check, sir.” He pulled his name tags out from under his uniform and said, “Lieutenant John Henry Messenger, sir.”

“So, lads,” he said to us. “What are we going to call Lieutenant John Henry Messenger?”

Kiltie piped up. “Manchester, sir. Because of his complexion,” he said. “He’s white as a sheet. Also, it sounds a bit like his real name.”

“That all right with you, lad?”

The pilot nodded. Manchester was all right with him.

“I’m sorry to tell you this, lad,” the Major said, “But your miraculous survival might not amount to much more than delaying the inevitable. We’re cut

off from the division and copping Jericho every night.”

“It’s all right, sir. We’re done for one way or another.”

The Major snapped upright with indignation. He said, “That’s not the sort of talk I tolerate in my battalion. You may be shaken, but I won’t have you pulling down morale.”

Manchester said that he had seen everything. He knew what was coming. It wasn’t a matter of attitude; it was what it was.

“So what is it that you know?” asked the Major.

“I don’t want to say, sir.”

“Whatever it is, it has affected you deeply, wot?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Don’t you think the rest of the men ought to know whatever it is that’s burning a hole in you?”

“I suppose so, sir.”

“Then out with it, Manchester.”

Manchester looked about, then at last chose to talk. He recounted a most peculiar story.

* * * *

MANCHESTER’S TALE

Manchester had been flying over the lines doing a midnight reconnoitre when a spray of bullets ripped across the fuselage.

He looked over his shoulder to find a Fokker D.VII, bright in the moonlight, on his tail. He tapped his observer on the shoulder, but the observer didn’t respond. Manchester gave the man’s shoulder a great shove, and the observer’s head fell forward, lifeless. The fellow had a bullet-hole through his chest.

Manchester put the Bristol into a hard bank to throw off the Boche ‘plane,

but the pilot in the Fokker was an experienced chap who knew how to hang back just the right amount to keep the fish on the hook. Manchester put the Bristol into a roll and, right at the peak of the roll, his observer fell out of the cockpit. The dead man fell away and disappeared into the fog below. When Manchester came out of the roll, he copped another spray across the fuselage.

The new Fokkers were not quite as fast as the Bristol he was flying, but they were more manoeuvrable. It was nearly impossible to shake one off in a one-on-one scrap, Manchester told us. His only chance was to dive into the fog.

He took the Bristol down into the cloud. Looking over his shoulder, he saw the Fokker holding back, staying above the fog cover. He knew the German pilot would be watching for signs of a trail in the fog. Manchester would have to fly low and risk smashing into the ground, or one of the few trees still standing on the front.

He flew as low as he dared for a full five minutes and then he opened the throttle as hard as he could and put the Bristol into a steep climb.

It almost worked. The Fokker had lost his trail and was doing slow circles above the fog. The Boche saw Manchester's Bristol come out into the moonlight and banked to catch him, but Manchester had enough of a head start to stay out of range of the Fokker's guns.

They climbed and climbed, with Manchester's Bristol slowly edging ahead. The Fokker opened his guns, trying for a lucky shot, but the rounds fell away safely below the Bristol.

Manchester fixed his bearings on the full moon and kept climbing. The air grew colder and harder to breathe. The Bristol's engine began to strain, but he was pulling ahead of the Fokker.

Then, without warning, the Fokker exploded. A huge fireball erupted a few hundred feet below him. Manchester wasn't sure why. Sometimes the Fokkers could overheat and their fuel tanks or their bombs could ignite spontaneously.

He watched with relief as the Fokker's ruins tumbled back to Earth, strings of black smoke trailing the debris as it fell. Manchester eased the Bristol out of the climb and went into a slow descent. He watched the Fokker fall all the way down.

Then he saw what it was that had disturbed him so deeply.

From 20000 feet, the whole arena of battle was laid out before him. Moonlight illuminated the realm. The terrain wasn't the way it looked on the maps.

According to the maps we have, the front goes from Mullhausen on the Swiss border to Nieuport on the North Sea. Manchester ought to have seen a long ribbon meandering across the Earth, roughly north-to-south. No Man's Land should have been at the centre of the ribbon, with trenches branching and sub-branching either side of it.

What Manchester saw instead was that the trenches made a circle. No Man's Land ran in an enormous loop and the trenches flanked it all the way around. The entire arena seemed to be in the centre of a depression, with the mountains reaching up around it, and the slope running down towards the centre.

The centre could not be seen for the fog. Thick banks of mist rolled out of the core, obscuring everything in the middle, and only dissipating near the front, so that patches of No Man's Land and the accompanying trenches could be seen peeking through the fog.

"I have to confess," he said. "I didn't lose control of the plane. I put it into a nosedive."

His memories became confused from that time forward. He could recall diving. He could recall the moment the Bristol sank into the clouds and everything became white. The next thing he could remember was Lofty pulling him out of the aeroplane while Kiltie and I made chatter.

"I must have lost my nerve at the last moment, but I don't remember."

When Manchester finished, we stood in silence, mulling it over.

"Well, lad," the Major said at last. "I'm glad you can see the madness in that story. Not to worry. We all get a little confused and disoriented under the strain. You had just lost your observer, which must have come as quite a blow, and also the air must be thin up there, wot? Quite likely not enough oxygen got to your brain. Let's hear no more about it, especially to the younger lads who are rather impressionable. The important thing is you pulled through and we need a dependable pair of hands tonight."

"Yes, sir," said Manchester, and then we took him out and showed him around the camp and introduced him to the other lads.

* * * *

LAST NIGHT

We left him to sleep on an old bunk, and then Lofty and Kiltie and I had to go back down the salient to get the water we had been sent for in the first place.

As we climbed down the salient to the Black Nile, we went back past the Bristol in the mist. It looked like a heroic statue, proud and strong.

It reminded me of the stone lions that guard the South Bank, and that reminded me in turn of the brewery there and your promise, Pater, to buy me a pint the day I reach my majority; I hope it's a promise I'll be able to hold you to.

We filled our bottles and buckets and Dixies and hauled the water up the slope and then did it all over again. Then we found our bivvies and our sleeping bags and took some rest. The Huns attack at night, so we sleep as best we can during the day.

We slept, dreamt, and woke at dusk. We cleaned our rifles, filled our ammo pouches and sharpened our bayonets. The Moon came up over the enemy trench before us, big and full even through the fog, and we waited for the Hun to advance.

The Boche came when the Moon was halfway to overhead. They cast moon-shadows towards us through the mist; the shadows leaped ahead of them and crawled over the craters in No Man's Land. They came in shambling lines, without a care for military precision. I know exactly how the poor sods felt. I've been in a few forward sorties myself. It's a queer feeling. You're a sitting duck, and the only thing that might save your life is that you are one of so many other Tommies marching across No Man's Land, and only so many bullets can be fired before the captain decides enough is enough and orders a retreat.

When you're one among the huddle, moving towards a dug-in enemy with machine-guns, the merit of military discipline becomes rather abstract. Instead one digs into one's own soul and finds personal rigour. One finds the strength to walk proudly in the face of death like a true Englishman. Of course, the advancing soldiers were German rather than English, but their pride was none the less for it, no matter what stories the newspapers tell about the Huns being spineless dolts.

They marched downhill towards us and we could see from the way they

moved that they knew they were as good as dead.

The first wave of Boche came into range. We opened fire and ripped them to shreds. Not a single one of them was left standing. Another wave walked behind, stepped over the corpses, and fell to another hail of gunfire.

So it went, over and over: the Hun would advance and fall. Every advance would come closer, and we knew that sooner or later the Hun would overrun our trench and we'd be forced to withdraw further down the salient. Then dawn would come, and we would sleep. The cycle repeated itself every day, and the only thing that changed was the steepness of the gradient, the thickness of the fog, and the thinning of our ranks.

True to form, late last night, as the Moon swung over our heads and sank behind us, we found the Boche nearly upon us. We could see the gas masks on their faces. They were close enough now to return fire. Bullets cracked around us and machine-guns rattled. We fired so often that our rifle bolts grew too hot to touch, though we had no choice but to touch them. We did not have the luxury of even a few seconds to let the metal cool. We had to keep loading the breech and firing as fast as we could. Some men wrapped handkerchiefs around their trigger hands, and others let their palms scorch. The only time the breech got to cool a tad was when the magazine needed reloading.

Just before dawn, the Boche reached the trench and poured over the edge. We bayoneted a few, but the numbers were overwhelming and we scrambled a retreat to the trench behind.

We had already humped our supplies back there the day before, so we reloaded and fired into the advancing Huns. Then the sky lightened. It seemed as if the Boche were led by their shadows. When the Moon was behind them, it pushed them forward. When the Moon was at the other horizon, it pushed them back. The stand-down signal rang across the field and the German soldiers went back to their trenches with what seemed as little urgency for withdrawal as for advance.

It was dawn and we were exhausted. I'd just poured some water to replace the sweat I'd lost when Lofty of all people came leaping over the parapet and into the trench next to me. I was about to ask him what he had been doing out in No Man's Land when the answer followed him over the parapet.

Lofty was dragging a dead Boche by his harness, and the dead Jerry tumbled into the trench, covering me in mud and sticky German blood, and

knocking the cup from my hand. I'd have no water to drink until the morning run to the Black Nile.

"What the Devil are you playing at?" I asked Lofty.

"Mo, the pilot's right."

"What are you on about?"

"We're not in Flanders Fields, mate."

"Christ, not you too now."

"Just look and see."

He pulled the gas mask off the dead Boche. The poor Jerry had a hole in his skull the size of a saucer, right where his left eye should have been. You could see halfway into his brains.

"I've seen lots of dead men, Lofty. I don't much wish to see any more than I have to."

"Shut up and look, you stupid Minnie."

The Boche was all shot up to hell, and he still had Lofty's bayonet stuck in his chest.

Lofty said, "Look at 'im. 'E's got bits of uniform from all over."

The Boche was wearing a German uniform, but his harness was British, he had an ANZAC slouch hat, Canuck boots, and a jade figurine on a necklace.

"That's a South Seas idol," said Lofty of the figurine. "I've seen them Maoris carry 'em. I had to shoot this monster three times and I still 'ad to skewer 'im to make 'im drop."

"So he was a tough German who liked scavenging."

"How'd 'e get a head wound, then?"

"He copped a bullet while you were skewering him, that's how."

“Then how come ‘is gas mask doesn’t have a gaping big ‘ole in it?”

He had me there, but I wasn’t about to give in to his panic. “I don’t rightly know, but there must be an explanation.”

“Sure. The explanation is that the bullet went round ‘is gas mask before it went into ‘is brains. You really got the griffin there.”

“Listen, Lofty. You know the war does things to our heads. It shakes us up; stops us seeing straight; makes us believe things that can’t be true. Don’t get in a flap about this, and for God’s sake don’t tell anyone else about it.”

“What the ‘ell does it matter who I tell? We’re damned for sure, and I don’t mean in some future spiritual sense, neither. We’re damned right ‘ere and now and probably dead to boot and just don’t know it. We’re living right in the middle of one of them mediaeval paintings of Hell. What was the name of that painter you told me about?”

“Hieronymus Bosch.”

Lofty burst out laughing. It was the sort of laughter you hear from men who are dead-tired and pushed to their limits.

“Shut it, Lofty, and push this damned Jerry back over the top, will you? We both need sleep.”

I pulled my cap over my eyes and pretended to sleep. I got to thinking about what Manchester had seen and what Lofty had dragged back with him. I started wondering why we never got out of the fog, not even for a moment. I wondered why we had run out of food but always seemed to have plenty of ammo. I wondered why the lads in the Bn. had one name tag while Manchester had two. I wondered why the Moon seemed to be full every night, although that could have been my memory playing tricks. And I wondered if it was the Black Nile water that made it so hard to recall anything, even our names.

I thought about asking Lofty why we were in Hell, but I knew what he would say. Everyone here had done something to deserve it: the Major had been sent down from the base where he had been instrumental in developing attrition as a war strategy. Manchester had lost all hope and killed himself in his Bristol. Kiltie had knifed the captain who had punished me so immorally; but what about Lofty and me? I couldn’t think of a reason.

I took the cap off my face and crept over to Lofty. He was as wide-awake as I was.

“You going to clean yourself up before you sleep?” he asked.

“I need to ask you a question,” I said. He looked surly with me, but nodded anyway. “I can understand why some of us would go to Hell, but why you and me? Is it because of what we are?”

“It’s because of what Kiltie did.”

“We didn’t have anything to do with that. He didn’t ask us before he knifed the captain.”

“We could have stopped it.”

“How?”

“If we’d opened our traps and told ‘im what really ‘appened, that’s ‘ow. But you were afraid Kiltie would realize you ‘adn’t exactly struggled against the captain’s punishment. And I, God damn me, I wanted the bastard captain to die for what ‘e’d done.”

I couldn’t face him any more. I turned and walked away.

Down the trench I went to find an empty cubbyhole to be by myself. I got to thinking and I came up with a plan.

Please forgive me, Mater and Pater, not for what I am - because as Lofty says, God made us just as we are - but for what I have in mind. There are no chaplains here, and I am not certain a chaplain’s absolution would mean much to me any more. I can ask only you, in abstraction, even though you may never read these words.

This is what I’m going to do:

I’m not going to sleep this morning. I’m going to stay awake and I’m not going to drink any more of the Black Nile water. In case I forget anyway, I’ll have this letter to remind me.

Around midday, I’ll volunteer for water duty again. I’ll take Manchester with me and on the way down the salient, I’ll persuade him to take off in the

Bristol and I'll take the observer's seat. If he won't agree, I've got a German pistol.

It should be easy enough to turn the Bristol around and push it down the salient for a take-off.

We'll fly out of this white emptiness, away from the front. I'm tired of being pushed further and further down. I'm taking us out of here.

Maybe I'm as crazy as Manchester and Lofty. In that case we'll find HQ and let them know that the Bn. is cut off and needs rescuing. We'll both get medals and it'll be a splendid wheeze.

If I'm not mad, if we really are where I think we are, then there'll be no HQ to find. I'll make Manchester fly us to the centre of the maelstrom, right over the Devil's throne, and then I'll drop a few bombs over the side, straight onto Old Nick's crown. I don't imagine it will do Old Nick any lasting harm, but at least it will let him know that he's gone too far. Not even the Kaiser himself deserves this Hell.

After that, we'll fly right on past the Devil's throne and up into the Garden of Heaven if we can. And when we get there, I'll drop a bomb on Him too.

Please forgive,
Your loving son.