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FINISHED WITH THE WAR

## A Soldier's Declaration

I am making this statement as an act of wilful defiance of military authority, because I believe the war is being deliberately prolonged by those who have the power to end it.

I am a soldier, convinced that I am acting on behalf of soldiers. I believe that this war, upon which I entered as a war of defence and liberation, has now become a war of aggression and conquest. I believe that the purposes for which I and my fellow soldiers entered upon this war should have been so clearly stated as to have made it impossible to change them, and that, had this been done, the objects which actuated us would now be attainable by negotiation.

I have seen and endured the suffering of the troops, and I can no longer be a party to prolong these sufferings for ends which I believe to be evil and unjust.

I am not protesting against the conduct of the war, but against the political errors and insincerities for which the fighting men are being sacrificed.

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On behalf of those who are suffering now I make this protest against the deception which is being practised on them; also I believe that I may help to destroy the callous complacency with which the majority of those at home regard the continuance of agonies which they do not share, and which they have not sufficient imagination to realize.

S. Sassoon

July 1917

Bryce waited for Rivers to finish reading before he spoke again. 'The "S" stands for "Siegfried". Apparently, he thought that was better left out.'

'And I'm sure he was right.' Rivers folded the paper and ran his fingertips along the edge. 'So they're sending him here?'

Bryce smiled. 'Oh, I think it's rather more specific than that. They're sending him to *you*.'

Rivers got up and walked across to the window. It was a fine day, and many of the patients were in the hospital grounds, watching a game of tennis. He heard the *pok-pok* of rackets, and a cry of frustration as a ball smashed into the net. 'I suppose he is – "shell-shocked"?''

'According to the Board, yes.'

'It just occurs to me that a diagnosis of neurasthenia might not be inconvenient confronted with this.' He held up the Declaration.

'Colonel Langdon chaired the Board. *He* certainly seems to think he is.'

'Langdon doesn't believe in shell-shock.'

Bryce shrugged. ‘Perhaps Sassoon was gibbering all over the floor.’

‘“Funk, old boy.” I know Langdon.’ Rivers came back to his chair and sat down. ‘He doesn’t *sound* as if he’s gibbering, does he?’

Bryce said carefully, ‘Does it matter what his mental state is? Surely it’s better for him to be here than in prison?’

‘Better for *him*, perhaps. What about the hospital? Can you imagine what our dear Director of Medical Services is going to say, when he finds out we’re sheltering “conchies” as well as cowards, shirkers, scrimshankers and degenerates? We’ll just have to hope there’s no publicity.’

‘There’s going to be, I’m afraid. The Declaration’s going to be read out in the House of Commons next week.’

‘By?’

‘Lees-Smith.’

Rivers made a dismissive gesture.

‘Yes, well, I know. But it still means the press.’

‘And the minister will say that no disciplinary action has been taken, because Mr Sassoon is suffering from a severe mental breakdown, and therefore not responsible for his actions. I’m not sure *I’d* prefer that to prison.’

‘I don’t suppose he was offered the choice. Will you take him?’

‘You mean I *am* being offered a choice?’

‘In view of your case load, yes.’

Rivers took off his glasses and swept his hand down across his eyes. ‘I suppose they *have* remembered to send the file?’

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Sassoon leant out of the carriage window, still half-expecting to see Graves come pounding along the platform, looking even more dishevelled than usual. But further down the train, doors had already begun to slam, and the platform remained empty.

The whistle blew. Immediately, he saw lines of men with grey muttering faces clambering up the ladders to face the guns. He blinked them away.

The train began to move. Too late for Robert now. Prisoner arrives without escort, Sassoon thought, sliding open the carriage door.

By arriving an hour early he'd managed to get a window seat. He began picking his way across to it through the tangle of feet. An elderly vicar, two middle-aged men, both looking as if they'd done rather well out of the war, a young girl and an older woman, obviously travelling together. The train bumped over a point. Everybody rocked and swayed, and Sassoon, stumbling, almost fell into the vicar's lap. He mumbled an apology and sat down. Admiring glances, and not only from the women. Sassoon turned to look out of the window, hunching his shoulder against them all.

After a while he stopped pretending to look at the smoking chimneys of Liverpool's back streets and closed his eyes. He needed to sleep, but instead Robert's face floated in front of him, white and twitching as it had been last Sunday, almost a week ago now, in the lounge of the Exchange Hotel.

For a moment, looking up to find that khaki-clad figure standing just inside the door, he thought he was hallucinating again.

‘Robert, what on earth are *you* doing here?’ He jumped up and ran across the lounge. ‘Thank God you’ve come.’

‘I got myself passed fit.’

‘Robert, *no*.’

‘What else could I do? After getting *this*.’ Graves dug into his tunic pocket and produced a crumpled piece of paper. ‘A covering letter would have been nice.’

‘I wrote.’

‘No, you didn’t, Sass. You just sent me this. Couldn’t you at least have *talked* about it first?’

‘I thought I’d written.’

They sat down, facing each other across a small table. Cold northern light streamed in through the high windows, draining Graves’s face of the little colour it had.

‘Sass, you’ve got to give this up.’

‘Give it up? You don’t think I’ve come this far, do you, just to give in now?’

‘Look, you’ve made your protest. For what it’s worth, I agree with every word of it. But you’ve had your say. There’s no point making a martyr of yourself.’

‘The only way I can get publicity is to make them court-martial me.’

‘They won’t do it.’

‘Oh, yes, they will. It’s just a matter of hanging on.’

‘You’re in no state to stand a court-martial.’ Graves clasped his clenched fist. ‘If I had Russell here now, I’d *shoot* him.’

‘It was my idea.’

‘Oh, pull the other one. And even if it was, do you think

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anybody's going to understand it? They'll just say you've got cold feet.'

'Look, Robert, you think exactly as I do about the war, and you *do . . . nothing*. All right, that's your choice. But don't come here lecturing *me* about *cold feet*. This is the hardest thing I've ever done.'

Now, on the train going to Craiglockhart, it still seemed the hardest thing. He shifted in his seat and sighed, looking out over fields of wheat bending to the wind. He remembered the silvery sound of shaken wheat, the shimmer of light on the stalks. He'd have given anything to be out there, away from the stuffiness of the carriage, the itch and constriction of his uniform.

On that Sunday they'd taken the train to Formby and spent the afternoon wandering aimlessly along the beach. A dull, wintry-looking sun cast their shadows far behind them, so that every gesture either of them made was mimicked and magnified.

'They won't *let* you make a martyr of yourself, Sass. You should have accepted the Board.'

The discussion had become repetitive. For perhaps the fourth time, Sassoon said, 'If I hold out long enough, there's nothing else they can do.'

'There's a lot they can do.' Graves seemed to come to a decision. 'As a matter of fact, I've been pulling a few strings on your behalf.'

Sassoon smiled to hide his anger. 'Good. If you've been exercising your usual tact, that ought to get me at least two years.'

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‘They won’t court-martial you.’

In spite of himself, Sassoon began to feel afraid. ‘What, then?’

‘Shut you up in a lunatic asylum for the rest of the war.’

‘And that’s the result of your string-pulling, is it? Thanks.’

‘No, the result of my string-pulling is to get you another Board. You must take it this time.’

‘You can’t put people in lunatic asylums just like that. You have to have *reasons*.’

‘They’ve got reasons.’

‘Yes, the Declaration. Well, that doesn’t prove me insane.’

‘And the hallucinations? *The corpses in Piccadilly?*’

A long silence. ‘I had rather hoped my letters to you were private.’

‘I had to persuade them to give you another Board.’

‘They won’t court-martial me?’

‘No. Not in any circumstances. And if you go on refusing to be boarded, they *will* put you away.’

‘You know, Robert, I wouldn’t believe this from anybody else. Will you *swear* it’s true?’

‘Yes.’

‘On the Bible?’

Graves held up an imaginary Bible and raised his right hand. ‘I swear.’

Their shadows stretched out behind them, black on the white sand. For a moment Sassoon still hesitated. Then, with an odd little gasp, he said, ‘All right then, I’ll give way.’

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## *Regeneration*

In the taxi, going to Craiglockhart, Sassoon began to feel frightened. He looked out of the window at the crowded pavements of Princes Street, thinking he was seeing them for the first and last time. He couldn't imagine what awaited him at Craiglockhart, but he didn't for a moment suppose the inmates were let out.

He glanced up and found the taxi-driver watching him in the mirror. All the local people must know the name of the hospital, and what it was for. Sassoon's hand went up to his chest and began pulling at a loose thread where his MC ribbon had been.

*For conspicuous gallantry during a raid on the enemy's trenches. He remained for 1½ hours under rifle and bomb fire collecting and bringing in our wounded. Owing to his courage and determination, all the killed and wounded were brought in.*

Reading the citation, it seemed to Rivers more extraordinary than ever that Sassoon should have thrown the medal away. Even the most extreme pacifist could hardly be ashamed of a medal awarded for *saving* life. He took his glasses off and rubbed his eyes. He'd been working on the file for over an hour, but, although he was now confident he knew all the facts, he was no closer to an understanding of Sassoon's state of mind. If anything, Graves's evidence to the Board – with its emphasis on hallucinations – seemed to suggest a full-blown psychosis rather than neurasthenia. And yet there was no other evidence for that. Misguided the Declaration might well be, but it was not deluded, illogical or incoherent. Only the throwing away of the medal still struck him as odd. That surely had been the action of a man at the end of his tether.

Well, we've all been there, he thought. The trouble was, he

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was finding it difficult to examine the evidence impartially. He *wanted* Sassoon to be ill. Admitting this made him pause. He got up and began pacing the floor of his room, from door to window and back again. He'd only ever encountered one similar case, a man who'd refused to go on fighting on religious grounds. Atrocities took place on both sides, he'd said. There was nothing to choose between the British and the Germans.

The case had given rise to heated discussions in the MO's common room – about the freedom of the individual conscience in wartime, and the role of the army psychiatrist in 'treating' a man who refused to fight. Rivers, listening to those arguments, had been left in no doubt of the depth and seriousness of the divisions. The controversy had died down only when the patient proved to be psychotic. That was the crux of the matter. A man like Sassoon would always be trouble, but he'd be a lot less trouble if he were ill.

Rivers was roused from these thoughts by the crunch of tyres on gravel. He reached the window in time to see a taxi draw up, and a man, who from his uniform could only be Sassoon, get out. After paying the driver, Sassoon stood for a moment, looking up at the building. Nobody arriving at Craiglockhart for the first time could fail to be daunted by the sheer gloomy, cavernous bulk of the place. Sassoon lingered on the drive for a full minute after the taxi had driven away, then took a deep breath, squared his shoulders, and ran up the steps.

Rivers turned away from the window, feeling almost ashamed of having witnessed that small, private victory over fear.

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Light from the window behind Rivers's desk fell directly on to Sassoon's face. Pale skin, purple shadows under the eyes. Apart from that, no obvious signs of nervous disorder. No twitches, jerks, blinks, no repeated ducking to avoid a long-exploded shell. His hands, doing complicated things with cup, saucer, plate, sandwiches, cake, sugar tongs and spoon, were perfectly steady. Rivers raised his own cup to his lips and smiled. One of the nice things about serving afternoon tea to newly arrived patients was that it made so many neurological tests redundant.

So far he hadn't looked at Rivers. He sat with his head slightly averted, a posture that could easily have been taken for arrogance, though Rivers was more inclined to suspect shyness. The voice was slightly slurred, the flow of words sometimes hesitant, sometimes rushed. A disguised stammer, perhaps, but a life-long stammer, Rivers thought, not the recent, self-conscious stammer of the neurasthenic.

'While I remember, Captain Graves rang to say he'll be along some time after dinner. He sent his apologies for missing the train.'

‘He *is* still coming?’

‘Yes.’

Sassoon looked relieved. ‘Do you know, I don’t think Graves’s caught a train in his life? Unless somebody was there to *put* him on it.’

‘We were rather concerned about you.’

‘In case the lunatic went missing?’

‘I wouldn’t put it quite like that.’

‘I was all right. I wasn’t even surprised, I thought he’d slept in. He’s been doing a . . . a lot of rushing round on my behalf recently. You’ve no idea how much work goes into *rigging* a Medical Board.’

Rivers pushed his spectacles up on to his forehead and massaged the inner corners of his eyes. ‘No, I don’t suppose I have. You know this may sound naïve but . . . to *me* . . . the accusation that a Medical Board has been rigged is quite a serious one.’

‘I’ve no complaints. I was dealt with in a perfectly fair and reasonable way. Probably better than I deserved.’

‘What kind of questions did they ask?’

Sassoon smiled. ‘Don’t you know?’

‘I’ve read the report, if that’s what you mean. I’d still like to hear your version.’

‘Oh: “Did I object to fighting on religious grounds?” I said I didn’t. It was rather amusing, actually. For a moment I thought they were asking me whether I objected to going on a crusade. “Did I think I was qualified to decide when the war should end?” I said I hadn’t thought about my qualifications.’ He glanced at Rivers. ‘*Not true*. And then . . . then Colonel Langdon asked *said*

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“Your friend tells us you’re very good at bombing. Don’t you still dislike the Germans?”

A long silence. The net curtain behind Rivers’s head billowed out in a glimmering arc, and a gust of cool air passed over their faces.

‘And what did you say to that?’

‘I don’t remember.’ He sounded impatient now. ‘It didn’t matter what I said.’

‘It matters now.’

‘All right.’ A faint smile. ‘Yes, I am quite good at bombing. No, I do not still dislike the Germans.’

‘Does that mean you once did?’

Sassoon looked surprised. For the first time something had been said that contradicted his assumptions. ‘Briefly. April and May of last year, to be precise.’

A pause. Rivers waited. After a while Sassoon went on, almost reluctantly. ‘A friend of mine had been killed. For a while I used to go out on patrol every night, looking for Germans to kill. Or rather I told myself that’s what I was doing. In the end I didn’t know whether I was trying to kill them, or just giving them plenty of opportunities to kill me.’

“‘Mad Jack.’”

Sassoon looked taken aback. ‘Graves really *has* talked, hasn’t he?’

‘It’s the kind of thing the Medical Board would need to know.’ Rivers hesitated. ‘Taking *unnecessary* risks is one of the first signs of a war neurosis.’

‘Is it?’ Sassoon looked down at his hands. ‘I didn’t know that.’

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‘Nightmares and hallucinations come later.’

‘What’s an “unnecessary risk” anyway? The maddest thing I ever did was done under orders.’ He looked up, to see if he should continue. ‘We were told to go and get the regimental badges off a German corpse. They reckoned he’d been dead two days, so obviously if we got the badges they’d know which battalion was opposite. Full moon, not a cloud in sight, *absolutely mad*, but off we went. Well, we got there – eventually – and what do we find? He’s been dead a helluva lot longer than two days, and he’s French anyway.’

‘So what did you do?’

‘Pulled one of his boots off and sent it back to battalion HQ. With quite a bit of his leg left inside.’

Rivers allowed another silence to open up. ‘I gather we’re not going to talk about nightmares?’

‘You’re in charge.’

‘Ye-es. But then one of the paradoxes of being an army psychiatrist is that you don’t actually get very far by *ordering* your patients to be frank.’

‘I’ll be as frank as you like. I did have nightmares when I first got back from France. I don’t have them now.’

‘And the hallucinations?’

He found this more difficult. ‘It was just that when I woke up, the nightmares didn’t always stop. So I used to see . . .’ A deep breath. ‘Corpses. Men with half their faces shot off, crawling across the floor.’

‘And you were awake when this happened?’

‘I don’t know. I must’ve been, because I could see the sister.’

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‘And was this always at night?’

‘No. It happened once during the day. I’d been to my club for lunch, and when I came out I sat on a bench, and . . . I suppose I must’ve nodded off.’ He was forcing himself to go on. ‘When I woke up, the pavement was covered in corpses. Old ones, new ones, black, green.’ His mouth twisted. ‘People were treading on their faces.’

Rivers took a deep breath. ‘You say you’d just woken up?’

‘Yes. I used to sleep quite a bit during the day, because I was afraid to go to sleep at night.’

‘When did all this stop?’

‘As soon as I left the hospital. The atmosphere in that place was really terrible. There was one man who used to boast about killing German prisoners. You can imagine what living with *him* was like.’

‘And the nightmares haven’t recurred?’

‘No. I do dream, of course, but not about the war. Sometimes a dream seems to go on after I’ve woken up, so there’s a kind of in-between stage.’ He hesitated. ‘I don’t know whether that’s abnormal.’

‘I hope not. It happens to me all the time.’ Rivers sat back in his chair. ‘When you look back now on your time in the hospital, do *you* think you were “shell-shocked”?’

‘I don’t know. Somebody who came to see me told my uncle he thought I was. As against that, I wrote one or two good poems while I was in there. We-ell . . .’ He smiled. ‘*I* was pleased with them.’

‘You don’t think it’s possible to write a good poem in a state of shock?’

‘No, I don’t.’

Rivers nodded. ‘You may be right. Would it be possible for me to see them?’

‘Yes, of course. I’ll copy them out.’

Rivers said, ‘I’d like to move on now to the . . . thinking behind the Declaration. You say your motives aren’t religious?’

‘No, not at all.’

‘Would you describe yourself as a pacifist?’

‘I don’t think so. I can’t possibly say “*No war is ever justified*”, because I haven’t thought about it enough. Perhaps some wars are. Perhaps this one was when it started. I just don’t think our war aims – *whatever they may be* – and we don’t know – justify this level of slaughter.’

‘And you say you *have* thought about your qualifications for saying that?’

‘*Yes*. I’m only too well aware of how it sounds. A *second-lieutenant*, no less, saying “The war must stop”. On the other hand, I have *been* there. I’m at least as well qualified as some of the old men you see sitting around in clubs, cackling on about “attrition” and “wastage of manpower” and . . .’ His voice became a vicious parody of an old man’s voice. ‘“*Lost heavily in that last scrap.*” You don’t talk like that if you’ve watched them die.’

‘No intelligent or sensitive person would talk like that anyway.’

A slightly awkward pause. ‘I’m not saying there are no exceptions.’

Rivers laughed. ‘The point is you hate civilians, don’t you? The “callous”, the “complacent”, the “unimaginative”. Or is “hate” too strong a word?’



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‘No.’

‘So. What you felt for the Germans, rather briefly, in the spring of last year, you now feel for the overwhelming majority of your fellow-countrymen?’

‘Yes.’

‘You know, I think you were quite right not to say too much to the Board.’

‘That wasn’t my idea, it was Graves’s. He was afraid I’d sound too sane.’

‘When you said the Board was “rigged”, what did you mean?’

‘I meant the decision to send me here, or or somewhere similar, had been taken before I went in.’

‘And this had all been fixed by Captain Graves?’

‘Yes.’ Sassoon leant forward. ‘The point is they weren’t going to court-martial me. They were just going to lock me up somewhere . . .’ He looked round the room. ‘*Worse* than this.’

Rivers smiled. ‘There *are* worse places, believe me.’

‘I’m sure there are,’ Sassoon said politely.

‘They were going to certify you, in fact?’

‘I suppose so.’

‘Did anybody on the Board say anything to you about this?’

‘No, because it was –’

‘All fixed beforehand. Yes, I see.’

Sassoon said, ‘May I ask you a question?’

‘Go ahead’

‘Do *you* think I’m mad?’

‘No, of course you’re not mad. Did you think you were going mad?’

‘It crossed my mind. You know when you’re brought face to face with the fact that, yes, you did see corpses on the pavement . . .’

‘Hallucinations in the half-waking state are surprisingly common, you know. They’re not the same thing as psychotic hallucinations. Children have them quite frequently.’

Sassoon had started pulling at a loose thread on the breast of his tunic. Rivers watched him for a while. ‘You must’ve been in agony when you did that.’

Sassoon lowered his hand. ‘No-o. *Agony’s* lying in a shell-hole with your legs shot off. I was *upset*.’ For a moment he looked almost hostile, then he relaxed. ‘It was a futile gesture. I’m not particularly proud of it.’

‘You threw it in the Mersey, didn’t you?’

‘Yes. It wasn’t heavy enough to sink, so it just’ – a glint of amusement – ‘*bobbed* around. There was a ship sailing past, quite a long way out, in the estuary, and I looked at this little scrap of ribbon floating and I looked at the ship, and I thought that me trying to stop the war was a bit like trying to stop the ship would have been. You know, all they’d’ve seen from the deck was this little figure jumping up and down, waving its arms, and they wouldn’t’ve known what on earth it was getting so excited about.’

‘So you realized *then* that it was futile?’

Sassoon lifted his head. ‘It still had to be done. You can’t just acquiesce.’

Rivers hesitated. ‘Look, I think we’ve . . . we’ve got about as far as we can get today. You must be very tired.’ He stood up. ‘I’ll see you tomorrow morning at ten. Oh, and could you ask Captain Graves to see me as soon as he arrives?’

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Sassoon stood up. 'You said a bit back you didn't think I was mad.'

'I'm quite sure you're not. As a matter of fact I don't even think you've got a war neurosis.'

Sassoon digested this. 'What have I got, then?'

'You seem to have a very powerful *anti-war* neurosis.'

They looked at each other and laughed. Rivers said, 'You realize, don't you, that it's my duty to . . . to try to change that? I can't pretend to be neutral.'

Sassoon's glance took in both their uniforms. 'No, of course not.'

Rivers made a point of sitting next to Bryce at dinner.

'Well,' Bryce said, 'what did you make of him?'

'I can't find anything wrong. He doesn't show any sign of depression, he's not excited –'

'Physically?'

'Nothing.'

'Perhaps he just doesn't want to be killed.'

'Oh, I think he'd be most insulted if you suggested *that*. To be fair, he did have a job lined up in Cambridge, training cadets – so it isn't a question of avoiding being sent back. He could've taken that if he'd wanted to save his skin.'

'Any trace of . . . er . . . religious *enthusiasm*?'

'No, I'm afraid not. I was hoping for that too.'

They looked at each other, amused. 'You know, the curious thing is I don't think he's even a pacifist? It seems to be entirely a matter of of horror at the extent of the slaughter, combined with

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a feeling of anger that the government won't state its war aims and impose some kind of *limitation* on the whole thing. That, and an absolutely corrosive hatred of civilians. *And* non-combatants in uniform.'

'What an uncomfortable time you must've had.'

'No-o, I rather gather I was seen as an exception.'

Bryce looked amused. 'Did *you* like *him*?'

'Yes, very much. And I found him . . . much more *impressive* than I expected.'

Sassoon, at his table under the window, sat in silence. The men on either side of him stammered so badly that conversation would have been impossible, even if he had wished for it, but he was content to withdraw into his own thoughts.

He remembered the day before Arras, staggering from the out-post trench to the main trench and back again, carrying boxes of trench mortar bombs, passing the same corpses time after time, until their twisted and blackened shapes began to seem like old friends. At one point he'd had to pass two hands sticking up out of a heap of pocked and pitted chalk, like the roots of an overturned tree. No way of telling if they were British or German hands. No way of persuading himself it mattered.

'Do you play golf?'

'I'm sorry?'

'I asked if you played golf.'

Small blue eyes, nibbled gingery moustache, an RAMC badge. He held out his hand. 'Ralph Anderson.'

Sassoon shook hands and introduced himself. 'Yes, I do.'

'What's your handicap?'

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Sassoon told him. After all, why not? It seemed an entirely suitable topic for Bedlam.

‘Ah, then we might have a game.’

‘I’m afraid I haven’t brought my clubs.’

‘Send for them. Some of the best courses in the country round here.’

Sassoon had opened his mouth to reply when a commotion started near the door. As far as he could tell, somebody seemed to have been sick. At any rate, a thin, yellow-skinned man was on his feet, choking and gagging. A couple of VADs ran across to him, clucking, fussing, flapping ineffectually at his tunic with a napkin, until eventually they had the sense to get him out of the room. The swing doors closed behind them. A moment’s silence, and then, as if nothing had happened, the buzz of conversation rose again.

Rivers stood up and pushed his plate away. ‘I think I’d better go.’

‘Why not wait till you’ve finished?’ Bryce said. ‘You eat little enough as it is.’

Rivers patted his midriff. ‘Oh, I shan’t fade away just yet.’

Whenever Rivers wanted to get to the top floor without being stopped half a dozen times on the way, he used the back staircase. Pipes lined the walls, twisting with the turning of the stair, gurgling from time to time like lengths of human intestine. It was dark, the air stuffy, and sweat began to prickle in the roots of his hair. It was a relief to push the swing door open and come out on to the top corridor, where the air was cool at least, though he never failed to be depressed by the long narrow passage with its

double row of brown doors and the absence of natural light. ‘Like a trench without the sky’ had been one patient’s description, and he was afraid it was only too accurate.

Burns was sitting on his bed, while two VADs helped him off with his tunic and shirt. His collar bones and ribs were clearly visible beneath the yellowish skin. The waistband of his breeches gaped.

One of the VADs tugged at it. ‘There’s room for two in there,’ she said, smiling, coaxing. ‘Have I to get in with you?’ The other VADs frozen expression warned her of Rivers’s presence. ‘I’ll get this sponged down for you, Captain.’

They hurried past Rivers, bursting into nervous giggles as they reached the end of the corridor.

Burns’s arms were goose-pimpled, though the room was not cold. The smell of vomit lingered on his breath. Rivers sat down beside him. He didn’t know what to say, and thought it better to say nothing. After a while he felt the bed begin to shake and put his arm round Burns’s shoulders. ‘It doesn’t get any better, does it?’ he said.

Burns shook his head. After a while Rivers got up, fetched Burns’s coat from the peg behind the door and wrapped it round his shoulders. ‘Would it be easier to eat in your own room?’

‘A bit. I wouldn’t have to worry about upsetting other people.’

Yes, Burns *would* worry about upsetting other people. Perhaps the most distressing feature of his case was the occasional glimpse of the cheerful and likeable young man he must once have been.

Rivers looked down at Burns’s forearms, nothing that the groove between radius and ulna was even deeper than it had been a week

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ago. 'Would it help to have a bowl of fruit in your room?' he asked. 'So you could just pick something up when you felt like it?'

'Yes, that might help.'

Rivers got up and walked across to the window. He's agreeing to make me feel useful, he thought. 'All right, I'll get them to send something up.' The shadows of the beech trees had begun to creep across the tennis courts, which were empty now. Rivers turned from the window. 'What kind of night did you have?'

'Not too good.'

'Have you made any progress with what we talked about?'

'Not really.' He looked up at Rivers. 'I can't make myself think about it.'

'No, well, it's early days.'

'You know, the worst thing is . . .' – Burns was scanning Rivers's face – 'that it's a . . . a joke.'

'Yes.'

After leaving Burns, Rivers went up a further short flight of stairs and unlocked the door to the tower. Apart from his own bedroom, this was the only place in Craiglockhart he could hope to be alone for more than a few minutes. The patients weren't allowed out here, in case the hundred-foot drop to the path below should prove too tempting an exit from the war. He rested his arms on the iron balustrade and looked out towards the hills.

Burns. Rivers had become adept at finding bearable aspects to unbearable experiences, but Burns defeated him. What had happened to him was so vile, so disgusting, that Rivers could find no redeeming feature. He'd been thrown into the air by the explosion of a shell and had landed, head-first, on a German corpse,

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whose gas-filled belly had ruptured on impact. Before Burns lost consciousness, he'd had time to realize that what filled his nose and mouth was decomposing human flesh. Now, whenever he tried to eat, that taste and smell recurred. Nightly, he relived the experience, and from every nightmare he awoke vomiting. Burns on his knees, as Rivers had often seen him, retching up the last ounce of bile, hardly looked like a human being at all. His body seemed to have become merely the skin-and-bone casing for a tormented alimentary canal. His suffering was without purpose or dignity, and yes, Rivers knew *exactly* what Burns meant when he said it was a joke.

Rivers became aware that he was gripping the edge of the parapet and consciously relaxed his hands. Whenever he spent any time with Burns, he found himself plagued by questions that in Cambridge, in peacetime, he might have wanted to pursue, but which in wartime, in an overcrowded hospital, were no use to him at all. Worse than useless, since they drained him of energy that rightly belonged to his patients. In a way, all this had nothing to do with Burns. The sheer extremity of his suffering set him apart from the rest, but the questions were evoked by almost every case.

He looked down and saw a taxi turn into the drive. Perhaps this was the errant Captain Graves arriving at last? Yes, there was Sassoon, too impatient to wait indoors, running down the steps to meet him.



## Three

Graves, his mouth slightly open, stared up at the massive yellow-grey façade of Craiglockhart. ‘*My God.*’

Sassoon followed the direction of his gaze. ‘That’s what I thought.’

Graves picked up his bag and together they went up the steps, through the black and white tiled entrance hall on to the main corridor. Sassoon began to smile. ‘Fine prisoner’s escort you turned out to be.’

‘I know, I’m sorry. God, what a day. Do you know, the train stopped at *every* station?’

‘Well, you’re here now. Thank God.’

Graves looked sideways at him. ‘As bad as that?’

‘Hm. So-so.’

‘I don’t suppose you’ve seen anybody yet?’

‘I’ve seen Rivers. Which reminds me, he wants to see *you*, but I imagine it’ll be all right if you dump your bag first.’

Graves followed Sassoon up the marble staircase to the first floor.

Three

‘Here we are.’ Sassoon opened a door and stood aside to let Graves enter. ‘The guest room. You’ve even got a lock on your door.’

‘You haven’t?’

‘No. Nor in the bathroom either.’

‘Poor old Sass, you’ll just have to *fight* the VADs off.’ Graves swung his bag on to the nearest chair. ‘No, seriously, what’s it like?’

‘Seriously, it’s *awful*. Come on, the sooner you’ve seen Rivers the sooner we can talk.’

‘Sassoon asked me to give you this.’

Rivers took the envelope without comment and placed it unopened on his desk. ‘How did you find him?’

The net curtains breathed in the draught from the open window, and a scent of lime trees invaded the room. A sweet smell. Graves, to whom all sweet smells were terrible, wiped the sweat from his upper lip. ‘Calmer. I think it’s a relief to have things sorted out.’

‘I don’t know how sorted out they are. You do realize, don’t you, that he can walk out of here at any time?’

‘He won’t do that,’ Graves said definitely. ‘He’ll be all right now. As long as the pacifists leave him alone.’

‘I had quite a long talk with him this afternoon, but I don’t think I’m quite clear what happened. I suspect there was a lot going on behind the scenes?’

Graves smiled. ‘You could say that.’

‘What exactly?’

‘Sassoon sent me a copy of his Declaration. I was in a convalescent home on the Isle of Wight at the time –’

*Regeneration*

‘He hadn’t talked to you about it?’

‘No, I haven’t seen him since January. I was absolutely horrified. I could see at once it wouldn’t do any good, nobody would follow his example. He’d just destroy himself, for no reason.’ He stopped. When he spoke again, his voice was very clear and precise. ‘Sassoon’s the best platoon commander I’ve ever known. The men worship him – if he wanted German heads on a platter they’d get them. And *he* loves them. Being separated from them would kill him. And that’s exactly what a court-martial would’ve done.’

‘He’s separated from them here.’

‘Yes, but there’s a way back. People can accept a breakdown. There’s no way back from being a conchie.’

‘So you decided he –’

‘Had to be stopped? Yes. I wrote to the CO, asking him to get Siegfried another Board. He’d already skipped one. Then I contacted various people I know and managed to persuade them to treat it as a nervous breakdown. That left Siegfried. I knew it was no use writing. I had to see him, so I got myself passed fit and went back to Litherland. He was in a *shocking* state. He’d just thrown his MC into the Mersey. Did he tell you that?’

Rivers hesitated. ‘I believe it was in the Board’s report.’

‘Anyway, it took a long time, but he saw sense in the end.’

‘What made him give in, do you think?’

‘He just couldn’t go on denying he was ill.’

Rivers didn’t reply. The silence deepened, like a fall of snow, accumulating second by second, flake by flake, each flake by itself inconsiderable, until everything is transformed.

### Three

‘No, it wasn’t that.’ Graves’s knobbly, broken-nosed boxer’s face twitched. ‘I lied to him.’

Rivers’s glasses flashed as he lifted his head. ‘Yes, I thought perhaps you had.’

‘I swore on the Bible they wouldn’t court-martial him, but I didn’t know that. I think if he’d held out, they might’ve done.’

‘They might. But you know the advantages of treating this as a nervous breakdown would have been quite apparent to the authorities, even without your pointing them out.’

‘The fact remains I lied, and he gave in because he believed the lie. He wouldn’t have believed it from anybody else.’ He paused. ‘Do *you* think I was wrong?’

Rivers said gently, ‘I think you did the best you could for your friend. Not the best thing for his *cause*, but then the cause is lost anyway. Did you find the Board difficult to convince?’

‘Quite. There was one youngish man who was sympathetic. The other two . . . Well. I got the impression they didn’t believe in shell-shock at all. As far as they were concerned, it was just cowardice. I made up my mind right from the start they weren’t going to think that. I told them about last year when he took a German trench single-handed and got recommended for the VC. I’d like to see *them* do it. And this April. You know, that bombing expedition of his was fantastic. Everybody I’ve spoken to who was there thinks he should’ve got the VC for *that*.’ He paused. ‘I just wanted them to know what kind of man they were dealing with.’ He smiled. ‘I kept bursting into tears. I think that helped in a way. I could see them thinking, My God, if this one’s fit for duty what *can* the other one be like?’

*Regeneration*

‘And you told them that he had hallucinations?’

‘Yes.’ Graves looked slightly uncomfortable. ‘I had to convince them. There were a lot of things I *didn’t* tell them. I didn’t tell them he’d threatened to kill Lloyd George.’

‘And you persuaded him to say nothing?’

‘Yes. The last thing we needed was Siegfried talking sense about the war.’

‘Sense? You mean you agree with him?’

‘Well, yes. In *theory*. In *theory* the war should stop tomorrow, but it won’t. It’ll go on till there isn’t a cat or a dog left to enlist.’

‘So you agree with his views, but not his actions? Isn’t that rather an artificial distinction?’

‘No, I don’t think it is. The way I see it, when you put the uniform on, in effect you sign a contract. And you don’t back out of a contract merely because you’ve changed your mind. You can still speak up for your principles, you can argue against the ones you’re being made to fight for, but in the end you *do the job*. And I think that way you gain more respect. Siegfried isn’t going to change people’s minds like this. It may be *in him* to change people’s minds about the war, but *this* isn’t the way to do it.’

Rivers took his clasped hands away from his mouth. ‘I couldn’t agree with you more.’

‘What’s infuriating is that basically *he* knows it better than anybody. He’s the one who can communicate with the ordinary soldier. It’s just that he got taken over by Bertrand Russell and Ottoline Morrell. You know, I used to admire them. I used to think, well, I don’t agree with you, but, on the other hand, I can see it takes *courage* . . .’ He shook his head. ‘Not any more. I know

### Three

Russell's over military age, Ottoline's a woman, fair enough, neither of them can understand what he's been through, but they *could* see the state he was in, *and they still went ahead*. They were quite prepared to destroy him for the sake of propagating their views. I don't forgive them for it.' He made a visible effort to calm down. 'Anyway, it's over now. But I must say it gave me great pleasure to write to Russell and tell him Sassoon was on his way here, and he could just *bloody well leave him alone* in future.'

'And what about you?' Rivers asked, after a pause. 'Do you think they'll send you back?'

'No, I don't think so. In fact, the battalion doctor told me if he ever found my lungs in France again, he'd shoot me himself. I'm hoping for Palestine.' A pause. 'I'm glad he's here. At least I can go back to Litherland knowing he's safe.'

'I hope he is.' Rivers stood up. 'And now I think I should let you get back to him. He'll need company on his first evening.'

After Graves had gone, Rivers sat for a while resting his eyes, then opened the envelope Graves had given him. Three sheets of paper. On the top sheet, dated the 22nd April, Sassoon had written in pencil, 'I wrote these in hospital ten days after I was wounded.'

*Groping along the tunnel in the gloom  
He winked his tiny torch with whitening glare,  
And bumped his helmet, sniffing the hateful air.  
Tins, boxes, bottles, shapes too vague to know,  
And once, the foul, hunched mattress from a bed;  
And he exploring, fifty feet below  
The rosy dusk of battle overhead.*