

One

In formal beds beside the Serpentine, early tulips stood in tight-lipped rows. Billy Prior spent several moments setting up an enfilade, then, releasing his companion's arm, seized an imaginary machine gun and blasted the heads off the whole bloody lot of them.

Myra stared in amazement. 'You barmy bugger.'

He shook his head sadly. 'Five months in a loony bin last year.'

'Go on.'

She didn't believe him, of course. Smiling, he came back and offered her his arm. They had been wandering along beside the lake for an hour, but now the afternoon was waning. A coppery light, more like autumn than spring, slanted across the grass, turning the thorned twigs of rose bushes into strips of live electric filament that glowed, reddish, in the dusk.

Prior, always self-conscious, was aware of approving glances following them as they passed. They made a romantic picture, he supposed. The girl, young and pretty, clinging to the arm of a man in uniform, a man, moreover, wearing a greatcoat so grotesquely

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stained and battered it had obviously seen a good deal of active service. As indeed it had, and was about to see more, if only he could persuade the silly bitch to lie on it.

‘You’re cold,’ he said tenderly, unbuttoning the greatcoat. ‘Put your hand in here. You know, we’d be warmer under the trees. We’d be out of the wind.’

She paused, doubtfully, for by the lake it was still light, whereas the avenue of trees he was pointing to smoked darkness. ‘All right,’ she said at last.

They set off across the grass, their shadows stretching ahead of them, black, attenuated figures that reached the trees and began to climb before they were anywhere near. In the darkness they leant against the trunk of one of the trees and started to kiss. After a while she moaned, and her thighs slackened, and he pressed her back against the fissured bark. His open greatcoat shielded them both. Her hands slid round him, underneath his tunic, and grasped his buttocks, pulling him hard against her. She was tugging at his waistband and buttons and he helped her unfasten them, giving her free play with his cock and balls. His hands were slowly inching up her skirt. Already he’d found the place where the rough stockings gave way to smooth skin. ‘Shall we lie down?’

Her hands came up to form a barrier. ‘What, in this?’

‘You’ll be warm enough.’

‘I bloody won’t. I’m nithered now.’ To emphasize the point she pressed her hands into her armpits and rocked herself.

‘All right,’ he said, his voice hardening. ‘Let’s go back to the flat.’ He’d wanted to avoid doing that, because he knew his landlady would be in, and watching.

She didn't look at him. 'No, I think I'd better be getting back.'
'I'll take you.'

'No, I'd rather say goodbye here, if you don't mind. Me mother-in-law lives five doors down.'

'You were keen enough the other night.'

Myra smiled placatingly. 'Look, I had a woman come nosying round. The voluntary police, you know? They can come into your house, or anything, they don't have to ask. And this one's a right old cow. I knew her before the war. She was all for women's rights. I says, "What about my rights? Aren't I a woman?" But there's no point arguing with 'em. They can get your money stopped. And anyway it isn't right, is it? With Eddie at the Front?'

Prior said in a clipped, authoritative voice, 'He was at the Front on Friday night.' He heard the note of self-righteousness, and saw himself, fumbling with the fly buttons of middle-class morality. Good God, *no*. He'd rather tie a knot in it than have to live with that image. 'Come on,' he said. 'I'll walk you to the station.'

He strode towards Lancaster Gate, not caring if she followed or not. She came trotting breathlessly along beside him. 'We can still be friends, can't we?'

He felt her gaze on his face.

'Can't we?'

He stopped and turned to face her. 'Myra, you're the sort of girl who ends up in a ditch with her stockings round her neck.'

He walked on more slowly. After a while, her hand came creeping through his arm, and, after a moment's hesitation, he left it there.

‘Have you got a girl?’ she said.

A brief struggle. ‘Yes.’

She nodded, satisfied. ‘Thought you had. Lying little git, aren’t you? Friday night, you said you hadn’t.’

‘We both said a bellyful on Friday night.’

At the underground station he bought her ticket, and she reached up and kissed his cheek as if nothing had happened. Well, he thought, nothing had happened. On the other side of the barrier she turned, and looked as if she might be regretting the evening they’d planned, but then she gave a little wave, stepped out on to the moving staircase and was carried smoothly away.

Outside the station he hesitated. The rest of the evening stretched in front of him and he didn’t know what to do. He thought about going for a drink, but rejected the idea. If he started drinking as early as this and in this mood, he’d end up drunk, and he couldn’t afford to do that; he had to be clear-headed for the prison tomorrow. He drifted aimlessly along.

It was just beginning to be busy, people hurrying to restaurants and bars, doing their best to forget the shortages, the skimped clothes, the grey bread. All winter, it seemed to Prior, an increasingly frenetic quality had been creeping into London life. Easily justified, of course. Soldiers home on leave had to be given a good time; they mustn’t be allowed to remember what they were going back to, and this gave everybody else a magnificent excuse for never thinking about it at all.

Though this week it had been difficult to avoid thinking. Haig’s April 13th Order of the Day had appeared in full in every newspaper. He knew it off by heart. Everybody did.

One

There is no other course open to us but to fight it out. Every position must be held to the last man: there must be no retirement. With our backs to the wall, and believing in the justice of our cause, each one of us must fight on to the end.

Whatever effect the Order had on the morale of the army, it had produced panic among civilians. Some women, apparently, were planning in all seriousness how they should kill themselves and their children when the Germans arrived. Those atrocity stories from the first months of the war had done the trick. Rather too well. Nuns with their breasts cut off. Priests hung upside-down and used as clappers to ring their own bells. Not that there hadn't been atrocities, but prisoners of war were always the main victims, and the guilt was more evenly distributed than the press liked to think.

There were times – and tonight was one of them – when Prior was made physically sick by the sight and sound and smell of civilians. He remembered the stench that comes off a battalion of men marching back from the line, the thick yellow stench, and he thought how preferable it was to this. He knew he had to get off the streets, away from the chattering crowds and the whiffs of perfume that assaulted his nostrils whenever a woman walked past.

Back in the park, under the trees, he began to relax. Perhaps it was his own need that coloured his perceptions, but it seemed to him that the park on this spring evening was alive with desire. Silhouetted against the sunset, a soldier and his girl meandered along, leaning against each other so heavily that if either had

withdrawn the other would have fallen. It made him think of himself and Sarah on the beach in Scotland, and he turned away sharply. No point thinking about that. It would be six weeks at least before he could hope to see her again. Further along towards Marble Arch the figures were solitary. Army boots tramped and slurred along the paths or, in the deepest shadow, jettted sparks.

He sat on a bench and lit a cigarette, still trying to decide what to do with the stump of his evening. He needed sex, and he needed it badly. Tossing off was no use, because . . . because it was no use. Prostitutes were out because he didn't pay. He remembered telling Rivers, who'd been his doctor at Craiglockhart War Hospital, the 'loony bin' where he'd spent five months of the previous year, about a brothel in Amiens, how the men, the private soldiers, queued out on to the pavement and were allowed two minutes each. 'How long do officers get?' Rivers had asked. 'I don't know,' Prior had said. 'Longer than that.' And then, spitting the words, '*I don't pay.*' No doubt Rivers had thought it rather silly, a young man's ridiculous pride in his sexual prowess, his ability to 'get it' free. But it was nothing to do with that. Prior didn't pay because once, some years ago, he had been paid, and he knew exactly how the payer looks to the one he's paying.

'Got a light?'

Automatically, Prior began tapping his pockets. At first he hardly registered the existence of the speaker, except as an unwelcome interruption to his thoughts, but then, as he produced the matches, some unconsciously registered nervousness in the other man's voice made him look up. He had been going to offer the box, but now he changed his mind, took out a match and struck

it himself. The rasp and flare sounded very loud. He cupped his hands to shield the flame, and held it out as the other bent towards it. An officer's peaked cap, dark eyes, a thin moustache defining a full mouth, the face rounded, though not fat. Prior was sure he knew him, though he couldn't remember where he'd seen him before. When the cigarette was lit, he didn't immediately move off, but sat further along the bench, looking vaguely around him, the rather prominent Adam's apple jerking in his throat. His left leg was stretched out awkwardly in front of him, presumably the explanation of the wound stripe on his sleeve.

Prior could see the problem. This wasn't exactly the right area, though it bordered upon it, and his own behaviour, though interesting, had not been definitely inviting. He was tempted to tease. Instead he moved closer and said, 'Have you anywhere to go?'

'Yes.' The man looked up. 'It's not far.'

The square contained tall, narrow, dark houses, ranged round a fenced-off lawn with spindly trees. The lawn and the surrounding flowerbeds were rank with weeds. Further along, on the right, a bomb had knocked out three houses and partially demolished a fourth, leaving a huge gap. They walked along, not talking much. As they approached the gap, the pavement became gritty beneath their feet, pallid with the white dust that flowed so copiously from stricken houses and never seemed to clear, no matter how carefully the ruin was fenced off. Prior was aware of a distinct sideways pull towards the breach. He'd felt this before, walking past other bombed sites. He had no idea whether this sideways tug was felt by everybody, or whether it was peculiar to him, some

affinity with places where the established order has been violently assailed.

They stopped in front of No. 27. The windows were shuttered. A cat, hunched and defensive, crouched on the basement steps, growling over something it had found.

Prior's companion was having trouble with the lock. 'Part of the damage,' he said over his shoulder, pulling a face. He jabbed the door with his shoulder, then seized the knob and pulled it towards him. 'It works if you pull, I keep forgetting that.'

'Not *too* often, I hope,' said Prior.

His companion turned and smiled, and for a moment there was a renewed pull of sexual tension between them. He took off his cap and greatcoat, and held out his hand for Prior's. 'The family's in the country. I'm staying at my club.' He hesitated. 'I suppose I'd better introduce myself. Charles Manning.'

'Billy Prior.'

Covertly, they examined each other. Manning had a very round head, emphasized by thick, sleek dark hair which he wore brushed back with no parting. His eyes were alert. He resembled some kind of animal, Prior thought, an otter perhaps. Manning saw a thin, fair-haired man, twenty-three or four, with a blunt-nosed, high-cheekboned face and a general air of picking his way delicately through life. Manning pushed open a door on the left, and a breath of dead air came into the hall. 'Why don't you go in? I won't be a minute.'

Prior entered. Tall windows shuttered, furniture shrouded in white sheets. A heavy smell of soot from the empty grate. Everything was under dust-sheets except the tall mirror that reflected,

through the open door, the mirror in the hall. Prior found himself staring down a long corridor of Priors, some with their backs to him, none more obviously real than the rest. He moved away.

‘Would you like a drink?’ Manning asked from the door.

‘Yes, please.’

‘Whisky all right?’

‘Fine.’

Alone, Prior walked across to the grand piano, lifted the edge of the dust-sheet and found himself looking at a photograph of a woman with two small boys, one of them clutching a sailing boat to his chest.

When Manning came back, carrying a whisky bottle, a jug and two glasses, Prior was staring at a crack above the door. ‘That looks a bit ominous,’ he said.

‘Yes, doesn’t it? I don’t know what I’m supposed to do about it, really. One can’t get workmen, so I just come in and look at it now and then.’ He held up the jug. ‘Water?’

‘Just a dash.’

They moved across to the fireside chairs. Manning pulled off the sheets, and Prior settled back against the stiff brocade. It didn’t give at all, but held him tensely upright. They started making the sort of conversation they might have made if they’d been introduced in the mess. Prior watched Manning carefully, noting the MC ribbon, the wound stripe, the twitches, the signs of tension, the occasional stammer. He was in a state, though it was difficult to tell how much of his nervousness was due to the situation. Which *was* dragging on a bit. If this went on they’d demolish the whole bloody bottle and still be swopping regimental

chit-chat at midnight. All very nice, Prior thought, but not what I came for. He noticed that Manning's eyes, though they roamed all over the place, always returned to the stars on Prior's sleeve. *Well, you knew I was an officer*, he said silently. He was beginning to suspect Manning might be one of those who cannot – simply cannot – let go sexually with a social equal. Prior sighed, and stood up. 'Do you mind if I take this off?' he said. 'I'm quite warm.'

He wasn't warm. In fact, to coin a phrase, he was bloody nithered. However. He took off his tie, tunic and shirt, and threw them over the back of a chair. Manning said nothing, simply watched. Prior ran his fingers through his cropped hair till it stood up in spikes, lit a cigarette, rolled it in a particular way along his bottom lip, and smiled. He'd transformed himself into the sort of working-class boy Manning would think it was all right to fuck. A sort of seminal spittoon. And it worked. Manning's eyes grew dark as his pupils flared. Bending over him, Prior put his hand between his legs, thinking he'd probably never felt a spurt of purer class antagonism than he felt at that moment. He roughened his accent. 'A' right?'

'Yes. Let's go upstairs.'

Prior followed him. On the first floor a door stood open, leading into a large bedroom with a double bed. Manning pulled the door shut. Prior smiled faintly. 'E would not take Oi into the bed where 'e 'ad deflowered 'is broide. Instead 'e went up and up and bloody up. To what were obviously the *servants'* quarters. Manning pushed open a door at the end of the corridor, handed Prior the lamp and said, 'I won't be a minute.'

Prior went in. A double bed with a brass bedstead almost filled

the tiny room. He sat on the edge and bounced up and down. It was quite possibly the noisiest bed he'd ever encountered. Thank God the house was empty. Apart from the bed there was a washstand with a jug and bowl, a table with a looking-glass, and a small closet curtained off. He got up and pulled the curtain back. Two housemaids' uniforms hung there, looking almost like the maids themselves, the sleeves and caps had been so neatly arranged. A smell came from the closet: lavender and sweat, a sad smell. Prior's mother had started her life in service in just such a house as this. He looked round the room, the freezing little box of a room, with its view of roofs, and, on a sudden impulse, got one of the uniforms out and buried his face in the armpit, inhaling the smell of sweat. This impulse had nothing to do with sex, though it came from a layer of personality every bit as deep. Manning came back into the room just as Prior raised his head. Seeing Prior with the uniform held against him, Manning looked, it had to be said, daunted. Prior smiled, and put the uniform back on the peg.

Manning set a small jar down on the table by the bed. The click of glass on wood brought them into a closer, tenser relationship than anything they'd so far managed to achieve. Prior finished undressing and lay down on the bed. Manning's leg was bad. Very bad. Prior leant forward to examine the knee, and for a moment they might have been boys in the playground again, examining each other's scabs.

'It looks as if you're out of it.'

'Probably. The tendons've shortened, you see. They think I've got about as much movement as I'm going to get. But then who knows? The way things are going, is anybody out of it?'

Prior straightened up, and, since he was in the neighbourhood, began to rub his face across the hair in Manning's groin. Manning's cock stirred and rose and Prior took it into his mouth, but even then, for a long time, he simply played, flicking his tongue round and round the glistening dome. Manning's thighs tautened. After a while his hand came up and caressed Prior's cropped hair, his thumb massaging the nape of his neck. Prior raised his head and saw that Manning looked nervous, rightly, since in this situation it was a gesture of tenderness that would precipitate violence, if anything did. And Manning was in no state to cope with that. He went back to his sucking, clasping Manning's buttocks in his two hands and moving his mouth rapidly up and down the shaft. Manning pushed him gently away and got into bed. They lay stretched out for a moment side by side. Prior rolled on to his elbow and started to stroke Manning's chest, belly and thighs. He was thinking how impossible it is to sum up sex in terms of who stuffs what into where. This movement of his hand had in it lust; resentment, of Manning's use of the room among other things; sympathy, for the wound; envy, because Manning was *honourably* out of it . . . And a growing awareness that while he had been looking at Manning, Manning had also been looking at him. Prior's expression hardened. He thought, Well, at least I don't twitch as much as you do. The stroking hand stopped at Manning's waist, and he tried to turn him over, but Manning resisted. 'No,' he said. 'Like this.'

Athletic sod. Prior unscrewed the jar, greased his cock with a mixture of vaseline and spit, and wiped the residue on Manning's arse. He guided Manning's legs up his chest, being exceedingly

careful not to jerk the knee. He was too eager, and the position was hopeless for control, he was fighting himself before he'd got an inch in, and then Manning yelped and tried to pull away. Prior started to withdraw, then suddenly realized that Manning needed to be hurt. 'Keep still,' he said, and went on fucking. It was a dangerous game. Prior was capable of real sadism, and knew it, and the knee was only an inch or so away from his hand. He came quickly, with deep shuddering groans, a feeling of being pulled out of himself that started in his throat. Carefully, he lowered Manning's legs and sucked him off. He was so primed he was clutching Prior's head and gasping almost before he'd started. 'I needed that,' he said, when it was over. 'I needed a good fucking.'

You all do, Prior thought. Manning went to the bathroom. Prior reached out and turned the looking-glass towards him. Into this glass they had looked, half past five every morning, winter and summer, yawning, bleary-eyed, checking to see their caps were on straight and their hair tucked away. He remembered his mother telling him that, in the house where she'd worked, if a maid met a member of the family in the corridor she had to stand with her face turned to the wall.

Manning came back carrying the whisky bottle and glasses. He was limping badly. Despite Prior's efforts the position couldn't have done the knee any good.

'Where d'you get it?' Prior asked, nodding at the wound.

'Passchendaele.'

'Oh, yes. Your lot were in the assault on the ridge?'

'That's right.' Manning poured the whisky and sat at the end

of the bed, propping himself up against the bedstead, and stretching his left leg out in front of him. 'Great fun.'

Prior said, 'I've just had a Board.' He didn't want to talk about his condition, but he was incapable of leaving the subject alone. Manning's silence on the subject, when a question would have been so much more natural, had begun to irritate him.

'What did they say?' Manning asked.

'They haven't said anything yet. I'm supposed to be Permanent Home Service, but with things the way they are . . .'

Manning hesitated, then asked, 'It *is* neurasthenia, isn't it?'

No, Prior wanted to say, it's raging homicidal mania, with a particular predilection for dismembering toffee-nosed gits with wonky knees. 'No, it's asthma,' he said. 'I *was* neurasthenic, but then I had two asthmatic attacks in the hospital, so that confused things a bit.'

'Which hospital were you in?'

'Craiglockhart. It's up in—'

'Ah, then you know Rivers.'

Prior stared. 'He was my doctor. Still is. He's . . . he's in London now.'

'Yes, I know.'

It was Prior's turn not to ask the obvious question.

'Are you still on sick leave?' Manning asked, after a pause.

'No, I'm at the Ministry of Munitions. In the . . .'

He looked at Manning. 'And *that's* where I've seen you. I *knew* I had.'

Manning smiled, but he was very obviously not pleased. 'Just as well I didn't call myself "Smith". I thought about it.'

'If you're going to do that I'd remove the letters from the hall

table first. They aren't addressed to "Smith".' Prior looked down into his glass, and gave up the struggle. 'How do you know Rivers?'

Manning smiled. 'He's my doctor, too.'

'Shell-shock?'

'No. Not exactly. I . . . er . . . I was picked up by the police. About two months ago. Not quite caught in the act, but . . . The young man disappeared as soon as we got to the police station. Anyway.'

'What happened?'

'Oh, we all sat around. Nobody did anything unpleasant. I sent for my solicitor, and eventually he arrived, and they let me go. Wound helped. Medal helped.' He looked directly at Prior. '*Connections* helped. You mustn't despise me too easily, you know. I'm not a fool. And then I went home and waited. My solicitor seemed to think if it went to court I'd get two years, but they probably wouldn't give me hard labour because of the leg.'

'That's big of them.'

'Yes. Isn't it? Then somebody said the thing to do was to go to a psychologist and get treatment and and . . . and that would help. So I went to Dr Head, who has quite a reputation in this field – I was actually told in so many words "Henry Head can cure sodomites" – and he said he couldn't do me, he was snowed under, and he recommended Rivers. So I went to him, and he said he'd take me on.'

'Do you *want* to be cured?'

'No.'

'What does he do?'

‘Talks. Or rather, *I* talk. He listens.’

‘About sex?’

‘No, not very often. The war, mainly. You see that’s where the confusion comes in because he took one look at me and decided I was neurasthenic. I mean, I can see his point. I was in quite a state when I came out of hospital. A lot worse than I realized at the time. One night at dinner I just picked up a vase and smashed it against the wall. It was quite a large party, about twelve people, and there was this awful . . . silence. And I couldn’t explain why I’d done it. Except the vase was hideous. But then my wife said, “So is your Aunt Dorothea. Where is that sort of thinking going to lead?”’ He smiled. ‘I can’t talk to anybody else, so I talk to him.’

Prior put his hand on Manning’s arm. ‘Are you going to be all right? I mean, are they going to leave you alone?’

‘I don’t know. I think if they were going to bring charges they’d’ve brought them by now.’ His voice deepened. “*At that moment there was a knock on the door . . .*”’

Prior was thinking. ‘All the same, it’s rather convenient, isn’t it? That you’re neurasthenic?’

‘Not particularly.’

‘I meant for Rivers. He doesn’t have to talk about —’

‘I don’t know what Rivers thinks. Anyway, it’s the war I need to talk about. And even with him, you know, there are some things I couldn’t —’

‘You will.’

They lay and looked at each other. Manning said, ‘You were going to say which part of the ministry —’

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'Yes, so I was. Intelligence.'

'With Major Lode?'

'Yes. With Major Lode. And you?'

'I'm on the fifth floor.'

Evidently the location was the answer. Manning turned and threw his arm across Prior's chest. 'Do you fancy a bit of turn and turn about? Or don't you do that?'

Prior smiled. 'I do anything.'

Two

Charles Manning left the Ministry of Munitions two hours earlier than usual and went to his house, where he'd arranged to meet a builder who'd promised to repair the bomb damage. It was mid-afternoon. A surprisingly sticky day for spring, warm and damp. When the sun shone, as it did fitfully, emerging from banks of black cloud, the young leaves on the trees glowed a vivid, almost virulent green.

He was walking abstractedly past the bombed site, when the crunch of grit and the smell of charred brick made him pause, and peer through a gap in the fence. The demolished houses had left an outline of themselves on either side of the gap, like after-images on the retina. He saw the looped and trellised bedroom wallpaper that once only the family and its servants would have seen, exposed now to wind and rain and the gaze of casual passers-by. Nothing moved in that wilderness, but, somewhere out of sight, dust leaked steadily from the unstaunchable wound.

Suddenly a cat appeared, a skinny cat, one of the abandoned pets that hung around the square. It began picking its way among

the rubble, sharply black and sleek, a silhouette at once angular and sinuous. It stopped, and Manning was aware of baleful yellow eyes turned in his direction, of a cleft pink nose raised to sift the air. Then it continued on its way, the soft pads of its feet finding spaces between shards of glittering glass. Manning watched till it was out of sight. Then, thinking he must get a move on, he swung his stiff leg up the steps to his house and inserted his key in the lock, remembering, with a faint smile, that he must *pull* and not push.

There was an envelope in the post-box. He took it out and carried it through into the drawing room, his eyes gradually becoming accustomed to the darkness. A heavy smell of soot. There must have been another fall: chimney-sweeping was another job one couldn't get done. He looked down at the envelope. Typewritten. Tradesman, probably. His family and friends all knew he was staying at his club. He put the letter down on the dust-sheet that covered the sofa and walked to the other end of the room, where he opened the shutters, letting in a flood of sickly yellow light.

He went to look at the crack above the door. Is it a load-bearing wall? the builder had asked. Manning thumped with his clenched fist. It didn't sound hollow or feel flimsy, but then these houses were very solidly built. He crossed to the front wall, banged again and thought perhaps he *could* detect a difference. Not much in it, though. He went back to the crack and noticed that the whole surround of the door had been loosened. In fact the more closely one examined it the worse it appeared. That looks ominous, Prior had said, smiling slightly. Odd lad. Even as he felt himself begin to stir at the recollection of the evening, Manning's mind was at