



REGENERATION

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PAT BARKER

AUTHOR OF *THE EYE IN THE DOOR* AND *THE GHOST ROAD*
WINNER OF THE BOOKER PRIZE

Pat Barker

REGENERATION

A WILLIAM ABRAHAM'S BOOK



PLUME

*For David, and in loving memory of
Dr John Hawkings (1922–1987)*

PLUME

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PAT BARKER has earned a place in the first rank of contemporary British writers with such novels as *Union Street*, *Regeneration* (shortlisted for Britain's prestigious Booker Prize and chosen by *The New York Times* as one of the four best novels of 1992), *The Eye in the Door* (winner of the 1993 Guardian fiction prize), and *The Ghost Road* (winner of the 1995 Booker Prize). The latter three novels are available in Plume paperback editions. Pat Barker lives in Durham, England.

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Part 1

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.

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?'

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 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.'

'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.'

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 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.

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* "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.’

‘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.’

‘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.’