

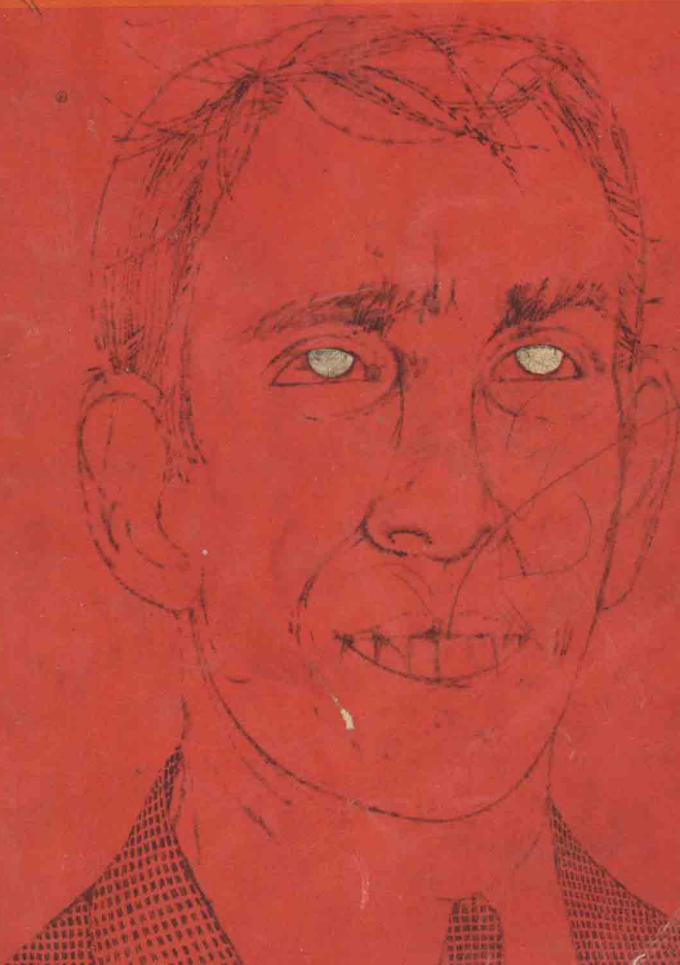


a Penguin Book

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# Henry's War

**Jeremy Brooks**



PENGUIN BOOKS

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HENRY'S WAR

JEREMY BROOKS

Jeremy Brooks was born at Southampton in 1926, and educated at Brighton Grammar School, Llan-dudno County School, and Magdalene College, Oxford. During the war he served on mine-sweepers in the Mediterranean. He studied stage design at Camberwell Art School, and then worked in the theatre, mainly in provincial repertory. After a spell as a feature writer in Fleet Street, he ran away to Snowdonia, where he lived in a seventeenth-century cottage, complete with pigs and chickens, worked in a hotel during the summer, and wrote in the winter. In 1959 he returned to London and subsequently became drama critic for the *New Statesman*, and a fiction reviewer for the *Sunday Times* and other papers. In 1962 he became script adviser to the Royal Shakespeare Company, and was made literary manager in 1964.

His other novels are *The Water Carnival* (1957), *Jampot Smith* (1960), and *Smith, As Hero* (1964). The second and third of these belong to a pattern of novels, probably five in all, connected with a character called Bernard Smith, who is also the centre of a sequence of radio plays and some short stories. Jeremy Brooks is married and has four children.



# HENRY'S WAR

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JEREMY BROOKS



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For  
The Landlord and Customers  
The Brondanw Arms,  
Llanfrothen



5. *The proud have hid a snare for me,  
and cords; they have spread a net by the  
wayside; they have set gins for me. Selah.*

PSALM 140



### *Stitch-in-Time Dept*

If the 'Castillian Emergency', vaguely suggested here, bears any resemblance to any other emergency, living or dead, that is only because history is tediously repetitive in its patterns. If current regulations affecting the Army conflict with anything in this book, I don't care.

## Chapter One

A MOTH had somehow gained entrance to Henry's mosquito net. Henry lay on his back and watched with resentment as it gyrated clumsily about the apex of his little muslin tent. What was the use of a mosquito net, he grumbled to himself, if even a moth could get into it? They were much bigger than mosquitoes. Then it occurred to him that the moth had quite possibly lain dormant in the bed before the net had been erected; or might even have been born there while he lay asleep. This solution satisfied Henry, and he became more cheerful.

Outside the window of Henry's bed-sitting-room a number of large damp snowflakes were sliding erratically down into Gloucester Road. Henry had seen them, in the grey hours of dawn, while he was being sick in the bathroom. Then the flakes had been even larger, but drier, ragged at the edges like pieces of old lace. Resting, pale but composed, on the rim of the hand-basin, Henry had watched their slow descent into the brick canyon between the houses with quiet satisfaction. It was the first week of June, a time of year when one has a right to expect some firm manifestation of summer, not the last desperate gesture of winter. Such meteorological freaks invariably gave Henry a childish pleasure: that'll show 'em, he thought obscurely. But it had been cold in the bathroom, and he had returned, as soon as he felt some confidence in his stomach, to the warm safety of his mosquito net, feeling curiously spiritual now that the violence of the nausea had spent itself.

Waking now, some hours later, Henry's appreciation of the unseasonable weather outside was clouded by his determination to believe that he was in Aden, in the middle of July. 'The arid sun,' he muttered experimentally, 'shrivels a man's mind into a small, hard, emotionless pea.' No, bean. You can't have an emotionless pea.

Henry giggled, and shifted on to his side, pulling the netting aside so that he could see out into the room. Screwing up his eyes he saw, or told himself that he saw, the little splashes of dried blood spattered across the wall near his desk, where, the night before, he had been absent-mindedly massacring mosquitoes while working on the secret report for Brigadier McNeil. His own blood, he reminded himself. All over the Middle East, he reflected, in Cairo, Damascus, Beirut, Tel Aviv, Teheran, as far east as Kasrkand on the borders of Baluchistan, there were rooms like this where the walls carried these tiny legacies of his tough, indestructible body. Then there was the little pool of blood that had seeped into the earthen floor of his Caucasian prison, after he had been brought back from the 'interrogation' at which he had refused to reveal Domenica's hiding-place; the toe he had had to hack off himself, with a piece of broken glass, during their escape down the Caspian Sea; the little finger that had been neatly amputated by a sniper's bullet as he escaped across the Embassy wall in Baghdad.

'Little bits of my body,' Henry murmured softly to himself, with emotion, 'scattered across half the world!'

Henry tossed restlessly under his mosquito net, seeming to feel the sweat spurt from his pores, soaking the single sheet that covered his nakedness. He reached under his pillow for his potato-gun, fondling the cold

metal against his chest: a wicked little killer that would take the heart out of an ace at twenty yards. Henry's head ached, and his mouth was dry, sour-tasting; but he put from his mind the idea that this was the natural result of the ridiculous, unwanted pub-crawl of the night before, and instead fell to cursing, in the clipped understatements of a man to whom duty is a strict but well-loved mistress, the event which had condemned him to swelter dangerously in Aden at just the worst time of the year. He could still feel the sand under his fingernails from his ordeal in the desert, and in his nostrils the insidious red dust of the Yemen clogged and dried at every breath.

On Henry's bedside table there stood a half tumbler of clear brown liquid; beside it, a single egg. Henry reached an arm under the mosquito net, deftly, one-handedly, broke and emptied the egg into the tumbler, and drew the mixture into the secret world below the net. Leaning up on one elbow, he raised the glass to his lips, tossed the entire contents into his mouth, and, with some difficulty, swallowed. It was not a very pleasant experience. The cold tea had been rather stale, and eggs purchased in Kensington are seldom as fresh as one could wish. But, lacking brandy, it was as near as Henry could get to a Hero's breakfast. 'There's nothing,' he said to himself firmly, 'like a Bombay Oyster for putting lead in the pencil.' No, that wouldn't do. 'For setting a man up'? It wouldn't do to start getting fussy about style at this stage. He wasn't supposed to be writing masterpieces, was he?

As if unjustly accused of an artistic crime, Henry got out of bed truculently, and for a moment stood shivering in the bleak London air. He looked longingly back at the mosquito net, that womb surrogate to which he had now become so attached that he could no longer

write thrillers which were not set in a tropical climate for fear of losing his slender title to the thing; and regretfully decided that since it was now past noon, his day ought, in all conscience, to commence.

Henry was a man of habit, but he was not ruled by the clock. He liked to do his writing in the 'morning', but for his purposes the word indicated a period of time, probably about three and a half to four hours, between breakfast (usually orange juice – this morning's Bombay Oyster had been a rare refinement) and lunch, a meal which in Henry's life not seldom occurred at five o'clock in the afternoon. During this period Henry would smoke about sixteen cigarettes, drink five or six cups of Instant coffee, and consume anything up to a quarter of a pound of Dolly Mixture. In moments of intense artistic travail he would play meaningless tunes on a bulbous little instrument called an ocarina, and when a mental blockage, or sheer boredom, brought work to a standstill he would stand with his back against the wall on one side of the room and throw darts at the dartboard attached to the opposite wall, a distance of exactly 8' 6". The wall near the dartboard was pitted like a battlefield from the days when Henry had first installed the game, but now, after five and a half books written in the same room, Henry rarely missed.

On this June morning, which was afternoon to the rest of Europe, Henry spent much of the time at the dartboard, none at all at the ocarina. He had started well, still under the suggestive influence of the mosquito net and the Bombay Oyster; but there was something, quite distinct from the hangover and its attendant remorse, nagging away at the back of his mind, refusing to come forward and identify itself, yet by its insistent nudging preventing him from losing himself completely

in the predicament of his hero. He would dearly have liked a drink, but the Rules would not allow him to leave his room until he had done 'a day's work'. Henry thought of himself as a weak character, and had therefore devised certain Rules intended to reinforce the apparently boneless body of his life. He was also possessed, intermittently, of a guilty conscience. This was due to what seemed his fortuitous ability to earn an adequate income (adequate for him, that is: about £10 a week) by working an average of five and a half hours a day. If it had occurred to Henry, which it didn't, that he worked a seven-day week and had never had more than a week's holiday since he became self-supporting, he would still have felt guilty. It was astonishing, even bewildering, that he, among so many millions and without the benefit of a private income, a decent education, or even a recognizable talent, should have broken free from that oppressive, mad, bad ogre, the employer. If necessary Henry would have worked ten hours a day, fourteen hours, just to stay free to choose which hours to work, and where to work, and when to eat, and what time to get up in the morning, and what clothes to wear.

This morning, as was usual after a beery evening, Henry found himself in a mood of cool detachment when facing his work. The magic which had been so abundantly present in the words when, during the previous day's creative afflatus, they had come tumbling forth, had now flown, leaving only the known pattern of the advancing plot to reassure him that each line was not, in fact, totally meaningless. To establish even this bridgehead on the shores of despair was in itself an act of faith. Looking back over the work of the last few weeks Henry could find little in it to commend. It would get by, that was about all. But there was no

liveliness, no spontaneity – and Henry knew why: Veronica. Ah, well.

At such times as this, with that whatever-it-was scratching away just below his consciousness and an all-too-clear apprehension of the way his work was slipping, the only thing to do was to search for mechanical flaws. Henry was fortunate in lighting upon a major mistake almost immediately. It appeared that in the heat of the moment his hero, Peter Colchester (the *nom-de-guerre*, it was sometimes hinted, of the younger son of a marquess), had absent-mindedly left his devoted Chinese servant, Wu Pin Chi, in the hands of that Russian-controlled band of disaffected Arabs from whom Colchester himself had only recently escaped. This would not do at all. It was not the act of a gentleman, and, besides, Wu Pin Chi would be needed for the next book. Since it was not possible, with only 15,000 words to go, to send Colchester off on a daring and dangerous rescue mission, the only thing to be done was to go back and cut out all reference to the Chinaman in the pages leading up to Colchester's capture. This would have the advantage of freeing another 2,000 or so words, and it was always convenient to have a small margin in hand when winding up a book.

This task occupied Henry for more than an hour. He then retyped those pages which had suffered the worst mutilation, carefully knitting the ragged ends of paragraphs together with an absolute minimum of fresh composition. This accomplished, Henry began to feel happier. His 'morning' was wearing on; things – if only negative things – were being achieved; guilt was being waved back like a woman of the streets into its dark doorway. Henry put the kettle on and started to play himself round the board: a double to start,

treble one, double four, double nine, nineteen, twenty, the starting double, the bull – eight darts.

But even his darts playing was not up to standard today. He missed the double nine, had to go for double ten, got a single, was tempted to pretend that it had been a double, and gave up in disgust.

When you start cheating against yourself it's time to take a long cold look at your opponent. The previous evening's drinking had been unusually heavy: had been, Henry emended honestly, stupidly excessive. There is no pleasure in drinking like that, in getting so drunk that you couldn't even remember, next morning, how the evening had ended. And with this thought there floated to the surface of Henry's mind the memory which, submerged but active, had lain unrecognized between himself and his work ever since he woke up. Something had happened last night. He had met someone. A girl. He had done something dreadful, been rude, been insufferable in some way. Was that all? The emotion of shame was strong there, without the cause. What had he done, what was the girl's name? He would certainly get nothing useful done until he had found out.

It was a relief when the telephone rang. Henry's hatred and love of this instrument see-sawed daily, but even when he was loathing it most bitterly he would admit that at times its sudden shattering ring called out in tones of nothing less than salvation, as now.

'Veronica!' he said warmly. 'You've no idea how glad I am to hear your voice. This damned room's absolutely chock full of nothing this morning.'

'You've been drinking again,' said Veronica, without sympathy. 'Anyway, it's afternoon, not morning. I suppose you haven't even had lunch yet?'

'Not yet, no.'



‘You know it’s nearly six o’clock, I suppose? When did you last eat?’

‘I had an egg for breakfast.’ Henry had been tempted to say that he had had a Bombay Oyster for breakfast, but Veronica never would understand about his relationship with Peter Colchester.

‘That’s not much for a whole day’s fuel intake. Are you working?’

‘Sort of.’

‘That means you’re not. Have you got a hangover?’

‘A bit.’

Veronica’s voice softened. She hated Henry to go drinking, but he knew it was one of his attractions for her; it gave her reforming zeal something solid to bite on. Henry had even, at times, caught himself pretending to be a drunkard, which he wasn’t, in order to heighten her interest in him.

‘Oh, Henry, dear, why do you do it? Are you unhappy? Lonely? Is the book going badly again? Where did you go last night? Whom were you with?’

Nobody he had ever met, Henry thought, could bring out a ‘whom’ with such assurance.

‘Well, no one really . . .’

‘You weren’t drinking alone?’

‘No, no, I met some people . . .’

‘What people?’

‘I can’t remember. Oh, there was this Irishman in Mooney’s, but he started picking a quarrel so I left. Then there were some other people somewhere else . . .’

‘And you can’t even remember who they were?’

‘Not very clearly, no.’

‘Oh, *Henry!*’

Henry might have felt some resentment at this inquisition (though it was fairly usual) had he not been trying so hard, for reasons of his own, to remember