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A Study in Murder

Written by Robert Ryan

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A STUDY in MURDER

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AUTHOR'S NOTE

During the course of *A Study in Murder*, Major Watson alludes to a story he is writing. For reference, the complete tale – 'The Girl and the Gold Watches' – is printed in the appendix.

1917

PROLOGUE

Harzgrund POW Camp, Germany

Sometimes, the dead talked too much. It was a babble of voices when they broke through – many tongues, all tripping over each other as they tried to make themselves heard. Which meant, of course, that none could be understood, not by a small, insignificant conduit still imprisoned in a mortal body. The noise reminded him of the howling Atlantic gale that did for the *Naronic* – out of Liverpool, en route to New York – killing all seventy-four aboard, including his father. It was his dad who had first come back to him, when he had just turned six, to inform his son that he had The Gift and that he could act as an opening to the domain of the dead. But latterly that opening had become clogged and chaotic.

It was, he supposed, due to the sheer volume of the newly parted being released each day. He often imagined the entrance to the afterlife, a long line of silvery souls, stretching into a far distance, waiting their turn to be admitted. Battalions of them. Many would still be baffled, disoriented, not wanting to accept

that they had taken the step over the threshold and would never have to face the privations and torment of war again. Death, though, once you embraced it, was the ultimate freedom. Of that he was certain. He didn't pity the dead. Sometimes he envied them.

He found that total isolation from his surroundings improved his chances of a successful contact. So, with the room lit by just one candle, he had taken to wearing a black hood, fashioned by one of the orderlies from thick silk. Where the man got it heaven alone knew, but the touch of the material on his skin soothed him, helped him relax as the voices jabbered about him, until one recognized him for what he was – an earthbound friend – and deigned to speak through him.

This evening, sitting around the same table as the medium were three other men, two believers and a sceptic. The latter had been persuaded to part with ten camp marks for the chance to hear from his brother, killed at the Somme. Whoever made contact, it would be an ordinary person, he knew, one of the faceless masses. Not for him some North American savage king, Peter the Great, Napoleon or Nefertiti. His dealings were with Everyman, the humble and the hardworking, the soldier and the servant.

He strained to try to make something from the cacophony swirling around in his head. There were snatches of laughter, not in gaiety but with a cruel aspect. He was being mocked, perhaps. Ridiculed for his feeble attempts to penetrate a world where the living had no place.

He pulled up the hood, opened one eye and glanced down at the table, where the blood was pooling. There was enough for

even the hungriest ghost. He reached for the glass of clear liquid before him, shuddering at the thought of the taste and the burn. It was like drinking paraffin. But it was part of the ritual they had developed.

'To those on the other side about to make contact, salutations!'

The three men drank. One of them gagged. Then, silence around the table, each man lost in his own thoughts and hopes. The medium pulled the hood down once more.

Then, the smell.

It made his nostrils twitch. It was pungent and far from pleasant. It spoke of caverns deep in the earth, of lava beds and hot gases. It was always the first sign that he was through.

'Jesus, what's that stink?' asked the sceptic.

'Ssh,' said one of the others. ''Tis the fires of hell.'

There was no hell, no eternal damnation; the dead were most adamant about that. So he had no idea of where the fumes originated. But the fact that even his companions could detect the aroma was a good sign.

'*Pauper*,' said the voice, causing him to jump a little.

'You'll have to speak up,' he ventured. 'We are all friends and believers here.'

'*Pauper!*'

'Are you saying you were a pauper? In this life, I mean?'

'*Pennebaker.*'

'Pennebaker? And what's your first name, Mr Pennebaker?'

A snort. Yes, a snort of disgust.

'*No.*'

He knew immediately that the fellow – for it was clearly a

man – had somehow gone back into the eddy of souls, like a twig snatched away from a riverbank, swirling off into the stream. He asked his fellow voyagers for patience.

'*Paper*.' It was the same voice, clearer now, as if its owner had stepped in closer. He could almost be at his shoulder, leaning across to pass on a confidence.

'Paper?'

'*Pen and paper*.'

'You want me to fetch pen and paper?'

'*Yes*.'

They were always close at hand and he felt them pushed towards him by his accomplices. He had experienced automatic writing, but it was not his usual method of communication. He imagined this man had something to say that he didn't trust to mere – and often misheard or confused – words.

'Are you a soldier? A British soldier?'

'*Yes*.'

'What's your name?'

Silence. Sometimes that happened. It was as if the old names no longer mattered where they were. Or they had simply forgotten them. He tried another tack.

'When did you cross over?'

The reply was garbled. He felt a sense of panic that he would lose him again. He took up the stub of a pencil and made sure it was on the top of the first page of the notebook. 'I have the writing implements.'

He felt warmth flood through him like a fever and was aware that someone, something, had invaded his body. He tried to relax, to let his visitor do as he pleased. He meant him no harm,

he knew that. The spirit world was sometimes playful and mocking but never truly malicious.

His hand twitched of its own accord and he heard a gasp from around the table. He felt the pencil begin to skate across the page, jerkily, the movements like a child's. The words forming would doubtless be shaky, but it wasn't a matter of calligraphy. How often does one get a missive from the dead? he thought. The medium concentrated hard on keeping his breathing steady and his heart rate down, even though he could feel his excitement rising. Within minutes the scrawl covered five sheets of paper, before coming to an abrupt halt. The noises in his ears died away, followed by the hum of a loud silence.

'Hello?'

No reply. The gate to the realm of the dead had closed for the night.

He waited a few moments, removed the hood and waited for his eyes to adjust to the flicker of thin candlelight before trying to decipher what the spirit had written in his spidery hand. It was a sequence of apparently random words, not a complete sentence among them, but that wasn't unusual; the channels to the afterworld took time to work smoothly sometimes. But it was also unsigned. Who was he, this unknown soldier? Names might not be important over there, but they still mattered on this side of the divide. Ah, well, the medium thought, he would get it from him next time.

And, although he didn't yet know it, that name would be the death of him.

ONE

It was the rattle of chains and the squeal of unoiled hinges that drew Major John Watson to the window of the infirmary that January morning. The metal gates of the Krefeld II *Offizierlager* had swung back and Watson watched a new arrival walk through them, accompanied by the grizzled Feldwebel Krebs. It was unusual for new prisoners to appear at the camp so early in the year. With the armies on the Western Front hunkered down for the winter, the supply of fresh faces – and therefore up-to-date news of the war and of home – tended to dry up until the inevitable spring offensives, which always generated a substantial influx of POWs from both sides.

The new man shuffled, even though he had on a stout pair of boots – many of the prisoners were reduced to wearing wooden clogs – and his shoulders were slumped. His bag of possessions was clutched tightly to his chest and he dumbly followed the *Feldwebel*'s instructions without glancing around to take in his new home. His face was oddly immobile, as if it had been paralysed or covered by a flesh-coloured mask. You didn't have to be a doctor or detective to know that the man

was broken. Krebs led him to Block 2, which formed the base of the U-shaped building that comprised the officers' billets, herding him like a sheepdog with one of its charges until they disappeared inside.

Watson turned back to his ward. In his morning surgery he saw dozens of minor complaints from prisoners, but there were only four in-patients that day: one bad case of boils, another of what could be TB, one with frostbite from trying to dig out under the fence on the coldest night of the year, and Private Martins, whom the other patients suspected was malingering. After all, the infirmary was the one room in the prisoner-of-war camp that was kept warm round the clock, with a ready supply of wood always available. So it was a magnet for those who simply fancied a spell in the heat.

In the main barracks – converted from the stables of a once-grand estate – the men had taken to burning their bunks in the freezing days of the new year. January had been mainly kind since then, but still a few hours in the infirmary were much coveted. However, Watson had come to the conclusion that Martins's symptoms were very real, as he had missed the Sunday football match against the Germans. He couldn't play very well, but he was rather skilled at barking the shins and clumping the ankles of any guard foolish enough to get the ball. It was the highlight of the man's week.

'Well, Martins,' Watson asked, 'any improvement?'

Martins, a sharp-faced fellow in his thirties, was an orderly, one of the other ranks kept on site to look after the officers. They had their own barracks and were little more than glorified footmen. The alternative for such non-officers, though, was

forced labour, in German factories, quarries or the salt mines. Complaints, therefore, were few and far between.

'Still can't stand up, Major. Room spins and I fall down. Like I just got off a merry-go-round. And I see that flashing.' He used his fingers to demonstrate the on-off bursts of coloured lights that had been plaguing him.

'That's the migraine.' Watson had determined he was suffering from Ménière's disease, probably caused by the shell that blew Martins out of his trench and into no man's land, where he was taken prisoner by the Germans. Not that the diagnosis did either of them much good. There was no treatment for the sudden, debilitating attacks of dizziness, nausea and the accompanying visual disturbances.

'There's nothing wrong with him, Major,' said Captain Tyrell, the man with a cluster of angry boils on his bottom that were so bright they could double as streetlamps. 'He was bounding around the place like a March hare before you came to do your rounds.'

Watson raised an eyebrow as a query to Martins.

'It comes and goes.' The private lowered his voice. 'They don't like sharing a ward with a regular soldier, that's the truth of it, sir. Think they should have an officers-only ward.'

'We're lucky to have an infirmary at all.'

It was Watson's third POW camp. He had been captured in no man's land in France, having been blown out of a tank near Flers. From there he had been taken to a field hospital behind the German lines, then a giant holding and processing facility on the Belgian border, a mainly French camp near Cologne, and finally shipped on to join his fellow countrymen at Krefeld II.

This was by far the most benign and well equipped of the three. Halbricht, the commandant, had even built the prisoners a theatre and, although food was desperately short, he made sure that at least one meal a day was something more than potato water and turnip skins. It was best, however, not to ask about the provenance of the meat the kitchen produced.

'You ever play tennis, Martins?' Watson asked.

'Tennis?' he replied with some degree of incredulity. 'I'm from Bermondsey, sir.'

'I think we can rig a net up over by where that Canadian has his hop, step and jump. Eye-to-ball co-ordination, that's what we'll try. Retrain your brain.'

'Good luck with that,' muttered Tyrell.

Watson looked down across the unoccupied beds at the officer, but the words his mouth formed were snatched away by the blast of wind that swirled in with the dried leaves from the open door. Feldwebel Krebs was there, along with Lieutenant Barnes from Block 2. Between them, hanging from their necks, was the newly arrived prisoner. And from the look of him, he was busy bleeding to death.