



**THE WATCHER
IN THE WOODS**

HENRY P. BARNES

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for Eddie Flack

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I remember Christmas Day 1944 like it was yesterday. Many other details from that time have become hazy with the passing of the years, but almost everything that happened that day I remember with crystal clarity. And I swear by all of it.

Let me set the scene.

At the time, I was a private in the British Army, serving in Europe and fighting my way towards Germany. Apart from a few short periods of respite here and there, my company had been in battle almost constantly since we landed in Normandy in June. I'd been lucky up until that point. I'd fought all through France, and then through Belgium and, apart from a few cuts and bruises, I was pretty much unscathed. By December, I started harbouring thoughts that I might even make it home in one piece — but we're a superstitious lot, us soldiers, and I tried to put such thoughts to the back of my mind.

My father used to tell me about his time in the Great War, and how people had said, at the beginning, that it would all be over by Christmas. In the end, there turned out to be four Christmas Days in conflict. In the second world war — my one — we'd already endured five, and we were all ready for

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it to end. That autumn, as our enemies gave way in front of us, we all believed it *would* be over and done with by Christmas.

Then our advance slowed down.

The weather got bad. It's madness fighting wars in winter, and that winter was the coldest we'd seen in years. There were rumours that there wouldn't be any serious action until the worst of the weather was over.

At that time, I believed that with one more push we'd be in Germany, Hitler would come to his senses and finally surrender. So the thought of halting our advance, even for a few weeks, was disappointing. But that was tempered by the fact that it was almost Christmas, and the place we were sent to rest was a picturesque little Belgian town, the name of which I've long since forgotten.

They told us we might be there a few weeks — time enough to catch up on our sleep, get a few decent hot meals inside our bellies, and get clean. Fingers crossed, we thought, we might even get to spend Christmas there. It was in that town I fell in love with Belgium — its people and above all, its beer. It's a love that has never left me. My mate, Bill, and I used to go and have a crafty little cigarette by a stone bridge over a blue river. I don't know how it got to be so blue.

By the time we'd been there a few days, the war seemed to disappear into the background. It was quite surreal. I felt myself beginning to relax, as did my mates. They put on movies for us, and even set up a NAAFI where we could get tea and scones.

For just those few days, the war became a distant memory. We allowed ourselves to believe we'd have a peaceful Christmas with the war on hold.

But the enemy had other ideas.

Just over a week before Christmas, they attacked American positions, about a hundred miles from where we were

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stationed. News reached us fairly quickly that they'd executed a massive offensive that had cut through American lines like butter. This was the beginning of the so-called Battle of the Bulge.

The fighting was fierce, far worse than anything we'd seen, and we'd fought through Normandy. News filtered through to us in dribs and drabs. When we first heard about it, we all grabbed our guns and were ready to pitch in. At first they told us we wouldn't be needed. The Americans had thrown in their elite Airborne infantry, and they were holding the line.

The Germans, however, broke through and went round the Airborne.

Soon, the Yanks were surrounded and cut off.

We tried to find out from our officers what it all meant for us, but all we were told was, 'Stand fast and wait,' which didn't really help. In the end, we resigned ourselves to the thought that whatever will be will be. We couldn't influence the situation, so we might as well just enjoy Christmas while we could.

Christmas Eve arrived, and still we were held back, with no hint that we might be mobilised. We were even given permission to throw a party, and we took over a bar in town and invited the locals to join in. There were Belgian girls galore, and more beer than we knew what to do with. I didn't partake — in the girls, that is. I had my beautiful Marian waiting for me at home, and Charlotte, our daughter. But I did avail myself of the beer. Like I said, I'd developed a taste for the stuff.

That night, I drank mostly to be sociable — it being Christmas Eve and all — but I also drank to hide my worries. I'd had a letter from home that afternoon, telling me about Charlotte — or Lottie as everyone in the family calls her. She'd been taken seriously ill, and was in hospital. To this

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day I don't know why Marian didn't write to tell me about it earlier. The first I knew anything was wrong was that afternoon, in that letter. By that time, she'd already been ill a few days. Lottie had pneumonia.

All the lads who were fathers said the same things about their kids but, to me, Lottie was the most beautiful thing on this earth. Marian spent a fortune getting pictures taken of her and sending them to me, which I loved of course. She told me that every night, she'd show Lottie photographs of me, so she'd know who I was when I finally came home. This was important as, at the time, Lottie was barely two years old. In a letter only a few weeks earlier, Marian wrote that Lottie had pointed to my picture and called out, 'Dah Dah.' That had set me off crying.

I didn't know much about pneumonia, except that it sounded serious. Bill was the one who told me that it could be fatal. In those days you couldn't just pick up the phone and call home. If I'd known then just how serious it was, I think I'd have made a run for it, to get home. I went to my sergeant and told him about it. 'What are the chances of me getting some home leave?' I asked.

'None,' he replied, gruffly.

'But it's Christmas...'

'All leave is cancelled.' This was because of the unfolding emergency on the American lines, and the fact that we were on stand by to muck in if needed. I argued that I needed to see my daughter, but he wouldn't budge. 'We all have our troubles. Can you imagine what would happen if we let everyone go home every time one of their kids got ill? There'd be nobody here.'

Even though I didn't get any sympathy from the sergeant, I got plenty from the lads, especially those who were themselves fathers. That's the thing about service life — the camaraderie between soldiers.

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Bill was the most supportive, but then he was my best mate in the army. I showed him Marian's letter. 'What do you think?' I asked.

'Bloody hell, mate,' was his first reaction.

'How serious is it?'

'Very.'

'What should I do? I tried getting leave, but it was refused.'

'I think we should go and talk to the padre.'

'I'm not religious,' I replied.

'Doesn't matter. He might be able to swing it for you to go home on compassionate leave. At the very least, he'll be able to give you some advice. Tomorrow's Christmas, so I think we should get him to say a prayer for Lottie in his service in the morning.'

'Do you think he would?'

'He's a decent sort of a chap.'

We agreed that we'd both go and talk to him just before chapel the next day.

That evening we were all given a pass to go into the town. A group of us met in a cafe for drinks. For the briefest time I managed to forget about Lottie, and enjoy myself. But by the time they threw us out, my mind was very firmly back on her.

Military police came into the bar at eleven and ordered all the troops out. They wanted us tucked up in our cots nice and early, and not out all night drinking. I was quite happy to go back, but I didn't get much sleep that night. I tossed and turned, thinking about my daughter all the way back home in Devon.

We had hoped for a fairly leisurely Christmas Day — a gentle wake up call followed by breakfast, then chapel, and an afternoon getting ready for Christmas dinner served by the officers. None of us expected anything like a sit down meal, but we all hoped for something nicer than the field

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rations we'd been living off.

It didn't turn out like that at all.

Dawn was still a long way off when the NCOs burst into our barn banging noisily anything in order to wake us up. 'Out of bed, come on fast! Move it!'

'Bugger off, it's Christmas,' I heard a voice moan, but it only earned him a sharp rebuke off a sergeant.

It appeared that the Germans didn't intend on letting us have Christmas Day off. Expecting to catch us off guard, they launched a massive offensive right across the Ardennes, and broke through the allied lines.

We were about a hundred miles away from the fighting. They needed us at the front and we hadn't a moment to lose. We were ordered to take up defensive positions and halt the enemy's advance.

We grabbed as much equipment as we could, and breakfast consisted of hastily prepared sandwiches and tea. I threw mine down as fast as I could, slung my rifle over my shoulder and ran for the trucks.

It was still dark when we trundled out of town.

When we left it started snowing and as we drove it got steadily thicker. By the time it got light, the snow was like nothing I'd ever seen before. At one point, I could barely see the lorry behind — only its headlights piercing through.

We drove one hundred miles in thick snow, buffeted around in the back of those trucks. If we were cold when we set off, we were close to freezing by the time we arrived. At least the tarpaulin kept the snow out, but an icy cold blast penetrated through the countless tears in the fabric. No matter how much I pulled my overcoat tight, I couldn't get warm.

We tried entertaining ourselves with song, but after a while the cold got the better of us and we stopped. That's when some of the lads shared stories that had filtered down to us

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from the front. They were little more than rumours, but we believed every word. The fighting was really bad and the first line of Americans were almost decimated.

We heard that they'd thrown in paratroopers — elite infantry — who were putting up a good fight and holding their the line, despite the pounding they were getting. How would we cope when it came to us? Sure we were toughened, seasoned, warriors but we weren't paratroopers. We were just bog standard infantry.

As we neared our destination, the stories died down and we all turned our thoughts to what we were about to face.

Finally the trucks came to a halt and we jumped down. We were on the edge of thick woodland. It was snowing hard and we couldn't see more than a few yards in any direction. At a different time, it would have made for a lovely festive scene — but not that day.

We muttered a semi-sarcastic *Merry Christmas* to each other before setting to the task of digging in, or rather trying. Fox holes were impossible. The ground was frozen solid, so we had to improvise, using the fallen branches of trees.

We set up two lines of defence, one about fifty yards behind the first. My platoon took up position in the second. It was only when I settled down that I became aware of gun fire in the distance — mostly artillery, but interspersed with machine guns. It wasn't long before it got louder.

I heard a dull thumping sound — a big gun going off not far away. As a veteran of several battles already, I knew exactly what it was. A voice from somewhere up front yelled, 'Get down! Incoming!'

A shell whistled overhead and exploded a few yards to our rear. The blast was ferocious, sending bits of tree flying in all directions, and a huge dollop of dirty snow. We all ducked down.

The explosion was followed by a brief, but eerie silence. It

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was enough for me to brave sticking my head up. I strained to see through the blizzard, but couldn't see a thing. Then there were three more thumps in short order, and seconds later the whistling of three shells. Again came the order to get down, and we all dived for cover.

The shells struck our left flank, but they were well wide of the mark.

Before we could gather our thoughts, shells began raining down on us, blasting trees to pieces and ripping huge holes in the ground. I heard men scream for life, and the frequent call for medics. For a while we were stunned and too frightened to move. It seemed to take ages for us to come to our senses and return fire. Those in the forward positions began firing randomly into the gloom.

I squinted my eyes, trying to spot enemy soldiers coming towards us, but didn't see anyone. By that point, my comrades up front were firing ferociously into the gloom, so I thought I ought to do likewise.

All we did, though, was give away our position, and the enemy homed in on us. We heard them come, but still we couldn't see them. They could see us, or at least that's how it seemed to us, because their firing was deadly accurate. Bullets strafed all around me, and slammed into the branches protecting my front. I was pretty much pinned down.

For a while I kept my head down, until I finally came to my senses and plucked up the courage to fire back.

They used mortars against us, and we did the same. From time to time, they'd break cover and attack our positions full-on. We held the line, and forced wave after wave to pull back.

It was like that for more than an hour — easily the most intense time I'd spent in combat, but we held on. Finally, the fighting died down and a strange quiet descended on our section of the forest. We drew our breath and one by one

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emerged from cover to assess the damage and tend to our wounded.

There were many casualties in my company, some seriously wounded but miraculously no-one was killed.

I set about finding branches to shore up my position, fearing the Germans would be back soon. I'd barely finished when the firing started up again, but this time it was a way over to our left, where 2 Company were positioned.

An officer ordered us to advance forward, out of our defensive positions, and engage the enemy before they could break through 2 Company. We grabbed whatever we could carry and moved out into the blizzard.

We moved slowly, carefully, fanned out in a line.

At once, the enemy started shelling us. Then there was machine gun fire from somewhere off to our right. Bill was at my side, and as soon as the firing started, we both hit the deck. Bullets blasted into the trees around us.

'Keep moving!' a sergeant yelled. As Bill and I pulled ourselves up, a grenade exploded just a few yards in front of us. Bill was thrown to the left, and I to the right.

'Move it!' our sergeant yelled again.

I heard my comrades get to their feet and some of them began firing into the space ahead of them. I started forward again, my gun at the ready, but utterly petrified.

Suddenly, I became aware that the shooting had stopped. Where there had only seconds before been a deafening racket, now there was quiet. I trudged forward. I don't know how far I went before I realised I was alone. I couldn't see anyone through the snow, and nor could I hear them.

It occurred to me that I was alone.

'Bill!' I called into the gloom, but there was no answer.

It was a schoolboy error. I was alone, out in the open, and calling out. I might as well have lit a flare. From somewhere in the blizzard, they opened fire on me. Instinctively, I hit the

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ground. Another shell exploded nearby, close enough to bring clumps of frozen earth and slush down on top of me.

Then, another shell went off only feet away. The ground shook and I felt the full blast. I couldn't feel my legs. I heard a tree fall, but strangely there was no pain when it landed on top of me.

It could only have been a few seconds later when I blacked out, unconscious.

2

I don't know how long I was unconscious, but the next thing I remember was slowly coming to, out in the open. It was freezing cold and all was deathly silent apart from footsteps, trudging through the snow, coming towards me. They stopped and I sensed someone standing over me. My instinct was to play dead in case it was an enemy soldier. Whoever it was stood and watched, checking for signs of life in me.

I could neither move nor feel my legs, and the pain was intense, like nothing else I'd ever experienced. I could sense the weight of what I assumed was a large tree lying on top of them. When I first awoke, I felt warm but quickly the heat ebbed away and I became very cold and shivering.

'Can you hear me?' a low and calm male voice said in a strong foreign accent. I couldn't tell, but in my weakened state of mind, I assumed him to be German, and thought my end was imminent.

I said nothing.

But he persisted and knelt at my side. 'I'm going to try to get this tree off you, so I can pull you free.'

I remained silent.

'Stay calm and I'll do what I can.'

He shoved his body hard against the trunk and pushed

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hard. It moved slightly, but just enough for the movement to send the most intense pain through my legs. I tried not to scream, but the pain was too great.

‘Sorry,’ the voice said.

‘Who are you?’ I asked.

‘Don’t worry, I’m not German.’

He shoved again and through brute force moved the tree just enough to be able to drag me out. I almost bit my tongue trying to stop myself from calling out in agony. He dragged me free of the tree and knelt down at my side. I looked up and saw him for the first time. He was dressed in civilian clothing — a thick overcoat, boots and a hat. ‘British?’ he asked.

‘Yes,’ I croaked.

‘Are you on your own?’

‘I don’t know.’

‘Where are your comrades?’

I didn’t know. ‘Over there?’ I tried pointing to the clump of trees to my left, but I hadn’t enough strength to even move my arm.

‘You’re the only one I’ve found so far,’ he looked anxiously around.

‘Germans...?’ I started.

‘They’re gone,’ he said. ‘But they’ll be back — nothing more sure, so we also must get out of here. Soon it will be dark. My house is close by. There I can look at your wounds, and you can warm up.’

‘No, get me to a hospital,’ I said.

‘Not now,’ he replied. ‘The hospital is too far away, and it’s too dangerous to move you. You’ll be safe at my house until morning.’

He lifted me to my feet, and slung my arm around his shoulder. The pain was so bad that I immediately passed out. Probably just as well because he must have dragged me Lord

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knows how far to his place.

The next thing I remember is waking up in an armchair, with my legs up on a footstool, in front of a roaring fire.

My rescuer had dressed my wounds, put a splint on my legs and bound them up tight. He then put his own overcoat over me.

'You were very cold,' he smiled. 'We'll soon have you warm.'

'Hypothermia,' I mumbled.

'Pardon?'

'Being too cold.'

'You kept going in and out of consciousness. I thought I was going to lose you. But, you're over the worst now.'

'Where am I?' I asked.

'In my house.'

'I need to get back to my unit,' I said.

'Not tonight. Stay here overnight, and tomorrow I'll get help.'

'What day is it?'

'Christmas Day,' he chuckled. 'Merry Christmas.'

I'm afraid any Christmas joy I might have had was long gone.

'Hungry?' he asked.

I was ravenous.

'I'm sorry I don't have a goose but I do have soup, and it's hot.'

He went into the kitchen and I gazed around the room. Furnishings might have been thin on the ground, but it did feel homely. The fire was huge, and it surprised me to see a decorated Christmas tree in the corner, festooned in coloured lights. Not what I would have expected.

He came back with a bowl of soup on a tray.

'I like your tree,' I commented. 'Very festive.'

'Thank you. We Belgians have had a tough few years with

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not a lot to cheer about. I know the war is still going on, but we try to celebrate wherever we can. This is our first Christmas as a free people again — at least, some of us are free.'

'Amen to that,' I said.

He placed the tray on my lap, and stood over me with a gleam in his eyes. He watched as I took my first sip. It was gorgeous and I told him so.

'It's soup the way my mother used to make it. I'm glad you like it.'

'Tell her she's got good taste,' I said.

'I will,' he replied, but I noticed the gleam fade a little bit. I figured she must be dead, but decided not to pursue it any further.

'Thank you for... for... all this.'

'My pleasure,' he replied. He stood and waited for me to scrape the last spoonful out of the bowl so he could pounce. 'More?' he asked.

'What about you? Are you having some?'

'I will, later. Don't worry about me, there's enough. Would you like more?'

'Thank you,' I nodded.

Obviously delighted, he rushed back to the kitchen, leaving me to gaze around the room some more. There were photographic portraits on the chimney breast. He came back to find me looking at them. 'My wife and my son,' he announced.

His wife looked utterly divine. Even in sepia, you could see how brilliant and inquisitive her eyes were. She had one of those smiles that lit up her whole face. 'Where is she?' I asked.

'Brussels.'

I was surprised to hear that. 'She doesn't live here?'

'No, not for many years now. She took my son, Henri, to

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the city. She thought he would stand a better chance there than here. I don't blame her for that.' I wanted to explore it more, and ask if they were separated or divorced, but in the end I didn't.

Instead I asked, 'How old is your son?'

'He would have been twenty seven.'

'Twenty seven?' I must have sounded amazed. My benefactor didn't look old enough to have a son aged in his teens, let alone twenty seven. 'You said he would have been twenty seven,' I pointed out.

'He was killed,' he replied, solemnity in his voice. 'Exactly one year ago today.'

'Christmas Day?' I exclaimed, 'I'm so sorry.'

'They murdered him on Christmas Day, alongside ten other Belgians — hostages.'

'Murdered? That's terrible.'

'He was executed by the Gestapo. My son is a martyr. He was a fighter. They caught him after they'd blown up a radio station. The others in his party got away, but they arrested Henri. I'm so proud of him. He gave everything for our country's liberation, and I'm only sorry he never lived to see it.'

'Why would they kill him on Christmas Day of all days?'

'Maximum impact. They took hostages, and brought them all to the market square. Then they forced all the residents to come out of their houses to watch. They hanged Henri and the hostages right there and then in front of everyone. Then they left their bodies hanging there until after Christmas and warned of the consequences if anyone moved them.'

'Hateful people.'

'Now Helen is all on her own.'

'Helen?'

'Henri's mother — the woman in the picture.'

'Your wife?'

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'Coffee?' he asked, changing the subject, and I instinctively knew I'd touched a nerve. Surprisingly, though, he didn't sound especially bitter, and described it in an almost matter-of-fact kind of way. I wouldn't have been so calm if it were me. I told him so.

'I am angry,' he confirmed, 'but it doesn't do anybody any good. I grieve in my own way. There are millions of people all over this world grieving for their sons and daughters right at this very moment. I'm only grieving for one, and I'm so proud of what Henri did.'

'You'll see him again in Heaven,' I said, conscious of how trite I sounded. 'I believe that.'

'I don't believe it, I know it,' he replied. 'I'll see Henri again sooner rather than later and that brings me comfort. I'll fetch the coffee.'

He took my bowl and went to the kitchen, returning moments later with a cup of black, fresh, coffee and more soup. I felt awful about taking another helping, but it tasted divine, and I'd been living for so long off field rations.

'You'll need all your strength to recover from those wounds,' he smiled.

Once he was sure I was well fed, he finally sat down on the armchair opposite and just looked at me. Normally, this would make me feel uncomfortable. I hate it when people stare at me, especially when I'm eating. But there was something about him that made me feel at peace.

'What were you doing out in the forest with a battle going on?' I asked

'When better to find wounded people than a battle?'

'You're a civilian, right?' I asked.

'Of course.'

'So, why did you want to find wounded soldiers?'

'I wanted to help. It is Christmas Day, after all. Don't you agree that it's wrong to be fighting a war on a day that's

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meant to be one of peace?’

I did, but it’s never that simple, especially in that war.

He continued, ‘I’ve come to believe that on Christmas Day you ought to aim to save lives rather than take them. That’s what I was trying to do. And in so doing, I found you, and brought you to safety. You will be safe here, at least until morning.’

‘Tell me,’ I asked, ‘would you have done the same if I’d have been a German?’

‘Life is life, whoever it belongs to.’

‘What about the other wounded?’ I asked.

‘What other wounded?’

‘It was a fierce battle. There must have been others.’

‘I only found you.’

Was I really the only one wounded? Had my mates left me? Did they think I was dead? Did they intend to come back later for me? I had so many questions, but I didn’t ask them out loud.

I wanted so much to find the right words to show my gratitude to my benefactor, but a simple thanks didn’t seem enough. I couldn’t think of another word, so I just thanked him and he waved it away like it was nothing.

‘Tell me about your daughter,’ he changed the subject.

‘How do you know I have a daughter?’ I hadn’t spoken about my family.

‘Forgive me. When you were asleep, I checked your pockets to find out who you are. I found a picture of a little girl and assumed she was your daughter.’

‘Lottie,’ I confirmed, fumbling in my tunic breast pocket. I took out the photograph and handed it to him. ‘She’s nearly two, but she’s not very well.’

‘Oh? How so?’ he asked.

I told him about her pneumonia. ‘I’m frightened she’s at death’s door. At least that’s how she was a few days ago.’

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I've not heard how she is now.'

'You're frightened because you think she might be dead,' he told me.

I was, but I didn't want to say it.

'Do you feel she's dead?' he asked. 'In your heart, do you have feelings that she's passed?'

'No.'

'Then that probably means that she hasn't passed yet.'

'How can you possibly say that?'

'When I was a kid, my mother used to say this,' he continued. 'If you have a real connection to someone like a father has to his daughter, you feel their presence — whether they're dead or alive. You must have had that feeling when you know instinctively that something bad has happened, and then you find out later that it has. When my grandfather died, I felt it in my heart long before anyone told me. The bond between a father and his daughter is strong. I believe that you'd know in your heart if Lottie has died already.'

He was probably trying to keep my morale up. 'I wish I could believe that,' I said.

'Trust me, I have a strong feeling that she's going to be just fine.'

'You're only saying that to make me feel better.'

He simply shrugged his shoulders. 'Remember what I just told you. Christmas Day is for saving lives, not taking them. I have a strong feeling that the hand of healing is on Lottie's head. She's going to be alright. Wait and see.'

Strangely, his words did make me feel better. Again, I thanked him, and I promised that if Lottie and I survived the war, I'd bring her back to meet him. He just smiled and waved the thought away. I realised then that I didn't know his name.

'Francois,' he held out his hand to shake mine. 'Francois Hublot.'

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‘Philip Webb,’ I replied. ‘I wish I had something to toast you with.’ I felt my connection with Francois growing stronger.

‘Where are my manners?’ Francois sprung up from his chair and went to a wooden dresser, from which he took out a bottle containing clear liquid and two small glasses. ‘Do you like schnapps?’

‘Isn’t that a German drink?’ I asked.

‘This is Belgian schnapps — far better than the German stuff.’ He poured two healthy measures and handed one to me.

‘To you, Helen and to the memory of Henri,’ I raised my glass.

In reply he toasted, ‘To you, Marian and Lottie — and long and happy lives.’

We might not have had goose, or much to cheer about, but the schnapps helped and we spent the early evening toasting victory, the Belgian and British royal families, Winston Churchill, Eisenhower, Montgomery. The last thing I remember toasting was for Hitler to fall off a cliff into a fiery abyss.

As we drank, the shadows on the wall grew longer as the light outside faded. I noticed the absence of gunfire, which pleased me no end. The fire never went down. Francois saw to that. As my alcohol levels rose, my body relaxed, and the cold and pain in my bones subsided. I felt cocooned in a lovely warm blanket, and for those few hours all my cares disappeared. I no longer felt like a wounded infantryman separated from his unit, or a father in pain for his daughter. That evening, I was a friend, enjoying another’s warm festive hospitality.

Francois got up and stood by the window. It surprised me that he kept the curtains open so long. Only hours before, a battle had raged just outside. Surely the glow from the lights

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would attract unwelcome attention from any passing platoons, and draw in their fire.

He gazed out, lost in his own thoughts. He never told me what went through his mind, but I think he was probably reflecting on Henri. Outside, the snow came down even harder. I saw the huge snowflakes through the glass and was glad to be inside in the warm and not freezing in a foxhole.

My thoughts turned to Bill and I hoped he'd made it unscathed through the battle. I wished he was in that farmhouse with me, warming his frozen bones.

I sank into a restful and deep sleep right there in that chair in front of the fire.

3

It was a miserable Christmas for Lottie, and at two years old she wouldn't have understood what was happening to her. Her pneumonia came on quickly, frightening Marian. She called in the doctor, who rang for an ambulance to take her to the infirmary. Lottie was admitted straight to the children's ward. For days, there was no news and Marian was utterly beside herself with worry.

On one of her visits, the doctor told her to brace herself for the worst, and that was the day she wrote to me. The hospital enforced strict visiting times and at eight o'clock each evening all visitors were kicked out. It broke Marian's heart to have to leave Lottie there alone and return home to an empty house, in the dark. Now she had to worry about me at the front and Lottie in hospital.

On Christmas Eve, during the night, Lottie's condition worsened considerably. I heard much later that the doctor told the nurse that he expected her to pass in the small hours.

I don't know how they did it, because we didn't have a telephone at home, but the hospital contacted Marian and told her to go straight in. Her heart sank, but stoically Marian prepared for the worst. Both our families rallied round. Marian's and my parents went with her. 'You can't all come

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onto the ward,' a nurse barred their entrance.

'Just you try and stop me,' my dad pushed her aside and they barged in.

Sister met them at the door, and instructed the grandparents to wait outside the ward, while she took Marian into a side office. Marian never told me exactly what Sister said to her. I expect that's because she didn't really hear much of it. She did remember Sister's pompous tone as she announced that they'd done everything they could for Lottie, and they'd moved her into a side room, so as not to disturb the other children on Christmas Day.

'How long do we have?' Marian asked.

This was the only time the Sister showed any empathy. She took Marian's hand and said softly, 'Not long. It will most likely be today. We'll do all we can to keep the child comfortable.' Then there were some words about keeping her pecker up and soldiering on, which really upset Marian.

To get to Lottie's room, they had to go through the children's ward. It being Christmas, they'd decorated it, and the staff were doing their best to make the day special for the kids. I can understand that, but it makes dealing with your own loss all the harder.

Towards lunchtime, a doctor made his rounds. Without acknowledging the family, he carried out a brief examination of Lottie's chest and left the room. Joan, Marian's mum, listened in as the doctor and nurse talked about Lottie's condition outside the door. 'It won't be long now,' the doctor said. 'The poor child hasn't the strength to fight.'

'Do you think we can keep her alive long enough so she doesn't die on Christmas Day?'

'What would be the point?' the doctor asked.

'The family... it will take away Christmas for them forever.'

'They'll get over it. People are resilient. No, the kindest

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thing to do is to allow the patient to pass in her own time.'

'What do I tell them?'

'What we always tell them — that we're doing our best.'

The nurse came straight back into the room, but it was obvious that the sight of Lottie lying there dying pained her to the core. 'I wish there was more we could do,' she said. 'Would it help to see a minister?'

'I don't think so,' Marian replied. 'We're not religious.'

'People do find that it helps. Many of the local clergy come in because it's Christmas. If you like, I could ask one of them to pop in — but only if you think it would bring you comfort.'

'What harm can it do?' Marian conceded.

A priest arrived only a few minutes later. He knocked on the door and stuck his head in. 'I'm from St Mary's,' he announced in a foreign accent that made my family slightly nervous.

'We're not catholic,' Marian responded.

'It's all the same God, surely,' he said.

'Where are you from?' dad asked.

'St Mary's.'

'No, your country.'

'Belgium,' the priest confirmed, to the relief of the family. 'Would you like me to say a prayer for Lottie?'

'Not the last rites, please — not yet,' Marian pleaded.

The priest smiled, 'I believe it's better to save a life on Christmas Day than to take one. I don't think the time is right for the last rites. I'll say a prayer for healing.'

He got straight down to it, making the sign of the cross with his thumb on Lottie's forehead. He mumbled a short prayer, the words of which the family couldn't hear. Then he placed the palm of his hand on Lottie's chest.

At that moment, Lottie erupted into a violent coughing fit. She writhed around, as she struggled to get breath. 'Stop it,'

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Joan shouted. Dad wanted to get up and push the priest out of the way, but he said later that he felt something stopped him from moving.

In a panic, Marian ran out, to fetch help.

All the while, the priest continued praying. Lottie got worse, and screamed a hideous high pitched squeal. Then, as suddenly as it started, Lottie calmed down and the coughing stopped.

Marian rushed back with the nurse, 'What seems to be the trouble?'

The priest opened his eyes, made the sign of the cross over Lottie's calm and sleeping body, and said quietly, 'That ought to do the trick. She's in the hands of our Lord now.'

The nurse examined Lottie, 'She seems perfectly fine to me.'

'I think you should leave,' Marian told the priest. 'Thank you for the prayer, but it unsettled Lottie and I'd rather she spent her final hours with her family.'

'As you wish. Would you like me to call back later?'

'No, I think you've done enough.'

'In that case,' the priest said, 'I'll take my leave. Today's a busy day. I'll continue to pray for Lottie, and I hope you all find peace today. I'll leave you with this.' He handed over a Christmas card in a sealed envelope. 'Open it later,' he whispered to Marian. Then he left.

'I've never seen that priest before,' the nurse commented.

'Shouldn't we tell someone?' Marian asked. 'He could be an imposter. I don't think he's a real priest.'

'I'm sure it's nothing to be concerned about. It's not uncommon for ministers to come and go, especially at this time of year, and with a war on.' She gave Lottie a thorough examination and seemed surprised, 'He must have done some good. Lottie is far more settled now, and her breathing is better.'

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The nurse returned on the hour to look over Lottie. Each time she expressed deep surprise that Lottie was improving. Sometime in the afternoon, she came with the doctor, who demanded everyone leave so he could take a good look. They all refused, forcing him to carry on regardless. After he'd finished, he glanced quizzically around the assembled family, 'I don't know how to explain this. I've never come across anything like this. This morning she was on the brink of death. Now, I'd put money on a full recovery.'

By teatime, Lottie was awake and sitting up, almost back to her old self.

A procession of hospital staff came to her room throughout the day to see for themselves the remarkable recovery little Charlotte Webb made. 'A true Christmas miracle,' declared Matron. 'This is one for the books.'

Just before the family left that evening, Joan told Marian, 'put that card up, the one the priest left. This place needs sprucing up. It is Christmas after all.'

Marian took the card out of its envelope and opened it up. The handwritten words inside, "Christmas is a time for healing and miracles. All my love, Francois Hublot."

4

It was early on Boxing Day when I awoke. Dawn had just broken, and the battle had started up again. There was the sound of shelling, not close by, but not distant, either. Through the the window I saw that there was no let up in the snow. Francois had done well keeping the fire going through the night. I was still in the armchair, but instead of Francois' coat over my legs, he'd replaced it with a thick blanket.

He was nowhere to be seen, though. 'Francois?' I called but there was no reply.

He couldn't have gone far. It looked as though fresh wood had only just been tossed into the fire and there was a mug of black coffee sitting on an occasional table he'd dragged to the side of my chair. It was steaming hot and freshly made.

'Francois? Are you there?' I called, again.

As I spoke, there was a terrific explosion outside, the blast of which rocked the house. Then there was another, and then another, and I knew that soon troops would be on top of us. Francois' little cottage was directly in the firing line.

Bursts of machine gun fire erupted, and I heard shouting. I couldn't tell if the voices were ours or theirs. My immediate concern was for Francois. He might have gone out, collecting firewood or something. What if he was caught up in it?

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I called after him again, but still there was no reply.

Another shell went off near the house, and I knew that I had to get out. A direct hit and I'd be a dead man. I figured my best chance was on the outside, but I could barely move, with my legs bound in splints, and cuts and bruises over my whole body. Each time I tried, intense pain engulfed me.

I heard footsteps close by the house and I thought it must be Francois. I shouted for him, but whoever it was just ran away. Another explosion, this time in the trees only yards from the house, and bullets smacked into the building. I was terrified that I was a sitting duck.

The windows rattled and the light cord hanging from the ceiling swayed about. The coffee cup next to me fell to the ground and shattered.

I had to get out.

In spite of the pain, I lifted myself off the chair and onto the floor, and dragged my body towards the door. Every move was too painful for words. When I got there, I realised I wouldn't be able to open it. The handle was too high.

I needn't have worried. Before I even reached the door, a shell went off just the other side of it, blowing it clean off its hinges. An icy blast of air hit me, and it brought in with it snow. I wiped my eyes clean and peered out.

A ferocious snow storm was raging, being whipped up by a powerful wind. And the cold, oh the cold.

I was possessed with a single-minded determination to get out, and take my chances with whichever troops were out there. As I dragged my body across the debris strewn floor, bullets blasted into the building above me. I ducked down, trying to protect my head as a huge piece of masonry fell on top of me, and blanked out.

When I regained consciousness, soldiers were swarming around the building. They found me in the doorway. 'He's one of us,' someone called out. 'You alright mate?'

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I tried to answer, but couldn't force the words out. They lifted away the chunk of building that lay on top of me.

A medic arrived shortly after. 'He's been strapped up,' he commented. 'Whichever of you did that should be proud. It's a bang up job.'

'It was Francois,' I replied.

'Who's Francois?'

'I think he might be still inside the building.'

'Who is he?'

'He owns the house,' I said, not seeing the looks the others exchanged. I heard one of them utter the word delirious but at the time I didn't think anything of it. 'Please! Someone, go in and look for him.'

The medic examined me while the others checked the building. 'It's empty,' they called out.

'How long have you been lying here?' the medic asked.

'I don't know. Francois brought me to the house yesterday.' I explained about the fire, the food and the drink.

'That's not possible,' the medic said. 'How long have you really been here?'

'I told you — yesterday. I must have got cut off from my unit.'

'Okay, we'll take you to the hospital and get your leg set.'

5

I must have drifted in and out of consciousness on the way to the hospital, because I don't remember much about the trip. I do recall the biting cold being like nothing I'd ever experienced before. My ambulance was an open top Jeep, and my stretcher was strapped to the bonnet.

The hospital they took me to was a Belgian civilian one. Since the Ardennes offensive had started, it had become overrun with British military casualties. British army medics had arrived to work alongside civilian Belgian doctors and nurses.

My first few days there are something of a blur. They carried out surgery on my legs, and they removed a bullet from my upper thigh. I also had a fever, probably through an infected wound.

'It's a miracle you're still with us,' a nurse told me when I woke up. 'Your wounds alone could have killed you, but being out in the open without protection on one of the coldest nights any of us can remember, you should have died from that. And yet, here you are.'

'I wasn't lying out in it,' I explained. 'I was tucked up in front of a blazing fire.'

'Still saying that, eh?' she asked, dismissively. 'You must

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still have a temperature.’ But, I didn’t. My fever had abated. They still thought me delirious, which I wasn’t.

While I was on the recovery ward, a letter arrived from Marian. I put off opening it, fearing the worst news about Lottie. One of the nurses almost forced me to open it and she sat with me while I read it. She thought I’d need her to comfort me. But the news was the best I could have hoped for. ‘Do you believe in miracles?’ I asked.

‘Sometimes,’ she smiled. ‘Although these days, they are a bit thin on the ground.’

A few days later, Bill Mason came to see me, and I couldn’t wait to tell him my news. We celebrated Lottie. He was genuinely pleased for us. ‘Do you know if they found Francois?’ I asked.

‘Who?’

‘The farmer who looked after me and bandaged me up.’

‘Phil, mate, there was nobody there. The place where we found you was deserted. I’d say there hadn’t been anyone living in it for years. Mate, it had no roof.’

‘No, that isn’t true. I was there — eating soup and drinking coffee. And there was a roaring fire.’

‘There was stuff growing in there alright, but there weren’t any Christmas trees. Weeds, maybe.’

‘You’re wrong,’ I insisted. It upset me to think that no-one believed a word I said. But they weren’t there.

One of the Belgian nurses took more of an interest in my story. She listened and didn’t pass judgement. One day, she brought Matron to talk to me, who introduced herself simply as Marguerite. ‘Tell me about Francois Hublot,’ she said.

‘I’m not delirious,’ I replied. I didn’t relish the thought of someone else telling me I’d imagined him.

‘I didn’t say you were. Just tell me about it.’

So I did, and to her credit she listened. She then asked me to describe the inside of the house. I told her about its layout,

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and the fact that there were very few items of furniture. She seemed especially interested in the pictures on the chimney breast, and what the hearth looked like. 'That was the only room I saw,' I told her, finally.

As I spoke, I noticed the colour drain from her face, and she glanced uneasily at the nurse. She took off her hat and wiped her brow. 'This can't be true,' she said softly, keeping her voice low.

'You believe whatever you want,' I snapped, annoyed.

'Francois Hublot was my cousin,' she told me. 'You described his house perfectly, Private Webb.'

'See?' I exclaimed, triumphantly. Then her words sunk in. 'What do you mean he was your cousin?' I asked.

'Francois Hublot was killed in 1917,' she announced. 'You couldn't possibly have seen him.'

'Well, I did. I spent most all afternoon and the evening with him.'

'Describe him to me,' she demanded and listened intently as I painted a very detailed picture of my benefactor — his light brown hair, brown eyes, and the slight gap in his front teeth.

'If I imagined it,' I said finally, 'how come I know about Henri?'

'I don't know.'

'Did he have a son called Henri?'

'Yes.'

'And, was he killed by the Nazis last year?'

She nodded.

'Then, I couldn't have imagined it. How do you explain any of it?'

'I can't, Private Webb.'

She told me Francois' story. He was the son of a poor farmer, who had managed to get a good education, and was fluent in French, Dutch and English. He'd married a girl he

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met in Brussels and they had a son, Henri. When the Great War broke out, Francois made up his mind to go and fight for his country and, after the Belgian army was defeated, made his way through the German lines to the British, where he volunteered as an interpreter, eventually being commissioned into a British regiment. He'd been so proud of the pip on his shoulder and what he was doing, and wrote reams of letters home telling his family about it. He was mortally wounded during heavy fighting in Ypres in 1917. He died from his wounds a few months later, in December.

Marguerite continued, 'His body is in a British cemetery near Ypres. Helen couldn't bear to bring up Henri alone in their cottage in the forest, and a few years after the war ended she took him back to Brussels. The house was left empty and after Francois' father died, it was left to ruin. I don't blame her for leaving. She did what was best for her and the boy. I lost contact with Helen, but I saw Henri not long before he was caught. He came to visit on his way to blowing something up. Henri stayed with me at my house overnight. He'd turned into a fine young man — a true patriot. Someone betrayed him to the Nazis. After the war, people like that will have to pay for what they did.' Then she paused. 'Did you say you were wounded on Christmas Day?'

'Yes.'

'They executed Henri on Christmas Day.'

'I know, Francois told me.'

'And that's what I can't explain,' she held up her hands. 'You described him perfectly. He was such a lovely man and I miss him dearly. But, it's impossible. He's long dead.'

'It wasn't a ghost,' I said.

'I didn't...' she started.

'I know that because we touched. We shook hands, and he brought me food — actual food.'

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'I don't know how to explain it. Some things are probably best left as a mystery. I suppose life is like that sometimes.'

'I don't know, either. Maybe Francois wanted to do some good for someone from beyond the grave,' I said. A cold shiver went down my spine as I spoke.

'The medics who brought you in here,' Marguerite continued, told us they were impressed at your dressings, and the splint. They also commented on how remarkably dry you were considering you must have been out in the snow all night. And, you weren't hypothermic. By rights, you should have died out there in the snow.'

'But I didn't.'

6

After a month in bed, I was able to get up and move about on crutches. The doctors said I was well enough to be transferred to a hospital in England to finish my recovery. The day before I was due to be moved, a couple of army medics visited me and brought one of the Belgian orderlies. Like so many, they were fascinated to learn about Francois, and the night I'd spent with him.

The British lads were sceptical.

I convinced them to sneak me out of the hospital for a few hours. 'I'll show you the house,' I said.

'I know exactly where it is,' the Belgian orderly replied.

We borrowed a Jeep and they drove me out to the forest. We had to be careful. Although it had been several weeks since the fighting, the place was still littered with ordnance, some of which was still live. If someone had caught us, we'd all have been in serious trouble, but none of us cared.

A narrow track covered with snow led off the road, through a clearing in the trees up to the old farm house. 'There it is,' the Belgian lad announced.

'No, it can't be,' I said, confused. This building was derelict, just as others had told me. The roof looked to have long since gone, save a few wooden beams that were happily

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rotting away. Part of one whole wall had caved in, and the windows and doorways were no more than gaps in the wall.

‘And you think you had a warm cosy night in there?’ someone asked, a degree of incredulity in his voice.

‘It must be the wrong building,’ I replied.

‘This is the old Hublot farm,’ the Belgian lad said.

I hobbled from the Jeep to the doorway where I’d been found. Someone pointed to a patch of blood on the masonry, ‘Could that be your blood?’

I gasped. It must have been.

I went inside. The layout was exactly as I’d described it, but there was no furniture, and the hearth hadn’t seen flame in decades. I shook my head. ‘This is the place, definitely... but I don’t understand.’

‘I do,’ one of the orderlies said. ‘At least I think I do.’

I’ve thought about those events many times in the years since. I can’t explain what happened. All I know is that on Christmas Day 1944, hundreds of miles apart, my daughter and I were on the verge of death. Both of us now believe that our healing was delivered by someone claiming to be Francois Hublot, who apparently had died exactly twenty seven years earlier.

There are no witnesses to my part of the story. All I can do to convince people I didn’t make it up is tell the facts about his life that he told me that day — things I couldn’t possibly have known beforehand. There are, however, six witnesses to the Hublot who visited Lottie in hospital. Six people who spoke to him, and heard him speak. And we still have the Christmas card he left.

The events of that Christmas have become part of the folklore of my family. We’ve passed the story down through the generations. Lottie told it to her children, who told it to theirs. With each new telling, the sense of scepticism grows ever more palpable. Soon they won’t believe it at all, and

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neither I nor Lottie will be around to put them right. That there are sceptics is of no consequence to us. We both know the truth of what happened. And to us, it's nothing short of a Christmas miracle.

Publisher's Note

We do not attest to the validity or accuracy of this testimony. We decided to publish it in good faith, word for word, exactly as it was passed to us — and in its entirety. Prior to publication, we conducted limited research in order to verify certain facts. Our intention was to determine for ourselves the extent to which Philip Webb's work was true.

There is a grave in Tynecot Cemetery, near Ypres in Belgium bearing the name Second Lieutenant Francois Hublot, and we were able to confirm from regimental records that he was a Belgian national, commissioned in the British Army as a translator. We also had it confirmed that Second Lieutenant Hublot died from his wounds on 25th December 1917.

Henri Hublot was executed by the Gestapo in a Brussels suburb on Christmas Day 1944. His name appears in several contemporary newspaper articles at the time, and also appears on a memorial plaque sited near where the gallows were erected, along with others killed in the same action. The reader might be interested to learn that after the war Henri was posthumously awarded the Croix de Guerre for his service to the resistance movement. The Rue de Henri Hublot, in Brussels was named in his honour.

Older residents of the Belgian town attest to having heard a version of the story, but it is no longer spoken about. We were unable to discuss it with any of the characters named in the story, because they have long since passed away.

A newspaper cutting from the Barnstaple Echo was found

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with Philip Webb's original manuscript. It is dated 23rd December 1952. In it, a nurse claims to have witnessed the miracle healing of a toddler by a priest on Christmas Day. The nurse in question passed away in the 1980s, and to the best of our knowledge, her story was never verified.

The manuscript was written by hand, and it is understood to be the work of Philip Webb himself. We believe that he wrote his memoirs for the benefit of his family — to better remember him after his death.

He passed away in 1998.

The writing was found among papers belonging to Charlotte Harrison (nee Webb) — Lottie, in the story. She died on 25th December 2012, of pneumonia.

The original papers were passed to us by Mrs Harrison's gentleman companion, the man with whom she shared her autumn years, having long outlived her husband. Her companion presented himself to us as Francois Hublot.

Lyle House Publishers, London, June 2013

A personal message from Henry P Barnes

Thank you for reading *the Watcher in the Woods*. I hope that you enjoyed it.

In Britain in the nineteenth century, telling ghost stories to each other was a popular pastime at Christmas. It has, perhaps, somewhat passed from fashion in recent years. But there is something appealing about dimming the lights, snuggling up in bed or in front of a roaring fire, with a cup of cocoa and reading a spooky tale. It's good at any time of year, but far better when the nights are long.

In writing *Watcher*, I thought about re-kindling this old tradition.

At the same time, I wanted to offer it free of charge in the

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hope that readers might feel moved to share it with their friends, and make a small donation to a charity of their choice. Just a few pounds, euros or dollars will make all the difference in the world to people in need.

So if you enjoyed “Watcher”, please consider giving a donation to charity.

It would be great to hear which charities benefitted, and where the donation was made, so please let us know.

With love and very best wishes

Henry P Barnes
December, 2018

About the Author



Henry P Barnes published his first full length novel — “*Pals*” — in 2014. *The Watcher in the Woods* is his first published short story. He has written extensively on leadership and healthcare management matters, but says his preference is fiction. A native of Lancashire, England, Henry works in healthcare in Yorkshire. In 2019, with close friends, he aims to launch a new publishing house, and has plans to bring out two brand new novels alongside a re-work of *Pals*.