

LBRIS

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Also by Alan Monaghan

The Soldier's Song
The Soldier's Return

THE SOLDIER'S FAREWELL

Alan Monaghan

PAN BOOKS

LEBRIS

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Part One

LONDON

I

'I appeal to all Irishmen to pause, to stretch out the hand of forbearance and conciliation, to forgive and forget, and to join in making for the land they love a new era of peace, contentment and goodwill.'

KING GEORGE V, 24 JUNE 1921

A horse lay dying in the yellow mud beside the corded path. The other men trudged past unheeding, but he saw it move. The back leg twitched, kicking feebly at the drizzling rain, and then the horse gave a painful snort and blew a cloud of steam up into the dismal sky. He stopped and stared at it. A shell had disembowelled the animal and the grey and purple ropes of its intestines had slithered out between the back legs. But even with its guts lying in a quivering pile in the mud, the horse clung to life. It snorted again, and its barrel chest shook and shuddered as it tried to lift its head.

Stephen knew damn well he had no business stopping there. The mud was yellow from mustard gas and he half expected to hear the ear-splitting shriek of another salvo at any moment. Nevertheless, he picked his way off the road, stepping on broken bricks and splintered furniture to stay out of the mud. The horse heard him coming and again tried to raise its head, but its strength was nearly gone and even the leg was starting to sag. As near dead as made no difference, he thought, but still he opened the flap of his holster and drew his service pistol. The lanyard was

stiff, caked with mud, and the gun was wet and slimy and cold. The horse snorted as he stepped closer, but then lay its head down and put its ears back. He felt like he should say something, some words of comfort, but he couldn't think of anything. The pistol suddenly felt heavy and awkward in his hand and he held it down against his leg, perhaps hoping that the horse would die first. But the animal was looking at him and he could see his own reflection in its large brown eye. It was a strangely feminine eye, with long eyelashes, and it watched him steadily, unblinking.

Gritting his teeth, he cocked the pistol and lifted his arm until the barrel touched the horse's head just below the ear. It didn't flinch or make a sound, it just kept staring at him. But the eye didn't just see, it also reflected. He was looking at the image of himself standing in the rain, trying to work up the courage to pull the trigger . . .

He woke with his hand clenching a gun that wasn't there. No mud, no rain. He was in bed; the sheets thrashed half off. He sat up, feeling sweat cooling on his chest. The room was dark, but it was high summer and the little window threw a faint grey glow over the familiar shapes in the room. It was his own bed in his own flat. As if to make sure, he slid his hand across the mattress to feel the place where Lillian had lain. She was gone; he'd walked her home hours ago, but her scent still lingered. He breathed it in for a few moments, then threw the sheets off and turned and sat on the edge of the bed.

Three times he'd had that dream now. Three times in the last week, and it was the same every time. Was it even a dream? It was so regular, so calm. There was nothing outlandish about it, no feeling of flying or falling or fear. No horror – only sadness. But if it was a memory, he couldn't place it – and he couldn't think why it was bothering him now. It was nearly three years

since the war had ended and he'd had his fair share of nightmares about it, but not one like this, and not in a long time.

When he looked down he found his hand had moved to his knee. Almost without thinking, he ran his fingers along the smooth ridge of scar tissue that wound up from the calf and across the kneecap. Another reminder of the bloody war, he thought. He couldn't even see it in this light, but he knew it was there. Maybe that was how it was with the dreams. Maybe they were always there, too, only sometimes he couldn't see them.

Dream or memory, he knew he wouldn't get back to sleep now. He stood up and pulled his dressing gown from the chair near the bed, then padded barefoot into the living room of his basement flat. This room was darker with the curtains drawn but he knew his way to the desk and sat down before he turned on the lamp. The desk was bare except for a single piece of paper that lay full in the beam of the lamp. It had a single equation written neatly near the top:

$$\sum_{n=1}^{\infty} \frac{1}{n^s}, \Re(s) > 1.$$

The Riemann Zeta Function. This was his life now, mathematics, not war. Stephen had written that equation down two weeks ago, and since then he had done nothing but stare at it, often for hours at a time. Sometimes he felt like he didn't know what he was looking at; the figures and letters seemed to go out of focus, becoming mere marks on the page and losing all their meaning. Sometimes he thought it spoke to him – it whispered something in his ear that set him running, scribbling furiously for a page, or maybe two. But he never got anywhere, always ending up in a hole, a dead end, tearing up and starting again. It bothered him because he knew there was something there. Deep

inside his own mind there was a meaning, a connection – he just couldn't see it clearly.

A faint bump overhead made him look up at the ceiling. He heard footsteps come softly down the stairs and then turn along the hallway directly above his head. Dunbar was on the move. Stephen listened, holding his breath, and when he heard the sitting-room door click shut, he glanced at his wristwatch: two in the morning – it looked like neither of them could sleep. Stifling a yawn, he looked down again at the page, but he knew it was no good. He felt distracted, his head too full to focus. His brother was in trouble again and his friend and mentor Professor Barrett was very sick. If Lillian were here she would take his mind off it, but she was gone home, out of reach . . . and now the dream had rattled him as well. If he could just relax for a minute then maybe his mind would clear – he might even get some sleep. But he knew he was fooling himself. He was more awake now than he had been during the day and his head was throbbing with Barrett and his brother, his brother and Barrett. One in prison and the other in hospital. And now the horse; the poor bloody horse in the mud with its guts hanging out . . . it was all too much. The weight of it was stretching his nerves, making him tense and edgy. He could feel the roughness of the paper through his fingertips, the cool air against his skin. He knew that if he went back to bed now he would just lie there, open-eyed, waiting for the sun to show at the window.

He switched out the lamp and walked around to the narrow stairs that led up to the ground floor. If neither of them could sleep, then at least they could keep each other company. Ten steep steps and he emerged into the main hallway. This was Dunbar's part of the house and as his eyes grew accustomed to the dark, Stephen could see the gleam of the lacquered floorboards stretching back to the sitting room and the dark patch to his right where

the door to the surgery stood ajar, the faint tang of ether drifting out to him on the still air. Straight ahead, there was a bar of light under the sitting-room door and noises were coming from beyond it. Scraping, thumping, the clang of something metallic. What the hell was Dunbar doing? Stephen went forward and put one hand on the handle and the other flat against the door. But then he stopped. He felt like an intruder, creeping around in the dark. This was Dunbar's house, after all, and he could rattle around in it as he saw fit. But then a louder thump and a string of muffled curses made up his mind for him. He twisted the handle and went into the sitting room.

Dunbar was kneeling at the fireplace, peering intently up the chimney. He was wearing a quilted dressing gown and blue pyjamas and was so engrossed in his task that he only looked around when he heard the door close behind Stephen.

'Come here and give me a hand,' he said peremptorily.

'What on earth are you doing?'

'The damper's stuck. I can't get the bloody thing open.' Dunbar jiggled the brass knob on the flue above the fireplace, and Stephen was struck by how bony his hand looked – the skin translucent, with a yellow tinge. He stopped short and frowned.

'What do you want to open the damper for?'

'So I can light a bloody fire, of course.'

'But it's the middle of the summer.'

'Well, when you get to my age you'll . . . oh, bugger it!' With a final angry tug at the knob, Dunbar pushed himself painfully to his feet, pulled his dressing gown tighter, and plumped down in the Chesterfield armchair by the fireplace. Even though he was barely fifty, he looked very much older, and he tried to hide a painful grimace as he settled himself in the chair. 'Not to worry,' he sighed and shook his head. 'Sorry, I must have woken you up with all my banging.'

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'Not really. I was up anyway – couldn't sleep. I thought I might steal some of your port, see if that helps.'

'Steal away.' Dunbar waved at the sideboard. 'Although, as a doctor, I should warn you that there's no medical evidence that port will help you sleep.'

'Do you want one?'

'Oh, no, thank you.' Dunbar picked up a glass full of white liquid from a side table. 'I've got my nightcap.'

'What's that?' Stephen poured himself a glass of port and sat in the other armchair, facing Dunbar across the fireplace.

'Baking soda and milk – for my stomach.'

'Good grief.' Stephen swirled the port in his glass but studied Dunbar out of the corner of his eye. His face had the same translucent yellowish tinge as his hand and he looked drawn, uneasy and ill. 'You know, you don't look well. Perhaps *you* should see a doctor.'

'Very fucking droll,' Dunbar muttered, taking a hefty swig from his glass and making a face. 'I'd sooner operate on myself than let one of those bastards poke and prod and roll their eyes at me.'

'All the same –' Stephen began, but when he saw Dunbar glaring at him he shrugged and took a sip of port.

'And what's your excuse?' Dunbar asked, his eyes narrowing. 'My innards might be at me, but what has you up at this hour? Is it the nightmares again?'

Very perceptive, Stephen thought, looking into the bottom of his glass for a moment. He was conscious that it was in this very room, in these very chairs, that he had unburdened himself before. That was less than a year after he'd come home from France and he'd been in a right old state – nightmares, hallucinations, the whole bloody lot. Worst of all was the feeling that the war had

broken him; that he was beyond repair, not worth saving. But Dunbar had saved him. He was a doctor, yes, but also a soldier, and he knew what war was like, what it could do to a man. After all the things they'd talked about here, Stephen wondered if this dream wasn't trivial, wasn't somehow insignificant. He hardly wanted to bother him with it.

'It's only a dream,' he said after a few moments. 'At least, I think it's a dream.'

'What do you mean?' Dunbar asked. He picked up his glass as if he was about to take another drink from it, but then set it down on the side table and stretched out his legs, looking at Stephen expectantly.

'Well, it's just that it's so realistic I'm not sure if it's a dream or a memory. Only it can't be a memory because I can't remember it ever happening. When I'm asleep it feels like a memory, but when I'm awake it feels like a dream.'

'Tell me about it,' Dunbar said, and Stephen told him about the horse and the gun and his own reflection in that dying eye. It wasn't long in the telling, but he felt like it poured out of him – so much so that he stumbled over the sudden ending, looked down into his glass again and took another sip of port.

'Where do you think it could have been?' Dunbar asked, after they had both listened to the steady ticking of the long-case clock for more than a minute.

'The mud makes me think it's Ypres, but, really, it could have been anywhere.'

'You must have seen your share of wounded horses. Did you ever have to do it – shoot one, I mean? Put it out of its misery.'

Stephen closed his eyes and thought of horses. He'd seen them, all right. He'd seen them whole and in pieces. He'd seen them drowned, mutilated and sometimes just dead of fright.

‘No, never. Not as far as I remember, anyway.’

‘Hmmm. You’re not making this very easy, are you? Perhaps we should look at the physical factors. How’s your head?’

Stephen’s eyes opened in surprise. Why hadn’t he thought of that? It was a month since it had happened, but there was still a tender spot above his right ear to remind him where the rifle butt had caught him. A reminder, too, of his friend dying in his arms, of hot blood on his hands and the stink of smoke in his nostrils. It could have been worse; with all the shooting that had been going on around the Custom House he could easily have caught a bullet, but all he’d got was a bang on the head and even that was fading. Now it only troubled him if he touched it.

‘It’s fine,’ he said.

‘Are you sure? That was quite a crack you got. No headaches, no blurred vision?’

‘No. Nothing like that.’

‘Then we must look to the psychological factors,’ Dunbar said, his voice trailing off. Stephen let the clock tick another few seconds before he took the bait.

‘What do you mean?’

‘You don’t think the fact that your brother is to be tried by court martial in the morning might be keeping you awake?’

Stephen allowed him a smile as he shook his head.

‘We’ve talked about my brother before. He’s big enough to look after himself. Besides, he’s been tried before and worse – he’s been shot, twice. Not to sound heartless, but it never kept me awake before.’

‘But you’re still going to the trial in the morning, aren’t you?’

‘He’s still my brother.’ Stephen shrugged. ‘And I don’t see what he has to do with horses.’

‘Probably nothing,’ Dunbar admitted. ‘But what can I say? You had a dream about the war. Some of them take a while to catch

up with you and sometimes it takes years to realise where they came from. I had one like that once, after I came back from South Africa. This bloody . . . well, I’m not sure how to describe it exactly. This bloody voice, I suppose. I kept hearing the same words over and over again – you know, in the middle of conversations and so on; a sort of arrangement of sounds, like an echo of sorts.’

‘What did it say?’

‘It said: “Put out the light.” Only it wasn’t the words themselves as much as the tone. Anyway, it took me months to figure out where it came from.’ Dunbar paused, leaned over and picked up his glass, then set it down again with a disgusted look. He snuggled himself deeper into his dressing gown and gave Stephen a weary smile. ‘I can tell from the quality of silence that I have you hooked. Do you want me to finish the story?’

‘Of course, please go on.’

‘Well,’ Dunbar frowned, as if trying to remember the details, ‘it turns out it was to do with this boy who was one of my first patients after we got to South Africa. We were fresh off the boat – hadn’t even clapped eyes on a Boer – and they put us into this camp near Cape Town which, apart from being hotter than hell, was overrun with snakes. Being from Ireland, our lads had never seen snakes before but it didn’t take them long to start teasing them, chasing them and generally acting the maggot. Needless to say, we had quite a few cases of snakebite in the first week, but this lad was by far the worst. He spotted this snake sleeping in the shade of a tree and took it into his head to poke it with a stick. Unfortunately, the snake was a cobra – and one of the sort that can spit. It gave him a full blast of venom right in the eyes and poleaxed the poor devil.’

Dunbar paused, drew a breath and frowned at Stephen, whose eyelids were starting to droop.

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'I'm not boring you, am I?'

'Not at all.' Stephen opened his eyes wide, swirled his glass and threw back another mouthful of port. 'Carry on.'

'Well, I did what I could for the blighter with cold compresses and so forth. By a stroke of pure luck, I managed to save his life, but I couldn't save his eyes – the poor boy was completely blind. But the strange thing was, he kept thinking he could see a bright light. I suppose it was nerve damage because there was no question that his eyes were buggered. I even brought in a specialist to make sure, but he wouldn't believe it. "Put out the light," he used to say, and he'd be crying because the light was so strong he thought it was hurting his eyes. Every damn day he was being blinded all over again – and that's where it came from, that's what stuck with me; put out the light, put out the light.'

'That's what bothered you?' Stephen asked drowsily. 'After everything else?' He knew Dunbar had been badly wounded in South Africa; shot several times by Boer snipers as he went out to help wounded men.

'Believe it or not, yes – eventually. Years later, after all the other wounds healed, all I was left with was this nagging voice that I could only half hear. Sometimes weeks and months would pass without my hearing it, and sometimes it was like an extra voice in the conversation over dinner. For a while I thought I was going around the bend, I can tell you. I simply didn't know what it meant, or where it was coming from.'

'So how did you make the connection?'

'It happened here, in this very room. We put on a magic lantern show for the nieces and nephews. We were just about to begin when one of the children turned to me and said, "Put out the light." He only wanted me to darken the room, of course, but the way he said it, and with those exact words, it suddenly came

clear to me and I remembered everything. Blubbed like a baby, too, I must admit. But after that, I never heard the voice again.'

'Hmm,' Stephen said sleepily. His eyes had closed again and his head was nodding. He wanted to say more but he could hardly find the strength to keep his head up.

'I do believe I can add a cure for insomnia to my other medical achievements,' Dunbar said with a smile. 'Go on, off to bed with you before it wears off!'

Stephen managed to rouse himself enough to set down his glass and push himself out of the armchair. He stood swaying on his feet, yawning deeply.

'What about you?'

'I think I'll stay here for the time being,' Dunbar said, settling himself lower in the armchair and crossing his legs. 'I quite like it in here, at night.'

'All right. Goodnight, then – and thank you,' Stephen said, and shuffled towards the door, feeling his head lolling and a delicious need for sleep spreading all through him.

'Stephen,' Dunbar called after him, just as he reached the door.

'Yes?'

'Put out the light, there's a good chap.'

Everything echoed under the dome of the rotunda. Every cough, every footfall. A soldier came in with a jug of water and Billy Standing watched him work his way down the long baize-covered table, filling each glass with a gurgling splash, his boot nails ringing and scratching on the tiled floor as he moved from one to the next.

When he was gone, a tense silence returned. Billy was aware of the solicitor sitting behind him, but he kept an uneasy eye on the small door at the back of the hall. Another soldier stood

there, as stiff and straight as the granite pillar that rose up beside him, his rifle at a perfect slope. Beyond that door was a gloomy passage that led into the upper yard of Dublin Castle. That was where Billy had come into the hall, and that was where Mercer had ambushed him earlier.

He might have known something would happen. He'd worked in the castle for over a year so he could hardly have expected to go unrecognized. One of the sentries at the gate had given him a knowing wink as he showed his pass, and he'd felt many more eyes on him as he walked up the yard, under the sand-bagged windows and wire coils strung out along the roof. But he had hoped to avoid Mercer. Mercer had hired him to investigate the finances of Sinn Fein and the IRA, and if he had never suspected treachery in the year that Billy had worked for him, he surely did now. Billy had seen it the moment he saw Mercer. Not in his eyes, but in the hunch of his back, in the way he stood in his rumpled suit with a surly look on his face, waiting by the door.

'Well, well, Billy,' Mercer had said, straightening his gangling bulk and clasping his hands behind his back to preclude even the hint of a handshake. 'You're playing for the other team, I hear.'

There was a bitter twist in his voice, and Billy had suddenly felt very shabby, though he was dressed in his best suit and shrouded in his black barrister's gown. And why wouldn't he be bitter? Mercer was paying the price for his failure to starve Sinn Fein of funds. Shipped off to England, to some dead-end post in Customs and Excise.

'Good morning, Frank,' Billy had answered brightly, trying to shrug off his dismay. Mercer had been no paladin himself, and if he was bitter it was only because he had lost at his own grubby

little game. 'And congratulations. I hear you got a posting in London.'

It was a dirty little compliment, and Mercer's eyes had narrowed. On the face of it, a posting to London was a step up from provincial Dublin, but not for Mercer. Over here, he was a big fish in a small pond but in London he would be a minnow. Unless he managed to pull off some spectacular coup he would end his career there in anonymous despair.

'And I hear you're defending a Fenian murderer,' Mercer had shot back, thin-lipped and pale. 'How did that come about? I was going to ask why you changed sides, but I don't think you ever did, did you?'

The bitterness of this – not to mention the accuracy – took some of the wind out of Billy's sails.

'Everybody is entitled to a defence,' he'd said guiltily. 'And if you must know, I went to college with his brother. I'm doing a favour for an old friend.'

This last part was very nearly true, but he'd still felt cheap for mentioning it.

'And everybody's entitled to a fair trial,' Mercer had sneered, stepping past Billy and turning as he went. 'At least, in principle. Let's see how *you* like having to fight with one hand tied behind your back.'

This parting shot had troubled Billy ever since. What the devil did he mean, with one hand tied behind his back? This may have been a court martial, but it was still a court of law and still subject to the law of the land. To reinforce this fact, the door opened and two men came in. Barristers, judging by their robes, but looking rumpled and distracted, as if their dignity had taken a knock. The gentlemen for the prosecution, Billy realized. Noyk, the solicitor, had told him that they would come fresh from