

THE CAMBRIDGE SIREN

By Jim Kelly

THE DRYDEN MYSTERIES

The Water Clock

The Fire Baby

The Moon Tunnel

The Coldest Blood

The Skeleton Man

THE NIGHTHAWK SERIES

The Great Darkness

The Mathematical Bridge

The Night Raids

The Cambridge Siren



THE CAMBRIDGE SIREN

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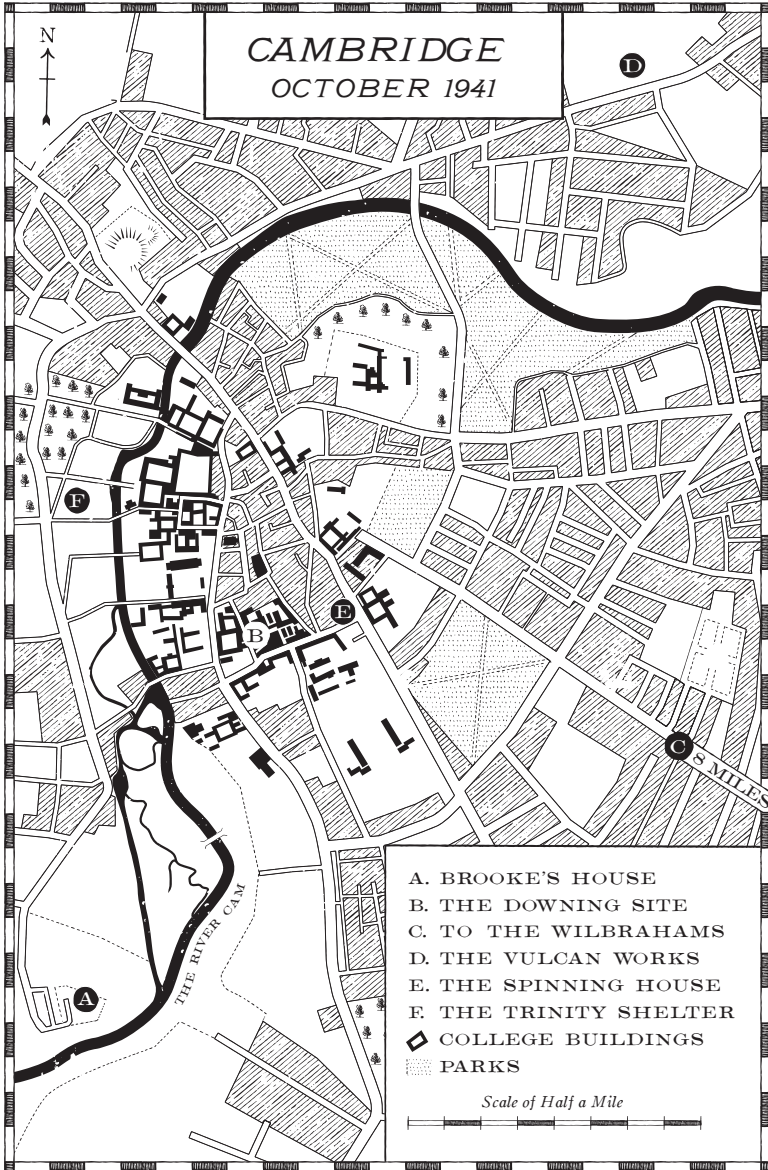
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*To all those men and women who failed their
Armed Forces' medical, but went on to serve their country.*



AUTHOR'S NOTE

It is traditional at this point to make it clear that all the characters in *The Cambridge Siren* are fictional; I should add that I have also invented events, places and institutions, but always in the interests of drama, clarity and pace. In particular, it is important to note that while Project Habakkuk existed, I have brought it forward in time, and created the scientific personnel involved at Cambridge in 1941.



CHAPTER ONE

Wednesday, 8th October 1941

Detective Inspector Eden Brooke sat on a wicker chair in his front garden watching the river flow by, dragonfly green in the evening light, pitted with miniature whirlpools, sliding towards Cambridge along its chalky bed. Beside him, on a kitchen stool, was his wife Claire, while their daughter Joy knelt with her baby on a rug. Iris was a year old and determined to crawl to the grass, only to be returned methodically at each attempt by her mother. Her first steps were eagerly awaited.

A punt went by; a rare sight now, in the third year of the war. An old man was at the pole, expertly running it through his hands, using it as a rudder to steer away from the bank as the river took the long slow turn around Newnham Croft. A

fisherman certainly, the boat laden with rods and tackle, even a picnic basket. One of the war's irritating burdens was the idea that enjoying yourself was somehow unpatriotic.

Morale, Brooke knew, was vital if you wanted to win the war on the Home Front.

'Any luck?' he called.

The man leant on the pole, bending down to retrieve a shining silver fish in a canvas bag, which he held out like a trophy.

Brooke tipped his hat by way of approval, and the fisherman went back to steering his punt, drifting downstream.

'That reminds me,' said Claire, who was sitting in the last of the sunlight, her head back, letting the warm rays fall on her upturned face. 'Supper is Asquith Pie.'

This was a family joke, the derivation long lost, but possibly a dimly remembered echo of the great prime minister's call to 'make do' with anything available during the long winters of the Great War. Asquith Pie contained leftovers, and anything else inedible if not concealed within pastry.

There was a long silence. The summer had been wet and grey, with only a few spells of blue sky. The winter before it brutal, cloaked in snow. It had all been a heart-breaking contrast to the brilliant blue Blitz summer which had marked the first year of the war.

Gradually, the shadow of the house fell entirely over the garden. Joy wrapped a shawl around the baby and held her fast. Claire took up a book on the treatment of malnutrition in children: she was a nurse, sister on the children's ward at Addenbrooke's Hospital. She could read the effects of war, and rationing, in the faces of her poorer patients.

The Brooke family home was one of a pair of modest riverside villas built in a playful style, a cross between a country railway halt and the gate lodge of a Scottish stately home. The garden ran down to the towpath; the gate – latch broken – always stood half open.

Brooke knew this idyllic scene was threatened on many sides by war, but recalled his favourite aphorism, from the *Rubaiyat of Omar Kayam*:

Be happy in this moment, this moment is your life.

‘You go first,’ said Claire, setting her book aside.

It was one of several enduring family games. They had to imagine what all the missing Brookes were doing at this very moment. Given the worldwide scale of the war, the first task was imagining where they were.

‘Luke?’ asked Brooke, lighting one of his precious Black Russian cigarettes, and adjusting his green tinted glasses. For a moment he watched the tip glow, burning the black paper, edging down towards the gold filter.

Their son had ignored his father’s one piece of advice in life: never volunteer. This had not carried much weight, as Luke knew his father had himself volunteered in the Great War. The result of that mistake had been his capture, and torture, in the Middle East campaign. They’d staked him out in the sun for three days, without water, and his eyes were damaged beyond repair. Hence the fondness for shadows, and a series of tinted glasses: ochre, green, blue and black, depending on the intensity of the light.

Brooke looked at his watch. ‘Given his last letter I suspect he’s back running between telegraph poles on a stretch of Scottish moorland. He’ll be sick of it by now. Then they’ll

have to run back to the castle.’

Achnacarry Castle was the HQ for commando training, six miles from Fort William. Luke had already done basic training, and taken part in a brief raid on the Normandy coast. Now he was back in Scotland, no doubt preparing for some other adventure. But the daily grind of keeping fit would be unchanged. Mr Churchill was desperate for the commandos to deliver a morale-raising raid behind enemy lines. Or – as the prime minister put it – ‘set Europe alight’. Only that morning the Home Service had reported a raid on the Norwegian coast. But Brooke decided to keep this news to himself. As far as Claire was concerned, her only son was back in training, and would be for several months, if not years.

‘When they do get back to the castle, there’ll be tea – so that’s what he’s thinking about right now. Food,’ decided Brooke.

‘Ben?’ asked Claire, knowing her daughter had a vision of her absent husband in mind at all times.

Joy picked up Iris with brisk efficiency. Like her mother, she was a nurse, and was competent at all things. ‘I think they’re on the surface – in the sunshine. I hope so. They’ve decided he’s the scientist on board – on the flimsy basis he’s a medical student. He might be recording the weather for the log. He’ll be thinking about Iris.’

Brooke’s son-in-law was a submariner on HMS *Unbowed*, currently stationed at Rosyth, on the Firth of Forth. But he’d be at sea and, Brooke thought, quite possibly in the sightless depths. He’d met his son-in-law half a dozen times and felt, fittingly, that he could be a bit of a cold fish. He’d once asked him what he did when the sub was lying low with an enemy ship above. His answer – that he read a book – revealed a level

of cool detachment Brooke found inhuman. But everyone on a sub was a volunteer, so he couldn't fault his courage. Ben's first boat – *Silverfish* – had caught fire in the North Sea due to engine trouble, and he'd been captured, and taken to a POW camp, from which he'd escaped. Not only escaped, but led an escape. So – courage certainly, and leadership. Joy was smitten, and each time Ben came to Newnham Croft, Brooke felt he detected a little more of a hidden vulnerability – again, fittingly, just beneath the surface.

They heard a car breaking on gravel with a theatrical skid.

The house faced the towpath; the road was at the back. From where they sat there was not a single clue that they lived their lives in the twentieth century. Brooke always said that time spent by the river was so peaceful because he had nothing in front of him and the world behind him.

But the world often came calling.

Steps, slow and steady, announced the arrival of Sergeant Ralph Edison, long before his substantial form appeared, pushing open the side gate. Edison had retired in 1938 after thirty years in uniform. Now he was Brooke's right-hand man, and in plain clothes, although he still managed to radiate the authority of the missing uniform. The unseen slalom with the motor car on gravel was a rare glimpse of an unruly side to his character.

'Sorry, sir. Ladies,' he added, lifting his hat.

'Hello Edison,' said Joy. 'Tea?'

Edison looked helplessly at Brooke.

'I can see by the way Sergeant Edison is holding onto the gatepost that he expects me to follow him to the car,' said Brooke. 'I shall. I'll just get my jacket.'

Claire stood. 'Food in the oven, Eden. We're both on nights this week. Iris will be with Mrs Mullins.'

A minute later Edison's gleaming Wolseley Wasp was on the road into the city past the millpond at Newnham. A significant factor in Edison's return to the force was the petrol coupons he could draw to run his own – treasured – car. Its crimson paintwork was a mirror to the passing world.

'What do we know?' asked Brooke.

'Fatality, sir. The Trinity Shelter.'

'Something suspicious?' said Brooke, swapping the green tinted glasses for the ochre, the sun finally setting.

'Possibly, sir. Constable who phoned it in said it had the hallmarks of suicide, but that there was a lot of blood. I thought it best to play it by the book.'

Brooke nodded. It wasn't good news. The shelters were supposed to represent a haven of safety in a violent world. They often offered sanctuary to the desperate. Suicide was not unknown. Pills had flooded the market at the outbreak of war as many families decided that if the invasion came, they couldn't face the invaders. The fate of the Jews, especially, was growing darker by the month as news emerged, piecemeal, from Poland.

Newspaper coverage of shelter deaths – often a single paragraph in the *Cambridge News* – had not helped to burnish the reputation of the city's communal public shelters. Brick-built, with a concrete 'cap', they were widely seen as death-traps. In London – it was said – several had failed in the Blitz, the walls crumbling, the concrete ceiling falling on the helpless within. More and more families opted for shelters at home: Andersons in the garden, Morrisons in the house. But not everyone had a garden, or the space indoors, so the poor were often left with

no alternative to the public shelters, unless they wanted to trust in fate and stay in bed – which many did, especially as the Guildhall siren went off every other day, although bombing raids were rare.

Edison drove along the Backs, the ancient colleges appearing through the trees on the far bank of the river. A slight wind, so often a herald of the dusk, prompted a shower of falling leaves, through which they glimpsed King's College Chapel, its stained glass now stored in a nearby basement, its windows boarded.

On this side of the river, on the rough pasture where cows had been kept in peacetime, a set of three shelters had been built. Keen to do their bit, three colleges – King's, Trinity and St John's – had each put up the money for shelters for the use of the residents of Castle Hill – a nearby warren of cramped housing, a refuge for the city's Irish labourers and the poor.

The Trinity Shelter boasted a stone version of the college crest over the door: Tudor roses, a lion and – a bad omen for a detective surely – two closed books.

The shelter warden, provided by the college, was a woman called Mrs Flaherty. Given the Irish brogue, and the spotless hands and nails, Brooke guessed she might be kitchen staff.

'I should have seen him this morning,' she said, distressed, covering her mouth with the back of her hand. She'd met them on the threshold of the shelter, as if it were her own front door.

'Why don't you show us, and start at the beginning,' said Brooke, taking off his glasses, ready for the gloom within. Ready, also, for the sight of death. Since his ordeals in Palestine, and especially on the long march to Gaza, he'd found it almost impossible to view a corpse without prompting a psychological

return to the battlefield. But this was his job, his duty, and so he steeled himself.

The door led into a small porch, set at an angle to the main shelter, presumably to stop draughts. Inside, the main room held fifty according to a sign, with two long benches on either side. At the far end there was another right-angled turn into the toilets. There was a short bench here too, and under it the body of a man, turned away, with his back to them.

A uniformed constable, PC Alby Durrell, stood guard. The Borough was the country's smallest police force. Brooke knew its dozen uniformed PCs by name – first, and last.

'When did you find him?' Brooke asked Mrs Flaherty.

'When I got here this evening at five. There was a raid last night – well, a siren – so I thought I'd better give it a clean and make sure I hadn't got any roadsters.'

The number of homeless tramps had grown with the coming of spring. Most of the shelters sent them on to Market Hill where there was a special shelter. Otherwise, there were complaints about the smell, and the drink. But the shelters were open at all hours, and so presented an irresistible temptation to the needy.

'The shelter was full last night?' asked Edison.

'Half full. The siren went at two, the all-clear at six.'

'You think this poor man may have been here last night?' asked Brooke.

She shrugged. 'Maybe. The toilet isn't popular. The light wakes people up so most of the men go outside and use the bushes. I can't stop them. The women use it – but they just trail a hand along the wall.'

There was a blurred mark on both sides of the passage.

'People sleep under the benches all the time,' she offered.

‘You can’t perch on a wooden bench for ten hours. Everyone lies down in the end. It looks like bedtime at a kennel. If you bring enough bedding, it’s fine. Does for me.’

‘And you sleep where, Mrs Flaherty?’ asked Edison.

‘By the entrance, in the little hall. I’ve got a gas burner, so I do tea.’

The electric light, even when it was on, was dismal, so Mrs Flaherty fetched a lantern and lit it, setting it by the body, but not looking *at* the body.

‘Oh God,’ she said, catching sight of the blood.

A trickle – about two inches wide at most – led away from the corpse and the slight ledge beneath the seat, and then formed a pool about three feet away.

The blood was black, coagulated.

Brooke turned to PC Durrell. ‘The blood – has it spread since you first saw him?’

‘No, sir. Not an inch.’

Mrs Flaherty was distressed. ‘I didn’t check back here when I left this morning. I never do. It’s the stink of it.’

‘Is there another way in or out?’

Mrs Flaherty led the way, beyond the last Elsan toilet and around yet another corner. Brooke thought she was right about the smell. The place reeked of it – the whiff of a chemical toilet would be one of the engrained memories of war.

Brooke stepped out through the small back door and found himself in the trees beside a water-filled ditch. A neatly mown grass path led to Trinity Bridge, then over the Cam, to Wren’s Library. He thought security was lax, but then there was little to worry about when the real danger was a thousand-pound bomb.

Back inside he found the Borough's pathologist, Dr Henry Comfort, briskly attempting to roll the victim out of his niche. The doctor was a large man, with a boulder-like head, and a butcher's meaty hands.

'There you are, Brooke. Help me lift him clear of the blood,' he said.

Brooke took his knees, Comfort the armpits.

'Poor man,' said Mrs Flaherty.

Once they had him in the light they could see that his clothes were clean, if worn, but of good quality. Both of his wrists were slit, and a bloodied cut-throat razor had fallen from a fold in his jacket.

Brooke recalled that less than half an hour ago he'd been sitting outside his riverside house thinking about happiness.

The features of the face already had the plump plasticity of the dead. In life he might have been handsome, with a wide face, a good jaw and fine skin – and here Brooke detected an olive tone, so perhaps Italian, Mediterranean certainly. There were several POW camps in the Fens full of Italian internees, a large number of them chefs and waiters from London's West End – an unintended consequence of government policy which had, it was said, upset several members of the Cabinet.

Edison, notebook open, told Dr Comfort what they knew. It was an expert summary, for his sergeant had a logical mind. As they listened Mrs Flaherty's lips were moving and Brooke guessed she must be saying a prayer.

'Time of death?' asked Brooke, braced for the usual rebuttal.

'As you well know, Inspector, that is a question for the laboratory later.'

Comfort opened his black bag and slipped on a rubber

glove, using his finger to test the consistency of the blood.

‘But if you have an urgent need to know, I’d say between twelve and twenty-four hours . . .’ He looked at his watch. ‘Between six last night and six this morning. The blood’s nearly dried. But it’s been a warm autumnal day – so don’t hold me to it.’

Comfort picked up the man’s arm and tried to articulate it at the elbow, wrist and shoulder.

‘Rigor’s gone. The blood’s almost black. I’ll stick with my estimates of the time of death – but the autopsy may throw up the odd surprise. Although I doubt it.’

‘I’d like to check the pockets,’ said Brooke.

‘Please yourself,’ replied Comfort, taking a cigar tube from his pocket, extracting the cigar within, and lighting up.

‘Nothing like a decent Cuban to give a chemical toilet a run for its money,’ he said.

Mrs Flaherty looked appalled.

Edison and Brooke emptied the dead man’s pockets. There was no wallet, no ID card, no name tags, no letters, no watch, no rings – although there was a pale band where the watch strap should have been. There was the usual litter: sweet wrappers, small change, a golf tee, a handkerchief – ironed, and fairly new. Brooke picked up the cut-throat with his handkerchief.

‘No means of identification,’ he said.

‘A bit odd if you want to end it all.’

‘Shame?’ suggested Edison. ‘Perhaps he wanted to spare others.’

Nodding, Brooke agreed: ‘Yes. Perhaps he just wanted to slip away.’

He was staring at Edison as he said this, eye to eye, but

at this moment his sergeant looked down at the corpse. There was something furtive in the sudden gesture. A hint of guilt perhaps. But for what?

Brooke had no time to give it further thought, as the pathologist had returned to his examination of the body.

‘Early twenties. Good condition, excellent even. Fair hair.’ He knelt down and slid an eyelid open. ‘Green eyes – glazing has set in. So again – my money stays on twelve hours or more.’

‘Something wrong?’ asked Brooke, because Comfort was simply contemplating the victim’s face.

‘Just a note of caution. It takes some determination – a steady hand – to slit *both* your wrists. It’s actually very rare – the second wound is often botched. Not here. Both wounds are straight, and deep enough to sever the arteries.’

‘What’s that?’ asked Brooke, pointing at the back of the left hand. There were inky letters, obscured by blood.

Comfort gave him a piece of clean bandage, and a bottle of white spirits, from his black bag. Carefully swabbing the skin, he revealed what turned out to be a line of numbers: 78891.

Brooke stood, staring at the hand.

‘What is it, Brooke?’ asked Comfort.

‘It’s my telephone number,’ he said.