

THE CAMDEN MURDER

By Mike Hollow

The Blitz Detective
The Canning Town Murder
The Custom House Murder
The Stratford Murder
The Dockland Murder
The Pimlico Murder
The Camden Murder
The Covent Garden Murder



THE CAMDEN
MURDER

MIKE HOLLOW

Allison & Busby Limited
11 Wardour Mews
London W1F 8AN
allisonandbusby.com

First published in Great Britain by Allison & Busby in 2022.
This paperback edition published by Allison & Busby in 2023.

Copyright © 2022 by MIKE HOLLOW

The moral right of the author is hereby asserted in accordance with
the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988.

*All characters and events in this publication,
other than those clearly in the public domain,
are fictitious and any resemblance to actual persons,
living or dead, is purely coincidental.*

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced,
stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by
any means without the prior written permission of the publisher,
nor be otherwise circulated in any form of binding or cover
other than that in which it is published and without a similar
condition being imposed on the subsequent buyer.

A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from
the British Library.

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

ISBN 978-0-7490-2884-8

Typeset in 11/16 pt Sabon LT Pro by
Allison & Busby Ltd.



Printed and bound by
CPI Group (UK) Ltd, Croydon, CR0 4YY

*For Rebekah,
a sparkle of sunlight in a still troubled world*

CHAPTER ONE

Frederick Bernard Long felt a faint thud on his head – or more precisely, on the top of his police-issue steel helmet. He stopped and pulled it off, then muttered a few choice words under his breath: words that he knew thirty-odd years ago would have earned him a clip round the ear from his mother, God rest her soul. A generous splattering of white was immediately recognisable in the half-light against the dark blue of the helmet. ‘Blasted pigeons,’ he added out loud to his initial more discreetly voiced imprecations. His younger colleague stopped beside him.

‘Hang on a moment, lad,’ said Long. He bent down to pull a tuft from the patch of grass at the foot of a plane tree set among the paving stones, then wiped off the offending mess. At least it was easier to remove from steel than it was from the cloth covering of a peacetime police helmet. He wondered idly why the miscreant bird had singled out him

rather than Dalton. Perhaps it was his height. Even for a policeman it was conspicuous, and standing out from the crowd had caused him trouble all his life. It wasn't just pigeons that picked on you.

He'd always been tall for his age. Well above the average man's height at fifteen, when he finally stopped growing he stood six foot three in his stockinged feet, as skinny as a rake and with a tendency to stoop to avoid attention until his dad, an ex-army man, beat it out of him and told him to stand up straight like a man. His time serving in the ranks as a conscript in the Great War had put some muscle on him, and the monotonous diet had added a few useful pounds, so that by the time he was twenty he was a fit and presentable young soldier.

Long had taken to the military life quite easily, discovering that a regimented existence with rules and regulations for everything suited him. Being moved up to the front line was no picnic, of course, but it had to be done, so he just got on with it. He was content to be a private, with no hankering for promotion even to lance-corporal, and he'd got by quite well, steering clear of trouble whenever he could. Until, that is, some fool of a young officer looking for a man to run messages back to battalion headquarters thought it would be amusing to single him out for duties as a runner, purely because of his name. And so, overnight, he was dubbed 'Runner Long' and saddled with one of the most dangerous jobs in the army. The young officer was killed soon afterwards, and Long volunteered for training as a machine-gunner, but the name dogged him until the end of the war.

Nowadays running of any kind was something he

tried to avoid. While his height and his boot size were the same as they'd been back then, his weight and girth had steadily increased, and his constable's tunic was seven inches larger at the waist than it had been when he joined the Metropolitan Police fourteen years ago. Pounding the beat at the regulation speed of two-and-a-half miles per hour suited him better than chasing villains down the street, and he relied more on experience and cunning than on athletic prowess to fulfil his duties to the satisfaction of his sergeant. Besides, he had Dalton at his side, a constable twenty-one years his junior: wet behind the ears, of course, but as lean and fit as he'd once been himself. Yes, if any running should be needed, Dalton could do it.

They were on early turn, which meant they'd been out patrolling the streets of Camden Town since six o'clock this morning, and now it was not far off eight. Their regular beat took them up Royal College Street and across the bridge over the Regent's Canal, followed by a right turn into Baynes Street, a short lane of small terraced houses, at the other end of which a wide bridge carried the trains running in and out of Camden Town railway station.

It wasn't long since the first glimmers of light had signalled the approach of dawn, and all was quiet. There had been no bombs since before they came on duty. The blackout wasn't due to end until eight minutes past eight, but Long at least had walked this area for so many years that he was confident he knew his way around in the darkest of nights as well as he did by day.

The delay in their progress caused by the pigeon incident probably proved more significant than he would have expected, for without it they might have missed

what happened next. Just as they reached the turning into Baynes Street they heard the hurried slap of shoe leather on cobbles, then almost immediately the figure of a tall, slightly built man in a white jacket and peaked cap came hurtling towards them in the twilight and clattered into them. A milkman, judging by his uniform. It was fortunate perhaps, thought Long, that he himself had taken the full force of the collision. He imagined that the ballast he carried under his tunic would have made the other man's experience something akin to running into a brick wall. If Dalton had been in the way instead, the milkman would probably have sent him flying.

'Steady on, now, sir,' he said, bracing himself as he stopped the man with a hand to each shoulder. 'What seems to be the trouble?'

The stranger's chest was heaving as he struggled for breath. He stared at Long for a moment, looking disoriented, as if surprised to have run straight into a policeman. 'Thank goodness I've found you, Constable,' he gasped, righting his partly dislodged hat. 'Round there – come quickly . . . It's on fire.'

Tugging at Long's tunic sleeve, he led them back the way he'd come until they reached the entrance to a cobbled yard set back from the street. It was surrounded on all sides by two- and three-storey brick-built warehouses and stores, and both Long and Dalton knew it as a builder's yard, disused since the builder in question had gone bankrupt at the beginning of the war.

'This way,' said the man. 'Behind that wall.'

They followed him as he dashed towards one of the buildings, PC Dalton keeping up with him more easily than

his colleague. A wall about seven feet high screened part of the yard from sight, but as Dalton neared it he saw the cause of the alarm.

He stopped dead in his tracks. He couldn't bear to look at it, but neither could he look away. The horror of the scene gripped him and wouldn't let him go. It wasn't just the flames prancing on the blazing car in feverish mockery of the blackout, it was what he fancied he could see among them. As the breeze caught the smoke for a moment, he glimpsed what looked like the silhouette of someone seated at the wheel, as still as if taking a nap before resuming their journey.

If he'd been in a movie, he thought, he'd have sprinted to the vehicle, yanked the driver's door open and dragged the helpless victim clear in the nick of time. But no, this was real life, and he couldn't get within twenty feet. He might as well try walking into a furnace.

PC Long caught up with him. There wasn't much he hadn't seen in his time, and he felt a twinge of sympathy for Dalton, but there was no way round it: this sort of thing was just part of the job, and probably always would be.

'It's all right, lad,' he said. 'There's nothing we can do for whoever that is – or was. Best thing you can do is run round to the phone box in St Pancras Way and dial 999 for the fire brigade. And if the phone's out of action, run on down to the fire station. It's only four or five minutes' walk from here to Pratt Street, so a fit young fella like you can run there in no time at all. And phone the station too. The last air raid was hours ago, so if we've got a car on fire with someone dead inside, it's suspicious – they'll have to get the CID in. Now be off with you.'

Dalton sped off, relieved to be spared.

Long turned to the man who had brought them to the scene and who now seemed rooted to the spot, as if transfixed. ‘Come along now, sir,’ he said. ‘I expect the fire brigade’ll be here in two ticks, and we don’t want to get in their way.’

‘Yes,’ said the young man absently. ‘Is it all right if I go now?’

‘In a moment, sir. I just need to make a note of your particulars.’

‘Why’s that?’

‘Because you’re a witness, sir. We may need to talk to you later.’

‘Oh, I see. All right then.’

Long took him a few steps away and stopped. ‘We should be all right here, sir.’

‘Couldn’t we do this somewhere else? I – I don’t really want to see that fire.’

‘I understand, sir, but I have to keep an eye on the scene. Perhaps you could just stand with your back to it, so I can still see.’

The man shifted his position accordingly while Long took a notebook and pencil from his pocket and turned to a new page.

‘Now, then,’ he said, ‘if you wouldn’t mind giving me your name.’

‘Of course. It’s Rickett – Joe Rickett.’

‘And you’re the milkman, I assume, dressed like that. On your round, were you?’

‘Yes, that’s right – Express Dairy.’ He gestured across the yard. ‘That’s my basket over there, with the bottles of milk in it.’

‘Right. And does your route normally take you through this yard?’

‘No, it’s just that I overslept a bit this morning, so I had to dash out. And then I . . . well, to be honest, I, er, felt the call of nature. You must know what that’s like in your job.’

Long gave him a blank stare and waited with pencil poised for him to continue.

‘So anyway,’ the milkman hurriedly resumed. ‘I slipped in here and nipped round the back to find a suitable place – somewhere a bit secluded, you know.’

‘And you found this car on fire?’

‘Yes. It was burning away like mad, and I could—’ He gulped. ‘I could see someone in it, and there was nothing I could do to save them – it was so hot I couldn’t get anywhere near it. So I ran off straight away to get help, and that’s when I bumped into you.’

‘The person in the car – could you see who it was?’

‘No. There was smoke as well as flames, and it was making my eyes sting. I couldn’t tell who it was or even what they looked like.’

‘Were they moving? Did you hear anything?’

‘No. Whoever it was must’ve been dead by the time I got here – no one could survive a fire like that.’

‘So what time did you see the car?’

‘I’m not sure, but it must’ve been only a few moments before I found you and your colleague. What time is it now?’

Long checked his watch. ‘Seven forty-nine.’

‘Well, I suppose it must’ve been about a quarter to eight, then.’

‘Thank you, sir.’

‘Look, can I go now? I’ve got to get on with my round – people expect their milk to be delivered on time, even when there’s a war on.’

‘Just one more question, sir. Did you see anyone else?’

‘Near the car? No, there was no one else around.’

Long reviewed his notes. ‘Right, that’ll be all for now. Where can we get hold of you if we need to talk to you again?’

‘At the dairy, or if I’m out delivering they’ll tell you where.’

‘And your home address?’

‘Elm Road – number 28, upstairs flat.’

‘Very well. Thank you for your assistance, sir.’

‘Just doing my duty,’ said Rickett. ‘Good day to you, Constable.’

He hurried off without another word, picking up his basket of milk on the way. He didn’t look back.