

By Mike Hollow

THE BLITZ DETECTIVE SERIES

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



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THE COVENT
GARDEN MURDER

MIKE HOLLOW

CHAPTER ONE

It was the same thing. Every time. He only had to look at the Prince Albert Theatre in Drury Lane for the memory to come stealing back. It was the same now: vivid in his mind, though a quarter of a century and more had slipped by. Vesta Tilley was up on the stage, singing ‘Your King and Country Want You’ like the accomplished recruiting sergeant that she was, with the crowd roaring back the chorus through a patriotic haze of beer and cigarette smoke. And he was in there, with them. Before he knew it, he’d signed up, taken the King’s shilling, and pledged his life to fight the foe.

By rights, he reckoned, he should be dead now, like most of those who’d volunteered so early in the war. But somehow, by the grace of God he’d never had to fight. In fact, he’d never seen the enemy. As soon as the army found out he could cut hair, they had him for a barber.

He'd spent the rest of his war in Catterick camp, in North Yorkshire, inflicting a lightning short back and sides on a never-ending stream of men, at first volunteers and later conscripts.

The Great War hadn't taken his life, but did undoubtedly change it. When he was finally demobbed, sick of clipping Tommy Atkins' hair all day and every day, he resolved to become a high-class gents' and ladies' hairdresser. Early in the war he'd met a wounded Belgian soldier who told him he had the same name as their king's second son, Charles, only the Belgian pronounced it the French way – something like 'Sharl', as far as he could tell – which sounded much grander than his plain old Charlie. He'd taken a fancy to it, and when he started working with the ladies he got into the habit of saying his own name the same way. Somehow a French name sounded more classy for a hairdresser, and classy was what he intended to be.

He'd done well, if he said so himself, and now he owned two shops – or salons, as he preferred to call them – both trading under the name 'Maison Charles'. And here he was, in 1940, back in uniform again. Instead of British Army khaki, however, today he was smartly turned out in the blue serge tunic and matching tin helmet of London's Metropolitan Police Special Constabulary.

No one had ever explained to him why it was called 'special': all it meant was that he was a part-time volunteer, and unlike a soldier or even the War Reserve police recruited to fill the wartime ranks, he worked forty hours a month as a policeman without being paid a penny.

Not everyone's cup of tea, perhaps, but it was what he'd chosen to do. Having staff to run the two salons meant he wasn't obliged to work every day of the week himself, so he could make his own small contribution to the war effort by helping to keep the streets safe. Not that anywhere was safe these days – especially for hairdressers, his wife Betty had said, worried that his professional background might not command much respect on those streets. She was anxious about the risks. Not just the German bombs, but the London drunks too, some of whom weren't past trying it on with a copper, especially if he wasn't a regular.

It didn't worry him, though. He'd met people with preconceived notions about hairdressers before, but he wasn't what they took him for. Over the years a number of smart Alocs had learnt to their cost that snide remarks about his profession, not to mention impertinent comments concerning his character, could lead to sudden and humiliating retribution. Hairdresser he might be, but Charlie Stone had been raised on the streets of Bermondsey, and while he was now on the wrong side of fifty, he was still not averse to a fist fight if the need should arise.

He wondered what the theatre looked like on the inside now. Like just about every other theatre in London it was closed because of the air raids, so he imagined a sad spectacle of dust and cobwebs. There wasn't much fun to be had in the capital these days, and it looked as though the approaching festive season would be a dull affair too. Christmas might still be coming, but the goose was certainly not getting fat, and by all accounts neither

were the turkeys. The war had put paid to supplies from the Continent, and imports of turkeys from America had been banned. Home-grown birds were going to be scarce and therefore expensive, and Betty had been playing down his expectations for weeks, playing up instead the merits of getting a nice piece of mutton, but he wasn't persuaded. It wouldn't be the same without a decent Christmas dinner.

Warm recollections of long-gone Christmas meals began to fill his mind. He'd just begun to recapture the sweet aroma of a roast turkey ready for carving when all such thoughts were dispelled by the scream of an aircraft engine. Not the pulsating drone of Luftwaffe bombers high in the sky, but the relentless, terrifying roar of a fighter plane. He whirled round as it burst into view above the Victorian flats to his left, a flash of grey with a bright yellow nose cone, flying so low that he instinctively ducked. In a flash it was gone, heading south towards the river, but not before he'd glimpsed the cross of the German air force on its side and the swastika on its tail. A split second later he was knocked off his feet by an explosion. Down the street, the Prince Albert Theatre had disappeared behind a cloud of dust and flying debris.

He picked himself up and ran towards the scene, choking on the unbreathable air. The nearest corner of the theatre had been demolished, three storeys of stone, brick and timber collapsed into a jagged heap. He couldn't imagine anyone surviving if they'd been caught in that, but a heavy rescue squad would no doubt be there in moments to start digging. First, he must do what he could on his own. The main entrance was still standing,

its doors and windows blown out into the street, and he could see a woman running in, rushing, he assumed, to the aid of any injured survivors. He dashed after her into the foyer just in time to hear her gasp in horror. She had stopped in her tracks, her hands clapped to her face and her eyes staring.

‘It’s him,’ she said, appalled. ‘He’s dead.’

Stone looked past her to where a man lay motionless on his back against a wall, his clothes dusted white with pulverised plaster.

‘Can’t you see who it is?’ said the woman.

Stone peered more closely, and recognition dawned. First the face, a very famous face, and then the hair: he’d cut it many times. It was Roy Radley, the comedian who’d once strutted the stage here and made it his own, now lying on the floor, lifeless. And there was something else. Something that suggested he was not the victim of a random bomb: what looked like a slim dust-covered handle was sticking out of Radley’s abdomen.

‘Oh,’ the woman gasped again. ‘He moved – look!’

Stone had already seen it. An almost imperceptible movement in the handle as the man’s abdomen rose by the tiniest fraction of an inch and fell again. There was breath in the body.

He dropped to his knees in the debris beside the victim and touched his shoulder. Radley’s eyes half opened and he whispered something. Stone slipped his steel helmet off so he could get his ear closer and spoke gently. ‘What did you say?’

Radley struggled to speak. ‘God have mercy . . . Forgive . . .’ he said faintly, as his eyes closed again.

‘Do you want a priest? I’ll send for one.’

‘No – it’s too late . . . I’m dying . . . stay with me.’

Stone reached for Radley’s hand and held it. ‘All right, I’m here.’

He turned to the woman, who was standing nearby and watching. ‘Quick,’ he said, ‘try to get an ambulance. This man needs one urgently.’ She nodded and ran off, but he doubted the man beside him would live long enough for the ambulance to arrive.

Radley gave his hand a feeble squeeze. He spoke again, his whisper growing fainter. ‘I . . . I confess . . . thought, word and deed . . . I’m sorry . . . forgive . . .’

Stone couldn’t tell whether Radley was speaking to him, to himself, or to the priest who wasn’t there, but he kept silent lest he miss any of the dying man’s words.

‘Stolen . . . lied . . . killed . . .’ Radley continued, his words interspersed with the weakest of snatched breaths.

‘Who did this to you?’ said Stone. ‘Who stabbed you?’

Radley gave a feeble cough. ‘My fault . . .’ he said. ‘Forgive me . . . I can’t—’

Whatever he intended to say next remained unsaid. His grip on Stone’s hand relaxed, his eyes remained closed, and there were no more breaths. He was dead.