

# THE SOHO MURDER

*By Mike Hollow*

THE BLITZ DETECTIVE SERIES

The Blitz Detective

The Canning Town Murder

The Custom House Murder

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The Pimlico Murder

The Camden Murder

The Covent Garden Murder

The Soho Murder



THE SOHO  
MURDER

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*For Neil,  
a straight bat, honest and true*



## CHAPTER ONE

Eric Thompson trudged along Romilly Street with his hands in his pockets and fury in his heart. In the distance, at the junction with Dean Street, he could see the ravaged remains of the parish church of St Anne, a Soho landmark for more than two hundred and fifty years but now reduced to an ugly shell by Hitler's bombs. The eastern façade was still standing, as was the tower beyond it, but the roof was burnt out and most of the side walls had been reduced to rubble. The magnificent stained-glass window that had once graced the church at its eastern end was now no more than a gaping hole through which the charred remains of the roof timbers were silhouetted against the December sky. If the mad Nazi tyrant had stepped out of the newsagent's with the *Daily Mirror* tucked under his arm at that very moment, Thompson would gladly have shot him on the spot.

If pressed, he would have to admit that the number of times he'd been inside the church could be counted on the fingers of one hand, but that didn't alter the fact that he appreciated beauty, and he remembered that window as a great work of art as well as craft. Its destruction was of course an assault on religion, but more than that, it was a desecration of what sane people regarded as civilisation. It had been beautiful, and now it was lost for ever.

He turned right into Dean Street and continued across Old Compton Street, where the bitter east wind gouged his face like broken glass. Not for the first time, he resented the course his life had taken. Trying to build a property empire, however modest, in the two decades of economic crisis, political instability and depression that followed the Great War had been an uphill struggle at the best of times, but the outbreak of war all over again in 1939 had put the curse of death on it. Since the beginning of the Blitz nearly four months ago, he'd lost two shops and the flats above them, and a third property had been severely damaged. Hitler had a lot to answer for. In the absence of the hated dictator, however, Thompson's rage of frustration turned instead onto Samuel Bellamy, the tenant from hell.

What irritated him most about Bellamy was his constant quibbling about the rent, and his uncanny talent for breaking fittings in the flat and damaging its fabric – always, he claimed, by accident. Yesterday he'd rung to complain that his toilet wouldn't flush and had threatened to withhold his rent until it was fixed.



Thompson's regular plumber was generally unavailable these days. There was so much demand for his services across the area that he could afford to pick and choose, and if he should deign to honour you with his presence even his oldest customers would find his rates grossly inflated. Rental incomes for property owners, of course, were not.

Thompson was adamant that he wasn't going to fork out good money for what was probably just a faulty ballcock – or more likely one that Bellamy had somehow managed to wreck – and that was why he had in his bag a small collection of tools with which he would do the job himself. His day of rest would go out the window, but he'd stop Bellamy's whining and make sure he collected the rent at the same time.

He checked his watch as he approached Bellamy's home in Peter Street. It was just coming up to eleven o'clock. With a bit of luck he'd get the ballcock straightened, extract the rent from Bellamy's wallet, and be in time for a pint and sandwich at The Intrepid Fox on the corner of Wardour Street. He'd rung Bellamy to say he was coming but told him he'd arrive at twelve. He knew Bellamy's tricks: at midday he'd be unexpectedly out, called away on some unspecified but urgent business to escape Thompson's wrath. But by arriving at eleven Thompson stood a chance of catching him at home and getting what was due to him. And if for any reason Bellamy proved to be out when he arrived, he'd brought along his own key to the property, so he'd fix the ballcock and then wait for Bellamy to return. At

least there'd be something to read while he waited: with the number of books the man had crammed into that flat, it was a wonder the whole place hadn't collapsed under the weight of them years ago.

He arrived at number 37 and pressed the bell button beside the street door. To his left, the boarded-up door and windows of the small travel bureau that used to occupy the ground floor silently goaded him with another reminder of lost rental income. Four months ago the couple who ran it had decided to decamp to Oxford to avoid the bombing, and since then he'd had no takers for the lease. To his right were some vacant premises and then a gramophone record shop, from which came the sound of raucous jazz music. There was no response to the bell, so he banged loudly on the door knocker and waited, resenting the chill seeping through his overcoat. Still no answer. So, Bellamy had contrived to be out after all: it was typical of the man.

Thompson pulled the key from his pocket and let himself in. He climbed the narrow staircase up to the flat and shouted a perfunctory 'Hello' in case his tenant was unavoidably detained and unable to get to the door, but there was no answer. He put his bag of tools down at the top of the stairs and went into the room that Bellamy called his office: it smelt musty, as usual, and to Thompson's eye it looked like nothing more than a dumping ground for dust-laden old books. The only sign of occupation was the coal fire burning low in the grate behind the mesh of a smoke-blackened brass fire guard. But of Bellamy there was nothing to be seen.

He moved towards the fireplace to warm his hands by the glowing embers, wondering idly where Bellamy might have gone, but as he rounded the large desk that stood in the middle of the room he stopped in his tracks. On the threadbare square of carpet surrounding it lay the body of a thin, middle-aged man with untidy dark hair. He was sprawled on his back, arms and legs akimbo, and his unbuttoned jacket had fallen open. The white shirt that it revealed might well have been clean when he put it on that morning, but now it was disfigured for ever by the spread of a grimly glistening red stain, at the centre of which was a small hole. A single glance was all Thompson needed to recognise the face. It was Samuel Bellamy, and he wasn't going anywhere.