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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 DOCKLAND
MURDER

Mike Hollow

CHAPTER ONE

The skeletal silhouettes of cranes stood watch over the Royal Albert Dock in the scant moonlight like mourners round a grave as a solitary man paced slowly along the south quay. Sharp gusts of wind blowing in off the Thames scoured his face, and the cold was like death in his bones, gnawing from the inside. He stamped his boots on the concrete, but it made no difference. It was always the same on nights: as the shift wore on, your body slowed down and the chill set in. No wonder they called it the dead of night.

He looked back to where spikes of orange flame leapt from the far end of the neighbouring Royal Victoria Dock. The bombers had hit something, but he couldn't see what. One of the transit sheds or warehouses that lined the quayside, perhaps, or maybe even a ship. Tonight, for once, on his own beat things hadn't been so bad: as far as he could tell, the planes had missed the Royal Albert. But behind him, beyond the dark, hulking buildings on the quay, the sky was bright with the glow

of more fire. He couldn't see what was burning, but there was nothing between here and the river except the King George V Dock and the tightly packed streets of North Woolwich and Silvertown, where his own home was. Ever since the area had been pounded on the first night of the Blitz he'd been thankful he didn't have a family.

He walked on, listening to his own footsteps. The luminous hands on his wristwatch told him it was twenty past five. Still a couple of hours to go before the blackout ended, but only another forty minutes to work on his shift, if he got off on time. The noise of the men fighting the fires was too far away to be more than a faint backdrop, and the aircraft had gone. Where he was, all he could hear was the rats scurrying towards the sheds as he approached, and the lap, lap of inky-black water beside him. In normal times that was the way he liked it on a night shift: quiet. But these were not normal times. Now there was no knowing when Mr Goering's swarms of Heinkel and Dornier bombers would pay their next visit.

He'd been up in an aeroplane just the once himself: in 1932, when Sir Alan Cobham's Flying Circus came to do a display at the Low Hall Sports Ground in Walthamstow and he'd gone for a five-bob flip in the back seat of an Avro biplane left over from the Great War. He'd seen the Thames, his little house in Silvertown, and the three long rectangles of the Royal Docks glinting in the sunlight below. He didn't give it a second thought at the time, but now he was only too aware that if they glinted in sunlight they'd glint in a bit of moonlight too, and sometimes his

spine shivered at the thought of standing in the middle of this unmistakable landmark. You could black out every house in London, every house in England, but you couldn't black out water, and when the moon shone its light on the river and these docks, there might just as well be a three-mile-long neon sign inviting the German air force to fly this way and do their worst.

It was Tuesday the fifth of November, 1940, which meant it was the last of his month of night shifts. It also meant the docks had been under attack from the air for two months now. It was a wonder anything was left standing.

This wasn't what Arthur Wilkinson had signed up for, nearly thirty years before. He'd joined the Port of London Authority Police in 1912, two years after it was set up, as a second-class constable on twenty-five shillings a week. His main reason for becoming a PLA copper was that it offered steady money, not the regular unemployment he'd known in the building trade before that, but he'd grown to enjoy the job. The Great War changed all that, of course. He'd policed the docks all the way through, and it was no laughing matter, especially when the Kaiser started bombing them. Keeping order in the peacetime years that followed was a merciful relief in comparison with that. But now it had started all over again, and with a savage intensity that the old Kaiser could only have dreamed of. Just a few weeks ago a PLA police sergeant and constable had been killed in this very dock when an unexploded bomb went off. Now, after nearly sixty nights of devastating air raids, he wasn't sure how much more his nerves could stand.

He pulled up short, noticing just in time by the moonlight that he was about to walk into a heap of discarded timber on the edge of the quay. The dockers called it dunnage, but to him it was simply lumps of old wood, just part of the junk they left lying around at night, ready to trip you up and send you plunging into the waters of the dock. Like all PLA policemen he was required to be able to swim fifty yards, but if you ended up in the water you had to have your stomach pumped. He'd had that done to him once and he never wanted to experience it again.

To say that the water was foul was an understatement. He had the smell of it in his nostrils now, and there was no denying it was pretty disgusting. He remembered some of the old-timers in the police saying that back in the days before oil-burning ships, the water in the docks was so clean they'd sometimes take a dip at the end of the day. Those days were long gone, of course, but in any case, he wondered, even without the oil, what about all the other stuff that got into the water? The ships' holds, for example: they were hosed out into the dock, no matter what noxious cargo they'd been carrying. And the toilets. It was against regulations for anyone to use these on the ships while in the dock, because they discharged directly into the water, but the lack of any alternative meant the regulation was ignored. And there were no toilets on barges, so barge hands often had no choice but to improvise as best they could – straight into the dock water. Then when you added the stench of rotting meat and vegetables, dead animals, chemicals, and anything else that fell or was dropped into the water, the

dock was a thoroughly unsavoury place to work.

He moved away a little from the edge and tried to focus his thoughts on the end of his shift. Soon he'd be sitting down for a cup of tea and some breakfast, then having a welcome sleep and a bit of respite – if his house was still standing. He continued on his way, towards the next ship that lay at its mooring ahead of him. He could make out its name inscribed in big letters on the bow: *Magnolia*.

As he got closer, he heard the creak of a hawser on a barge moored beside the ship and looked down onto one of the many such craft that were left tied up around the ships in the dock overnight.

He had passed this point several times already during the night, but now there was just enough light to notice an odd outline at the near end of the barge. He pulled out his flashlight to check, and confident that there were no enemy planes overhead to see his light, he directed a brief beam downwards.

That was when he saw the man. He was wearing a dark civilian overcoat and a steel helmet. Just above his right elbow was an armband bearing the words 'Home Guard'. He was lying on his back, draped awkwardly over the wooden coaming that framed the barge's hatch, and he wasn't moving. Wilkinson climbed down for a closer look and stopped: the man's eyes were wide open, staring at nothing. He knelt down beside him but could find no sign of injury. Then he slipped a hand beneath the man and felt something wet on his fingers. Using both hands, he lifted the body slightly at one side – enough to see the knife sticking out of the man's back.

CHAPTER TWO

The message from the station had been terse. Mr Soper wanted to see Detective Inspector Jago in his office at seven-fifteen. It was a common experience for Jago to be roused by duty from a sound sleep in his comfortable bed, or more recently from a fitful doze in his distinctly uncomfortable Anderson shelter in the back yard of his house, but it was less common for Divisional Detective Inspector Soper, his boss, to be in action at such an early hour. There must be something unusual going on, he thought, as he struggled into his clothes and grabbed a quick slice of bread and jam on his way to the car. Finding out precisely what that was, though, he was happy to leave until later: by then he might be awake enough to take it in.

At a quarter past seven precisely he knocked on the door of the DDI's office at West Ham police station, and a voice from inside bade him enter.

'Sir?' said Jago, presenting himself before Soper's desk.

'Ah, yes. Good morning, John. There's been an

incident in the docks – suspected murder. I want you to get down there straight away.'

'Which dock, sir?'

'The Royal Albert.'

'Right. I assume the PLA Police can't look after it themselves?'

'Unfortunately not. I've had a phone call from Divisional Inspector Grayson asking for assistance – he's their senior officer for the Royal Docks. Between you and me, I don't see why they have to call on the Metropolitan Police for help whenever they get something a bit out of the ordinary. It's not as though we're sitting around up here with nothing to do. I told him we're very stretched at the moment, especially what with having to run these new anti-looting squads.'

'Quite, sir.'

'Who'd have thought we'd need them? There's no morality these days. I can't begin to imagine what goes through the minds of villains like that who'll stoop to stealing decent people's possessions during air raids, but it's happening, and we've got to put a stop to it. I told Grayson we've had to double the number of officers working on it, not to mention getting extra detectives transferred to our division to take charge of them. I also pointed out that the PLA Police have their own CID and suggested they might like to deal with this suspected murder, but he said they only have one detective inspector to cover all the Royal Docks, so they want our help. We're stuck with it, I'm afraid.'

'Right, sir. So who's the victim?'

'I don't know his name, but it seems he was in the Home Guard.'

'Killed in the line of duty?'

'I don't know. But if you want my opinion, we're asking too much of those men. They're supposed to be our last line of defence against the Germans, and I understand they're being held in reserve to deal with any rioting that might break out too, but they're mostly boys and old age pensioners, as far as I can see.'

'Maybe they should be deployed to stop the looting.'
Soper sniffed contemptuously.

'Yes, maybe – but they've got a few slippery customers in their own ranks, haven't they? What about that case last week? Some seventeen-year-old lad in the Home Guard jailed for a month for stealing cigarettes from a bomb site. He admitted stealing them but said he didn't think it was looting. What's that supposed to mean? I worry about the youth of today, John. No backbone, no sense of right and wrong, that's the problem. How are we going to win the war with young people like that?'

Jago was beginning to feel his time would be better spent investigating a suspected murder in the Royal Albert Dock than on discussing the youth of today with DDI Soper, so he decided to take this question as rhetorical and make his exit.

'All right if I go down there now, sir? There's no point wasting time if it's our case.'

'Wasting time?' said Soper. 'Certainly not. Get started as soon as you can, and take young Cradock with you – I left instructions for him to be got out of bed. I've also called the

hospital and told them to send that young medical chappie Dr Anderson down to take a look at the body. How's he shaping up, by the way?'

'Dr Anderson? He's doing very well, I think. Intelligent, thorough, and none of the airs and graces you get with some of those famous pathologists. Doesn't miss a thing, in my experience – it just goes to show some youngsters can teach the old dogs a trick or two.'

Soper made an indeterminate noise that sounded as though he accepted Jago's assessment but was reserving judgement nonetheless.

'Right,' he concluded. 'And when you get to the Royal Albert, you're to go to No. 20 Gate on Connaught Road and report to Detective Inspector Burton of the PLA Police.'

'Yes, sir.'

Jago left Soper and returned to the CID office, where he found Detective Constable Cradock waiting for him, munching a bacon sandwich from the canteen.

'Come along, Peter,' he said. 'We're taking a little trip down to the docks – the PLA Police have requested our assistance with a suspected murder. You can finish that on the way.'

'Very good, guv'nor,' said Cradock. He stuffed the rest of the sandwich into his mouth and chewed it vigorously as he followed Jago out to the yard at the back of the station. By the time they reached Jago's Riley Lynx he was able to speak again.

'I've never been in the docks,' he said. 'How does it work with us and the PLA Police – I mean, what's our jurisdiction?'

‘It’s simple – they’re a separate force and deal with everything inside the docks, but they’ll ask us for help with things like murder. Our jurisdiction’s the same there as it is anywhere else in the borough, but theirs is just the docks and up to one mile outside them.’

Judging that this was sufficient information for Cradock to digest, Jago started the car and they set off.

It was about four miles’ drive from West Ham police station to the Royal Docks, but the recent aid raids had made any kind of travel unpredictable. Jago took what should have been the most direct route, heading south down West Ham Lane to Plaistow Road and over the Northern Outfall Sewer, the great Victorian construction project that conveyed half of London’s sewage through West Ham from the Abbey Mills pumping station in the west to the Beckton sewage works in the south-east. But a few minutes later, just past the East London Cemetery, they ran into a liquid obstruction of a different kind. The road ahead was flooded and closed.

‘Look at that,’ said Jago. ‘Plaistow on Sea. One of those bombers last night must’ve hit a water main.’

‘Yes,’ said Cradock. ‘Just as well they didn’t blow up the sewer instead. Thankful for small mercies, eh, sir?’

‘I suppose so,’ Jago replied grudgingly. Hauling on the steering wheel, he performed a quick three-point turn in the blocked road and set off in search of an alternative route to the south of the borough. After more diversions in Canning Town they eventually arrived at Connaught Road and took the hydraulic swing bridge across the water channel linking the Royal Victoria Dock to their right and the Royal Albert

to their left. Moments later they saw their destination: No. 20 gate, known as the Silvertown Gate, an entrance to the south side of the Royal Albert Dock.

Jago recognised the pathologist from Queen Mary’s Hospital in Stratford standing by the gate and halted the car beside him.

‘Dr Anderson,’ he said. ‘Good to see you. I hope you haven’t been waiting too long. Hop in.’

As Anderson climbed into the back seat, the uniformed police constable guarding the gate came over to the car. Mindful that this would be an officer of the PLA Police and therefore might not recognise him, Jago identified himself to the constable.

‘Thank you, sir,’ the man replied, with a brief salute. ‘Detective Inspector Burton’s waiting for you down at No. 10 shed. Keep on this side of the dock and drive down Centre Road behind those big transit sheds – that’s where the dockers store the cargo until the customers’ lorries collect it. About two-thirds of the way down the road you’ll come to the Customs and Excise Office, behind No. 14 shed. Park your car there, then walk through the gap between No. 14 and No. 12 sheds and carry on a bit further down the quay and you’ll come to No. 10.’

They drove in through the gate. Passing the Royal Albert’s two dry docks on their left, they continued down the road that ran between the long line of buildings on the south quay, much bigger than the name ‘shed’ would have suggested, and the corresponding row of

structures on the north side of the King George V Dock, until they came to the gap the constable had described. They parked the car and completed their journey on foot along the quayside.

From here they could see the full expanse of the dock's placid water, with ships moored down both sides, their bows pointing to the west, clusters of barges around them, and here and there other barges to which the barrage balloons gleaming silver in the sky overhead were tethered. The sun was just rising in the east, the direction in which they were walking, and by its light they could see evidence of the destruction wrought by enemy aircraft undeterred and unhampered by the balloons. One of the big single-storey transit sheds was gutted, its steel-and-concrete framework still standing but the rest of it a desolate chaos of loose bricks and other debris, and the quayside crane outside it a mangled wreck. There was a chill in the air.

At No. 10 shed a man in an overcoat and trilby hat stepped forward to meet them.

'DI Burton,' he said to Jago. 'Jim Burton. I'm the CID inspector for the Royal Docks.'

He was a thin man, with a pinched nose and a mouth that looked permanently turned down. As they shook hands, Jago noticed that Burton's overcoat was frayed at the cuffs, and his tie crooked. He wondered whether his Port of London Authority Police opposite number had also been dragged out of bed before time this morning. He introduced Cradock and Anderson, and Burton

responded with a nod and a half-hearted smile.

'If I can be of any assistance . . .' said Burton. He looked from Jago to Cradock and back again. 'But I don't suppose you'll need any from me.'

'I wouldn't say that,' Jago replied. 'We'll need any help you can give us.'

Burton gave a sort of shrug, said, 'Follow me,' and turned away in the direction of the nearest ship. Jago and Cradock followed, with Anderson bringing up the rear. Jago was looking to the left and right, taking in his surroundings, when something caught his eye. A taut mooring rope ran from the ship down to a steel bollard set into the quayside, and leaning against the rope was a rifle.

'Wait a minute,' he said. The other men stopped. 'Is this something to do with it?'

Burton glanced in the direction Jago's hand was pointing.

'Could be,' he said. 'I was going to mention it. The dead man's a Home Guard, and some of them have rifles, so it could be his. Don't worry, though, we haven't touched it. I thought we'd best leave it for you.'

Jago knelt down beside the firearm, thinking of the Lee-Enfield .303 he'd carried day and night as a soldier in the last war until he was given a commission and a pistol. This one wasn't a Lee-Enfield, but peering closely he could see the words 'Ross Rifle Co' engraved on the breech. He looked away, and as his eyes scanned the black expanse of the dock beyond, unbidden memories