

## FIFTH COLUMN

## **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

Mike Hollow was born in 1953 in the Essex County Borough of West Ham and spent his early years in Romford. After studying Russian and French at Cambridge University he worked for the BBC for sixteen years and then the international development agency Tearfund for eleven before going freelance as a writer and editor in 2002. He lives in Hampshire with his wife Margaret and has two grown-up children who live in London. Nowadays he earns his living translating Russian in his cellar and spends the rest of his time writing stories about Detective Inspector John Jago, the Blitz Detective. The first novel, *Direct Hit*, was published in 2015, and *Fifth Column* is the second in the series.



MIKE HOLLOW



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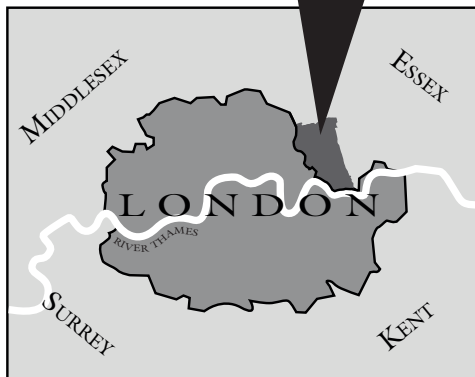
For Margaret, my wife, friend,  
and most faithful editor in art as in life

Footfalls echo in the memory  
Down the passage which we did not take  
Towards the door we never opened  
Into the rose-garden.

“Burnt Norton” (1937), from T.S. Eliot,  
*Four Quartets*

“Churchill and his fellow liars have deceived us on every phase of this war, and it is typical that they should have assured us that Germany had decided to abandon her air attack [on Britain] just before the biggest raids of the war... A more sinister example of mendacity was the official denial that any parachutists had landed, whereas in fact they did land, and are now being sheltered by the Fifth Column, and are probably receiving regular coded instructions from Germany.”

From a broadcast by the New British Broadcasting Station, a German propaganda radio station purporting to be British, at 9.30 p.m. on 20 August 1940. Reported in the BBC Monitoring Service's *Daily Digest of Foreign Broadcasts*, No. 399, 21 August 1940



The Anderson shelter had guarded his life for another night, but it felt like a grave. Only the thin sheet of corrugated iron at his side separated him from the cold earth in which he was lying. He drifted in and out of a restless, shallow dream. Now he was in France again, in a dug-out lined with sodden planks of wood, waiting for the day's shelling to begin. Then the picture shifted, and he was twelve years old, a Boy Scout stirring in a canvas tent as a chorus of birds heralded the start of day. Their song began to fill his ears, with one note soaring louder than all. It wailed on and on, and his body jolted. He was awake.

His eyes opened, and he was back in the present. It was Friday morning. He wasn't a Boy Scout and he wasn't a soldier, and the dawn chorus was the monochrome blast of the all-clear siren.

Detective Inspector John Jago was chilly despite being fully clothed, and his joints were stiff. He tugged the worn blanket up under his chin and shifted his aching body carefully on what passed for a bed in this cramped metal box as his mind cleared.

What a way to live, he thought. He'd spent twenty-five shillings – not to mention elevenpence postage – on Selfridges' promise of a purpose-made "shelter bed", but that decision was beginning to feel like a triumph of hope over experience. The wooden frame and webbing ("comfortable even without a mattress") were sturdy enough, but the thing was only five foot nine long and a miserly twenty inches wide. The simple act of turning over was now a delicate manoeuvre that risked pitching himself onto the damp floor, bedding and all. Tonight he would fetch his old eiderdown from the house and lay that on top. At least being warm might

help, although the air raids of late had pretty much put paid to any chance of a decent night's sleep.

A lady in the newspaper, well-meaning no doubt, had advised that the best antidote to a sleepless night in a shelter was to undress and go to bed "properly" as soon as the raids were over. All very well if you didn't have a job to do, he supposed. And as for her other helpful suggestion – having a sleep after lunch – well, that was just another way to make a policeman laugh.

He checked the time on his wrist-watch. Eight minutes past six. Just five minutes or so until the blackout ended, then another half-hour till sunrise, but there was nothing to be gained from staying on this paltry shelf of a bed. He hauled his reluctant body out from under the blanket, tied his shoes, slipped on his coat and clamped his crumpled grey fedora onto his head. One final stretch to get his limbs working and he felt at least half ready to face the world. He unlatched the door he'd cobbled together a year before from salvaged wood – wondering then, as now, why the government had decided to supply the shelters with no means of sealing the entrance – and climbed out.

His house was still there: a good start to the day. At least he should be able to go to work. No signs of fire in the immediate vicinity, but half a mile away the first of the dawn light revealed smoke curling above the rooftops, marking the points where random destruction, and no doubt death, had befallen the unlucky.

He trudged along the few yards of uneven path to the back door of the house. A cup of tea would perk him up if the gas was still working, and if there was power he'd make a bit of toast to keep him going until he could get some proper breakfast in the station canteen – if not, it would be bread and margarine with a scraping of jam again. He opened the door, went in, and closed it behind him. With the blackout curtains still in place it was darker inside the house than it was outside. He searched for the light switch with his fingers and flicked it down, and was pleased to see the bulb that dangled from the ceiling glow into life – he had electricity.

The brown enamel kettle was already full – he tried to remember to fill it every night in case the Luftwaffe hit the water main. He turned the knob on the stove and heard the hiss of gas, followed by a dull pop as his lighted match ignited it. He placed the kettle over the flames and reached for the teapot – and then the phone rang.

With a sigh and another glance at his watch he put the pot down and walked through to the narrow hall. At this time of the morning there was no mystery about who might be calling. He lifted the receiver.

"Jago."

"Good morning, sir. Tompkins here, at the station. Sorry to disturb you at this time of day, but I've just come on duty on early turn and I've been asked to call you."

"Don't worry, I was already up. And it's always a pleasure to hear your dulcet tones, Frank."

"That's not what my missus calls it."

"Well, far be it from me to intrude on private grief, Frank. So what is it that needs me to turn out at this ungodly hour?"

"A body, sir."

"Lots of bodies around these days, Frank. What's special about this one?"

"Possibility of suspicious circumstances, apparently. That's why they want you."

"Where is it?"

"Down in Canning Town, sir. Tinto Road, near the bottom end of Star Lane. On a bomb-site on the right-hand side as you go down the road. They say you can't miss it."

"I dare say. Have we got anyone down there?"

"Yes, sir, young Stannard. He's waiting for you to arrive. He's got reinforcements, too – one of them War Reserve constables."

Jago noticed the dismissive tone in which the station sergeant referred to PC Stannard's recently enrolled companion. That was

Frank's way of signalling his opinion of the government's solution to the wartime shortage of police officers, he thought, but now was not the time to rise to his bait.

"Very well," he said. "Get hold of DC Cradock and tell him I'll pick him up at the station in about twenty minutes. And see if you can get the police surgeon down to the site pretty smartish."

Detective Inspector Jago put the phone down, returned to the kitchen, and turned the kettle off. A cup of cold water would have to do for now.

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His estimate of twenty minutes proved to be optimistic. The Riley started first time, and he was on his way promptly, but the roads were still clogged with fire hoses, and twice he had to find a way round streets that had been cordoned off because of bomb damage.

It was five to seven by the time Jago reached West Ham Lane. He could see the police station ahead of him, its front door screened against blast by a wall of neatly stacked sandbags and the large windows to the side of the entrance protected by horizontal wooden slats. On the pavement in front of the station stood Detective Constable Cradock, awaiting his arrival.

Jago pulled up beside him. The young man looked as though he'd dressed quickly, and his hair was dishevelled. He eased himself carefully into the passenger seat with a quick "Morning, guv'nor", and Jago nodded a wordless greeting to him in return. Cradock looked as bleary-eyed as Jago felt.

"You getting enough sleep with these air raids every night, Peter?"

"Not too bad, sir. They wake me up, of course, but I try to get back to sleep when the noise stops. How about you, sir?"

"I seem to have lost the knack. Every time I think I'm going to doze off again Hitler drops another bomb just to spite me, and the anti-aircraft guns make so much noise I wonder whether he's

slipping them a fiver just to keep me awake. Last night I don't think I got to sleep until it was nearly time to wake up. I must be getting old."

Cradock raised his eyebrows and opened his mouth as if he'd just realized something important.

"It could be night starvation, sir. Maybe you should try a cup of Horlicks at bedtime."

"Tommy rot," said Jago. "I haven't quite reached that stage, thank you very much. It's morning starvation I'm suffering from – I didn't even have time for a piece of toast before I came out. And in any case, if I need anything to drink before I go to bed, I'll stick to a tot of whisky. Now, if I can stay awake long enough we're going to Canning Town to see a man about a body."

Jago slid his left foot onto the gear change pedal, then with a glance over his right shoulder and a light touch on the accelerator he eased the car back into the sparse early morning traffic.



## CHAPTER 2

“Morning, sir,” said PC Ray Stannard as Jago swung his legs out of the car. “Sorry to drag you out first thing in the morning, but I thought you ought to see this.”

Jago looked the young constable up and down. So much had changed in the last few weeks. It was no surprise now to see an officer in such a state at the end of a night shift. His tunic and trousers were streaked white with plaster dust, his boots were scuffed, and his hands and face were daubed black with soot. Not so long ago, thought Jago, Stannard would have spent the night quietly patrolling silent streets, rattling the doors of shops to check they were locked and watching out for any evidence of petty crime. But now it could reasonably be assumed that in the last few hours he and his colleague had been scrambling over scorched wreckage, helping to pull the living and the dead out from under ruined buildings, and taking on any and every task that needed doing in the wake of the latest air raid.

The detective turned to the War Reserve PC, who was in a similar state. He knew Stannard, but this other somewhat shorter man he didn't recall. He gave a sideways glance back at Stannard and raised his eyebrows.

“Oh, sorry, sir,” said Stannard, “this is PC Price; he's a War Reserve. Volunteered when the war started, but he's been on nights a lot, so you may not have met him.” He leaned a little closer to Jago and lowered his voice. “Not as bad as some, sir. Old soldier. Quite resourceful, considering they get thrown out onto the streets without any training.”

Jago nodded.

“Right, tell me what we've got here, then.”

“A woman, sir, found dead just back there.”

Jago followed the direction of Stannard's pointing finger. The neat row of small, late-Victorian terraced houses was punctuated by a gaping space where two, three, perhaps even four dwellings had been reduced to a straggling heap of matchwood and rubble by at least one high-explosive bomb. Those still standing either side of the gap had lost all their windows and most of their roof tiles. At the far end of the wreckage he could see part of a front bedroom that remained attached to the neighbouring house; a wardrobe leaned drunkenly against the wall where what was left of the floor was sagging, the ragged stumps of its joists exposed to the air. Seven untidy-looking men were standing in a huddle on the pavement, smoking. There was no other sign of activity on the site.

“So what's all this about suspicious circumstances?” said Jago.

“Well, it's just that this woman, she wasn't here when she should've been – if she'd been dead, that is – but then she was when she shouldn't have. I've told the men who found her you'll want to talk to them, so they'll explain.”

“All a bit quiet here now, isn't it?”

“The ARP warden says everyone's accounted for, sir, and there's no sound of anyone trapped. The people who've been bombed out have been taken to the rest centre in Star Lane. I thought it best to stop the work until you got here, so nothing would get disturbed.”

“Good man,” said Jago. “Do we know who she is?”

“I'm afraid we don't, sir. There's no identity card on her, no sign of a handbag or purse, and the warden says he doesn't recognize her.”

“And you've had a thorough look over the site?”

“Yes, sir. Price and I looked all round for anything that might identify her, and got the rescue squad involved too, but there was nothing.” Stannard paused, since Jago seemed to be thinking, then said, “The police surgeon's here too, sir, just on the other side of that pile of wreckage there. That's where the body is – you can't see it from here.”

“Very good. DC Cradock and I will go and take a look. You show us the way.”

The two detectives followed Stannard and Price, clambering up the unsteady heap of bricks, tiles and timbers littered with the shattered furniture and belongings of the unfortunate people whose homes this had been only hours before. When they reached the top they saw the grey-haired portly figure of Dr Hedges, the police surgeon, crouching beside the body of a young woman. She was a redhead, wearing a green coat that was unbuttoned, revealing a grey suit and green blouse. She had a black shoe on her left foot, and a matching shoe was lying near her right. Hedges hauled himself awkwardly to his feet as they approached.

“Morning, doctor,” said Jago. “What have we got?”

“Good morning, Detective Inspector. Young woman, mid to late twenties, I should say. Your constable seems to suspect foul play, but she could easily just have been caught by the blast of a bomb. No obvious signs of interference, but I expect you’ll want to get the pathologist to look at her. A proper examination in the mortuary will tell you more than I can from crawling round on my hands and knees in this mess, but I’ll leave that decision in your capable hands. In the meantime, I’ve certified her dead, and if you don’t mind I’d rather get back to my breakfast. I’m getting a bit too old and creaky for these early morning calls.”

With that he snapped his bag shut, dusted his trousers down with his hand, and made his way cautiously across the sloping debris towards a black Rover saloon parked on the other side of the road.

“Short and sweet,” said Cradock.

“Indeed,” said Jago. “A man with his mind on his pension, I suspect.”

He turned to the pair of police officers. Stannard’s expression was attentive, as if he were waiting for his next instruction, but Price looked uncomfortable.

“Are you all right, Constable?” said Jago.

“Yes, sir, thank you, sir,” said Price. “Just feeling a little queasy.”

“Not your first body, is it?”

“Well... It’s just... a young woman like that, sir, lying there dead. It was just a bit of a...” His voice trailed off, uncertainly.

“PC Stannard,” said Jago, “I suggest you take your colleague for a cup of tea. I expect you’ve both had a demanding night. But two things before you go.” He turned to Price. “First, you go and find a phone that’s working, call the station and tell them to get Dr Anderson the pathologist down here as quickly as he can manage – immediately, if possible.”

Price set off, scrambling back down the mound of wreckage towards the road.

“And second, sir?” said Stannard.

“Second, tell me: who are these men who found the body?”

“That lot over there, sir – or two of them, anyway, the ones on the right,” said Stannard, gesturing with his thumb in the direction of the group of men standing on the pavement. “They’re part of the heavy rescue party that’s been working here during the night. They told the ARP warden, and he found me and Price pretty sharpish and brought us down here. Shall I fetch them over?”

“No,” said Jago. “Just tell the two who found her to come up here, then go and get your cup of tea when Price comes back. We’ll manage.”

“Thank you, sir,” said Stannard, and headed off in the direction Price had taken. Jago saw him speak to two of the men. The constable pointed back up the heap, and they began to clamber up it.

Both of the rescue men were clad in blue dungarees and flat caps, so filthy as to make the departed police constables look relatively respectable. Jago scrutinized them as they approached. He estimated the taller of the two to be almost six feet in height and in his late forties. The second man was shorter and looked a little younger.

It was only when they drew close that the bigger man's face became clearly visible. Jago stepped forward to stand squarely in the man's path, his arms crossed.

"Well, well," he said. "Now look who's turned up like a bad penny. The Good Samaritan himself, eh? Fancy seeing you here." He peered into the man's face. "Just happened to find a body, did you? Simple as that. If anyone else had told me, I'd believe them. But nothing's ever simple with you, is it? Can you think of one good reason why I should believe you?"

Jago looked round to see where Cradock was and beckoned him to his side.

"Let me introduce you. Detective Constable Cradock, you may not have come across this gentleman before, but he and I have spent a considerable amount of time together over the years, one way or another. Mostly in the nick. Isn't that right, Harry?"

The man's only response was a look of what Cradock took to be pained incomprehension.

"Henry Parker, Esquire, of this parish," said Jago. "Commonly known as Harry."

He took a close look at Harry's clothing, as if inspecting him on parade.

"Well, I never. I have to say, Harry, you're the last person I'd expect to see out here rescuing people. I thought you had better things to do at night."

"Oh, please, Mr Jago," said Parker. "That was a long time ago. You must know I gave all that up years back. Straight as a die, I am, so help me."

"I had heard rumours, Harry, but you'll forgive me for being sceptical. Policeman's habit, you know. So how do you make your living nowadays, if it's not climbing in through the windows of the unsuspecting public and relieving them of their valuables?"

"I clean them, don't I? The windows, I mean – I'm a window cleaner. Least I was, till old Adolf started going round smashing them all. Things've gone a bit slack in the window-cleaning business of late. I still do some, mind – proper regular work, but it's mainly for businesses, the ones who have to keep looking smart. Anyway, I've got involved in this heavy rescue lark now. It pays a bit, and

I'll have you know, Detective Inspector, I'm saving people's lives. Repaying my debt to society, you might say."

"Very noble. You must be putting in some pretty long hours if you're repaying your debt to society." He looked Harry up and down. "Looks like you've put on a bit of weight since I last saw you, too."

"Yes, it's my wife's cooking."

"So you're not the one who goes crawling through cellars and wreckage to rescue people, are you?"

"No, Mr Jago, I leave that to the skinny blokes. I may not be quite as fit as I used to be, but I'm still good with ladders and with lifting and shifting. I can drive too – got a lorry licence six years ago when they first came out, and I'm the only one in the squad who's got one. So it's my job to drive the truck."

"Man of many talents. And where are you living now?"

"47 Hemsworth Street. And before you ask, the furniture's all paid for, and I'm up to date with the rent too."

"Very good. Now perhaps you could introduce me to your colleague."

The shorter man standing a few feet behind Parker pinched the short remainder of his cigarette between the forefinger and thumb of his right hand and slowly took it from his mouth, blowing a lazy stream of smoke upwards into the air. Jago wondered whether this was something the man had picked up from a movie.

"No need, Harry," said the man. "I can speak for myself."

"By all means," said Jago. "Could you give us your name, please?"

"Jenkins. Stanley Jenkins, but my friends call me Stan."

"Thank you, Mr Jenkins. And you're a member of this rescue party too?"

"Yes, I'm in the same boat as Harry, really. Before they decided to have this war I was a roofer, but the government's pretty much stopped people building anything now, so it's all gone a bit quiet in my line of work too."

"You'll be good with heights and ladders then, like Harry, if you're a roofer. Am I right?"

"Oh yes, definitely. But I don't drive. Never had enough money to run a car, and never had occasion to drive a truck."

"Thank you, Mr Jenkins. Now perhaps one of you would be good enough to tell me what happened here. How did you find the body?"

The two men exchanged a quick glance. Harry Parker spoke first.

"We were called out at about eight o'clock last night, not long after the air raid started. These houses had been hit, so we were sent down here to dig out anyone who might be trapped and generally tidy the site up a bit, make it safe – prop up dangerous walls and such like."

"And was anyone trapped?"

"Yes, we got a couple of old dears out from the first house that isn't there any more, if you see what I mean. They were the only people the ARP warden knew were unaccounted for – until we found them, that is – but we had a good look round after that in case there were any passing strays that had got caught out in the raid. You can easily miss someone, you know. Sometimes these days all you find is a few bits."

"Quite. So what happened next?"

"We got a message telling us to go and help at another site."

"What time was that?"

"Just before ten, as I recall. Is that right, Stan?"

"Yeah, I think so," said Jenkins.

"And what did you do then?" said Jago.

"We went, of course," said Harry. "It's not up to us where we go and what we do. We just go where we're told. And we have to be quick about it too. We don't spend half our time standing about doing nothing, like your lot."

"All right, Harry. But you haven't told us about the body yet. What happened?"

"Well, that's just it," said Harry. "That's what I couldn't understand. When we left, there was no sign of her. No sign at all. I call that fishy."