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# **Bryant & May On the Loose**

Written by Christopher Fowler

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# BRYANT & MAY ON THE LOOSE

CHRISTOPHER FOWLER



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‘When house and land are gone and spent, then  
learning is most excellent.’

Samuel Foote

‘If history is written by the victors, legend is at  
the service of the vanquished.’

Steve Roud, *London Lore*

(Note written in crimson felt-tip pen on the back of a flyer for the Tease to Please Burlesque Cabaret, Soho, found pinned to the door of the Peculiar Crimes Unit, 1b Hampstead Road, London NW1 0JP.)

*To The Incoming Team Taking Over From Us*

Welcome to the former offices of the Peculiar Crimes Unit.

We hope you're as happy here as we once were, and have better luck with your bosses than we ever had.

You may not have heard of us, but we saved London's collective arse on a great many occasions, and for a short but happy time this was our home. We put in a lot of hours here for very little cash. From these rooms the city's longest-serving detectives, Arthur Bryant and John May, controlled an investigation team that handled the stuff you lot couldn't begin to deal with; the cases that caused public panic, the ones that upset the status quo, the unsolved murders that were just too confusing, weird or embarrassing for our mates in the Met.

We were closed down and kicked out because we dared to do what no one else in this fair city would do. We challenged our so-called superiors at the Home Office after the government colluded in the deaths of innocent witnesses involved in a national defence project. So now, we no longer exist.

For anyone taking over Mr Bryant's space (Room 6) – please note that it is dangerous to operate electronic equipment in the area between his desk and the wall. Laptops, mobiles and gadgets containing batteries are all subject to leakage; I don't know why. There's always

too much loose electricity knocking around whenever Mr Bryant's in the room. According to him, the old Bakelite radio on the windowsill periodically picks up light-entertainment broadcasts from 1965. On Sunday lunchtimes when the office is quiet you can sometimes hear old episodes of *Round the Horne*. It's quite creepy if you're there by yourself.

Also, please beware of the large jar on top of his cupboard, as it contains a solution produced in the course of our last case at Mornington Crescent and must never be opened. I meant to throw it out before we left. In the event of a spillage, you'll find the number of a good epidemiologist pasted to the lid.

We bleached the kitchen refrigerator but still couldn't get rid of the funny smell in the freezer compartment. It's been like that ever since Mr Bryant left a human foot in it.

Do not use the photocopier beside my desk (Room 4) for more than fifty copies at a time. I spilled a full bottle of Max Factor 'Bowanga' Jungle Ruby nail varnish inside it, and the rollers get sticky whenever the machine warms up.

You might also want to avoid the middle floorboard at the end of the hall, which our Mr Banbury sawed through in the course of an experiment and never nailed back properly. If you get on the wrong end of it, it's like stamping on a rake and will have your eye out.

If you find a membership card to the Mount Pleasant Country & Western Barn Dancing Society, please forward it to DC Meera Mangeshkar at the address below.

On second thoughts, don't bother sending anything on.

We have no idea where we're going to be. None of us knows where we're heading. We're all out in the cold. I don't know what went wrong. We're good people, we've always done the right thing. That should count for something. We loved this unit, and now it's gone. Damn it all to hell.

Signed, on behalf of the members of London's former Peculiar Crimes Unit:

Janice Longbright – Detective Sergeant  
Raymond Land – Acting Temporary Chief  
Arthur Bryant & John May – Senior Detectives  
Dan Banbury – Crime Scene Management and  
Technology  
Giles Kershaw – Forensic Pathology  
April May – Office Management  
Jack Renfield – Sergeant  
Meera Mangeshkar – Detective Constable  
Colin Bimsley – Detective Constable  
Oswald Finch (Deceased)  
Liberty DuCaine – (part-time) Police Constable  
Crippen – staff cat.

# I

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## 'A BIT OF BAD LUCK'

The sleek metal cylinder was a little over a foot long, snub-nosed and topped with an inverted V of steel. It weighed about a kilogram, and the section with the fin pattern had been painted green. It hung in the air for a moment after being released, almost as if it had become weightless, then began to roll down through the thin low clouds. It had split away from the other incendiary bombs released from their rack, and now that its carrier had already droned past it fell silently, accompanied only by the soft whispering of the wind.

Below, the clouds parted and the brown curves of the terraced streets came into focus. Grey slate roofs, orange chimney pots, scruffy little back gardens, a child playing on the pavement with a red toy car – the details stood out in sharp relief. It all seemed so silent and undisturbed; there had been no warning siren.

The mundane urban topography came clearer and



closer, houses on wide cobbled streets that curved in arching paisley patterns beside the shining stripe of the canal. Makeshift shelters, chicken sheds, lines full of washing, outside toilets – the distance between the bomb and the ground closed fast as the cylinder spiralled down towards the crowded houses of King’s Cross.

A sudden wind buffeted it and shifted its direction a little to the right. There were two terraced homes just below it now. The nose of the bomb swung first over one, then the other, as if trying to decide which it would hit.

‘I’ll have to be getting back, Mrs B,’ said Ethel, drying her hands and replacing the tea towel on its rod. ‘My Alf creates merry hell if he don’t get his tea on time, and I’m late as it is.’

‘Do tell him it was my fault,’ urged Bea. ‘It was kind of you to help out today.’

Ethel wiped her nose and returned her handkerchief to her sleeve. ‘You do what you can. I’ll just be glad when everything settles back to normal.’ She unknotted her apron, folded it neatly, then yanked a grey felt hat over her hair and stabbed it into place with a pin.

‘Could you take these back as you go?’ Bea handed Ethel a pair of empty bottles, cod-liver oil and concentrated orange juice. ‘And you’d better pick up some more soap flakes at Lynch’s.’ She glanced over at her husband, who was half asleep in front of the fire, his chair tipped back at a precarious angle. ‘Harold, Eth’s off now.’

‘Oh, don’t wake him up, Mrs B. He’s like Alf, dead to the world when he’s not up and about, but it’s a good thing. Since we lost Bert it’s been hard for any of us to get

a good night's sleep.' Ethel's oldest son had been killed at sea. She slipped the bottles into her bicycle basket. 'I'll collect the linens from Wallace's and be back in the morning around half past ten.'

'I shall be here,' Bea promised. 'I agreed to let the Services Comfort Committee have the piano, and they're coming to collect it. I warned them it will need tuning. Mrs Porter is donating all her sheet music.'

'I don't know what you're going to do for a sing-song now, I'm sure.'

Bea was about to tell Ethel that the National Gallery's lunch-hour concerts would be a preferable alternative to Harold hammering out 'Whispering Grass' on the upright, but she didn't get a chance to speak. Nor did Ethel manage to get her bicycle out of the scullery doorway, because the room shook and all the crockery on the dresser was thrown forward, smashing to pieces on the stone floor.

'What the bloody hell—?' Harold's chair fell forward and he found himself sprawled across the rug.

'Lord, not again,' complained Ethel, quickly closing the door to the street and retreating inside. 'Second time this week without a warning.'

Their ears were ringing painfully. From somewhere above them came the clunking sound of falling bricks. They barely had time to gather their wits before a louder blast pulsed the air from the room and shattered one of the taped kitchen windows. Harold had been building an Anderson shelter in the garden, but it still wasn't finished because the Council hadn't delivered enough corrugated iron, so they usually stayed in the cupboard under the stairs until the all-clear sounded.

'Eth, you'd best stay with us for a while,' said Bea. 'That

was too close for comfort.’ She noticed that the cleaning lady’s face was bleeding from a dozen tiny cuts. ‘You’ve got some glass in you, love, just a little. Harold, give me a hand, don’t sit there like an article.’ She grabbed a flannel from the draining board, dipped it in the washing-up water and gingerly dabbed Ethel’s face, removing as many splinters as she could find, but daylight was fading and she could not turn on the lamp because the blackout curtain had been blown from the window.

‘Like the world’s coming to an end,’ said Ethel mournfully. Her face was a crimson mask, but if the process of retrieving the shards from her skin hurt, she made no complaint. The third detonation was further away, somewhere over in the next street, nearer to the station by the sound of it. The Jerries were trying to knock out the railway terminals, and anyone who lived near one was in danger.

Harold looked out through the shattered window frame and saw a great mound of bricks. The house beside it looked like a cutaway model, its private interior shamefully revealed to the world. A pair of slender yellow vases on its front room mantelpiece were still in place. Some pictures on the remaining wall had not even been knocked crooked, although the lace curtains had been torn to tatters. As always, it was the arbitrariness of it all that shocked most. This time nothing seemed to be burning and there was no smoke, but the air was dry and there were effusions of dense brown dust. Several people were wandering in the road, lost to the shock of the blast.

‘Blimey. The Porters’ house has taken a hit. That’s a bit of bad luck. Put Eth in the back room, Bea, and get the kettle on. Buck her up with a glass of something. We

should have a drop of whisky in the sideboard. I'm going to see what I can do.'

'Be careful, Harold,' called his wife. 'I didn't hear an all-clear. I didn't hear any sirens at all.'

'I've got to go to Alf, he'll be frantic,' said Ethel.

'You're not going anywhere just yet.' Bea took the cleaning lady's arm and led her into the passage. The bombs were falling further away now, sounding like a thunderstorm in retreat. It was Tuesday 12 November, 1940, the ninth week of the event that became known as The Blitz, and London's populace was getting used to the continual threat of air attack. When the sirens sounded, those caught outside often ignored official advice to file into sanctioned public shelters, and instead formed orderly queues into the city's Underground stations. The ones who stayed at home ducked into shelters, crammed themselves into coal holes and cupboards or hid under the stairs. The government wanted everyone to sleep at ground level, but many refused to give up their beds for a patch of cold linoleum in the kitchen. The war had forced an intimacy on people that made them uncomfortable. It wasn't nice to have everyone knowing your business.

Bea boiled a kettle while Ethel attended to her face and tidied her hair. They were better when they had things to do. The problem, said Bea, was the lack of information. The papers told them nothing, and not knowing got on your nerves. What a Christmas they could look forward to! Then she realized what she had said, and looked back at Ethel, who would be spending her first Christmas without her son.

Harold picked his way between the stacks of fallen masonry, crumpled chunks of an internal lath-and-plaster

wall and an entire fireplace surround that had landed perfectly upright in the road, as if it had been placed there by a giant hand. A confused-looking air-raid warden was trying to direct people away.

‘Mrs Porter,’ Harold called. ‘Stay right there. I wouldn’t move, if I were you.’ His neighbour was standing dazed on a splintered wooden floorboard that jutted out above her smoking cellar, all that remained of her living-room floor. She was dressed in a torn white blouse and skirt, and bedroom slippers. She had been preparing some supper to eat in front of the radio, which was still playing even though it dangled from the end of an electric cord. A jaunty foxtrot, ‘Till the Lights of London Shine Again’, played as Harold inched his way on to the creaking platform.

‘Give me your hand, love,’ he called softly.

Mrs Porter seemed not to have heard him. ‘*Don’t you cry when I’m gone,*’ sang the radio. ‘*Wear a smile and carry on, till the lights of London shine again.*’

‘I’m just here in front of you,’ said Harold.

‘*And now Syd Lipton and the Grosvenor House Dance Band play “Blacking Out The Moon” for every—*’ The radio spat an electrical pulse and went dead. All that could be heard was the soft suffering of the injured, the chink and tumble of dislodging bricks.

Harold stretched out his hand. ‘You can do it, love. Don’t look down. Just reach towards me.’

Mrs Porter remained frozen, staring past him to where the wall had been. To where her husband had been sitting, waiting for his dinner.

‘He’s not there,’ Harold explained carefully. ‘He’s gone, love, and the house has gone.’ He had passed the old man’s body as he approached the house, crushed beneath a

collapsed chimney stack. Nearby, a grandfather clock had landed face-down on the pavement, like a felled parade soldier.

She noticed him for the first time, and fluttered her eyelids as though coming to her senses. For a moment he thought she might faint and fall into darkness. Then she held out her arm, just far enough for him to grab her and haul her back from the edge. 'My name's Irene,' she murmured, and passed out in his arms.