

RIP TO THE RESCUE by Miriam Halahmy

Excerpt

The Blitz was bad that night. The German bombers were dropping showers of incendiaries all over London, and St. Pancras Station was a target once again. Incendiaries were small, but they were dropped in baskets containing hundreds.

The fires they caused lit up the streets like a beacon for the bombers to then drop high explosives. In between, the streets were pitch dark in the blackout made worse by the constant swirl of thick smoke. Jack rode with a wet handkerchief tied around his mouth like a mask to stop breathing in the choking air.

It was bad around Camden, Holborn, and the West End, but Jack knew the East End was getting the worst. A great blanket of smoke sat permanently on the horizon toward the river, and every night the bombers tore into the docks and the homes in the narrow streets. Hundreds were killed, thousands wounded, and the hospitals were so blocked up that the Warden told the boys to use the first-aid post instead.

“If you just need a few stitches, don’t go the hospitals, boys. There’s them what needs it more.”

Jack had been up the top of Parliament Hill fields with Mum to see the damage.

“Those poor people,” was all Mum said in a quiet voice.

The wardens said a lot more, and in not such nice language.

“You wouldn’t believe it when they drop them high-explosive bombs,” Warden Yates had told them. “I was visiting my sister in Bermondsey just as they started on the East End. The air was so wild it pushed and pulled me every which way. I thought my eyeballs would be sucked out my head. Couldn’t even get my breath that night, there was smoke like acid all around us. The neighbor’s shirt was ripped off by the blast.”

“What about our boys on the river?” put in another man.

“They had the fireboats pumping water onto the docks, and the fires were so hot the paint blistered on the side of the boats.”

“My cousin’s crew said the fire leapt the river, burning on both sides. Cranes was crashing over and the whole dock’s on fire,” another man said. He shook his head and stared at his boots.

Jack wanted to ask what happened to the man’s cousin, but he didn’t dare. Warden Yates knocked his pipe out against a wall and said, “All those homes on fire, people staggering around the streets with kiddies— how much more can they take?”

No one answered as they turned back to work.