

The Original Black Spider Letters

Pentrích August 1815

It were funny how Thomas Bacon seemed to tell me things, things he probably shouldn't have. I were a good listener, in fact I were fascinated by his stories. I know as some o'older men couldn't be doing wi 'im. He weren't like anybody else I knew. He allus said to me, "Now lad, don't say owt, but . . ." and then he start one of his stories. Mind you I never did tell anybody - that's until I started to write these notes.

I remember as one night when me and Tom Bacon were supping a pint in t'White Horse. I'd bin paid for t'smithy's building work and even asked me dad to come for a pint but he were too miserable to move. "Yo shouldn't be geeing your hard earned money to Ma Weightman, I thought I'd taught thee more sense!" Ma said, "Leave 'im dad, t'lads been worked full time for days, gee it a rest." Dad grunted and chewed on his clay pipe - I'm not sure he ever had owt in it.

Tom came in and I bought him a beer, I'd not seen 'im for a few days, I think he's bin away somewhere and anyow he'd bought me plenty.

I'd been thinking about somemat I'd heard about for some time so I came out direct like. "Is it raight you were a Luddite Tom."

"Now lad, keep this to y'sen. It's true we had a bita trouble in this direction a year or so back. One or two frame knitters did smash a few machines in Swanwick and South Wingfield. Wages were down and some were putting a few machines in an empty house and using women and kids to put men out of work. It were a scandal. We had no option, we had to do sommat. Some were about to quit it all and bugger off. Mind you it got too hot, so we jacked it in after we'd made a point."

I'd learnt not to question Tom too deeply but I did spot that he said 'we' a couple a'times.

"In fact," Tom went on after emptying his pot, "I met a chap t'other day who gev me a piece out a'paper. He delved about his jerkín and pulled out a scrap of newspaper. "Look at this." It were a page from a newspaper about frame-

breaking in Nottingham and Leicestershire. "Y'see, it's still going on but not around here, or not as I know about. Tek my advice lad and keep out on it, it's nowt but trouble and we won't win that one, there's bigger fish to fry."

I asked Tom what he meant, he just touched his nose and smiled.

Anyhow, I remember as August being a wet month with not much sun and all t'crops were standing still in t'fields. It were a miserable time and nowt seemed to going well. To cap it all, me dad finally gave in. He'd bin sat chewing his pipe when we all went to bed, he were watching last few embers of t'fire. That were it, next morning when mam got up see found him stiff as a board. To be honest she didn't seem too surprised. I remember her saying that she'd bin expecting it and that he'd bin hiding a problem for months. I never knew what it was.

We had a funeral and, as he were a big churchman, t'vicar didn't charge much, which were a blessin in its'en. In the service t'vicar picked me out to say that it were my responsibility now and that he hoped I'd get to church more often to pray for His help. I knew it would fall on me but as for going to church - I don't think so.

Folks in t'village pulled round for a while but it didn't last long, they'd got their own problems. I got work from Duke's agent in building a couple of more cottages at the end of the village and that kept us going.

I had one day off when I went wi me mate Jed to help him tek a cart-load o'piglets to Derby market. To be honest I didn't get away much in them days and it were good to rumble down t'turnpike from Buckland Hollow. Jed did his business and bought some feed which he loaded onto his cart. "How does fancy a pint or two," said Jed and before I could answer he was he in the front door of the Market Inn.

It were my first time in a big town pub and it were full despite it being only mid-morning. There were a few wenches serving ale and food but it were full o'men - farmers most on 'em.

The thing that I found interesting was the talk about prices, cost of food and what you got for beasts and the like. As I listened a bit closer to another group I could hear 'em talking politics. I heard talk about corn laws, poaching and thieves taking crops. "No-bodies bloody interested," one man said. "it be different if you took one a'Kedleston pheasants, that's for sure." added another.

I sat there listening because Jed was talking to a farmer about something or other.

On the way back we got chatting, Jed went to market most weeks and he knew the score. I asked him if they were allus on about prices and that stuff. "Farmers are farmers, they allus moan about one thing or another. If they can't think of sommat they'll get on about weather, idle labourers even about serving wenches. Mind you there's getting to be more politics than there was. More lookin' for someone to blame for it all."

"What doest mean?"

"Well," began Jed after thinkin' it over, "sometimes there's some blokes there winding 'em up, men I haven't seen before, men who I'd keep away from. I mean men looking for trouble. Tha knows, when you find six farmers together you'll get at least ten different opinions on what's wrong, what caused it and what should be done about it."

As I sat bumping along the road I thought what Jed had been sayin. It seemed to me that there were as many disgruntled farmers and there were frame knitters in our village.

I decided to tell Tom about this.