

The Original Black Spider Letters

Pentrich December 1815

Since I started these notes around May or June time, it's bin a strange year. We've lost me dad, he were a good man. We've beat Boney, and I'll tell thee more about him in a bit, and we've had some funny weather. All in all it's a raight dog's breakfast, as me dad allus used to say.

To mek things wos people are poorer than they were years ago. Some old folkes tell that prices had gone up and wages, 'specially frameworkers, are not as good as they used to be, in fact some are meking' less than half what they made ten years back. One of t'problems is that some bagmen are tekín' the wok to factories and bringín' less to t'framework knitters who work at hom. I've never bin to a factory but I'm told that some at Cromford and Belper have more women and kids than men workín' there.

And, to mek things wos, I've bin pressed by magistrate's clerk to report on strangers who turn up in t'village. I saw him t'other day and told 'im that I'd seen a coach full a'men on t'turnpike and one o'lads from t'Peacock said they were on way to see Duke at Chatsworth. Clerk said, "thank you, but I'm not sure we should to be spyíng on the Dukes guests." He gev me thrupence for a beer; and I took it!

Outside work is slowing down what wí t'weather and t'lack o'money. I have gorra a few days wok at t'foundary building a new wall. I like that cos they're good payers.

Any road what I thought yo might be interested in were a man I sat with at Devonshire Arms last Thosday. He told me he were a salesman for some factories in Manchester and had been selling cloth, uníform and t'like to t'army. He sed that t'bottom had fell out of t'market for soldiers trousers - this sempt to amuse him more than it did me, he laughed to hissen.

I could tell he were a salesman as he never stopped talking and I were t'nearest. He even bought me a beer so I sat and listened to 'im.

"Did news of t'Waterloo battle get this far."

"Cause it did we heard a month or so back."

"Well, did you know Napoleon had been arrested and then escaped before t'battle of Waterloo? Well I've bin in and out of army barracks trying to get orders and I hear all sorts."

I must say I found this interesting so I settled down to listen.

"T'army marched into Paris and Boney gave in without much of a fight, I think t'correct word is abdicated and, apparently, we thought we'd beaten t'French at a place called Bayonne and then we thought that were that."

"But it weren't?"

"No, it bloody well weren't. Just after they sent Bonaparte to an island called Elba¹ to cool off and lick his wounds. Well, he didn't cool off, he planned his next move – a cunning fox he is. Sometime in February and March this year, Boney escaped, went back to Paris and started the bloody war again. He were not a General anymore, he'd promoted hissen to Emperor"

"What happened then?"

"They started fighting again and they ended up at Waterloo when he came face to face with Wellington."

"Where's Waterloo²?"

"I think it's near to Brussels but I've never bin abroad, there or anywhere else for that matter. Anyway, I 'm told it were a real near thing. According to what I were told Prussians did well, it were 'orrible weather and to cap it all Boney made a few mistakes and that were unusual."

"Ow dost know all this?"

"As I told thee, I've been trying to sell me goods to t'army and you get talking. Some of t'officers like to talk about what they've done and where they've bin and you get it all for a beer or two. In fact, many soldiers thought Boney were a good general and it could'a gone either way at one stage."

"Where is he now?"

¹ Elba is a Mediterranean very small island in Tuscany, Italy, 10 kilometres from the coastal town of Piombino.

² The Battle of Waterloo was fought on Sunday, 18 June 1815, near Waterloo in present-day Belgium, then part of the United Kingdom of the Netherlands. A French army under the command of Napoleon was defeated by two of the armies of the Seventh Coalition: an Anglo-allied army under the command of the Duke of Wellington, and a Prussian army under the command of General Blücher.

"They tell me that Wellington's not making same mistake and he's to go to a place called St Helena³, miles away this time. Anyway, I've booked a room and I'm off t'bed. It's Manchester tomorrow on t'early coach and to see if I've still gorra job. Maybe I'll see thee again."

My new friend stood up, downed his beer and went without another word. I thought to messen that were interesting. I know more than me mates now and I can brag about it.

As I walked up t'hill back to Pentrich I thought to messen that all this faighting is a waste o'time and the only buggers who suffer are soldiers and those who's villages they smash up. I can't understand what it's all about.

The weather come to me 'elp again and blew a few walls over what with frost and rain, so I had plenty to do. It sempt I would be able to gi me mam a bit more money for a Christmas treat. I can never remember our village mekin' much about Christmas. T'men might get a beer or a pie from Nancy at t'White Horse and Duke's agent sometimes brought a cart full o' vegetables to share around his tenants – but that were about it.

I'd not seen owd Tommy Bacon for a week or more until one naight when I were in t'White Horse. "Were yo bin Tom?", I asked 'im, not expecting a real answer.

"Keep it to thisen, but I've bin to Nottingham and then Manchester to meet some men who think like I do."

"What does mean?"

"You musta seen how men are worse off, how food is dearer and no bugger cares. If you're interested I might tek thee wi me one time. Now go and fetch me a beer."

Anyhow that's enough for now, Happy Christmas to thee.

³ Saint Helena is a volcanic tropical island in the South Atlantic Ocean, 4,000 kilometres east of Rio de Janeiro and 1,950 kilometres west of the southern coast of Africa

