

The Original Black Spider Letters

Pentrich August 1816

I nearly threw all me notes away, it's tekken a few days afore I decided to pick up me pen and ink. Me head's bin spinnin' but to be 'onest, I had this feelin' she were going and soon. I aint got round to any decisions yet.

I dunna think me mam would want me to change much, though she never knew about me notes.

Though I miss me dad, it's different this time, mam dying cuts me from me upbringing if tha knows wa I mean.

Time moved fast, everybody came round, including t'vicar and we had a funeral and buried mam in less than a week. Most o'village came to t'funeral and we had a few beers in t'White Horse; Nancy put some bread and meat on. Some folks were more worried about who were goin' to look after their kids now me mam's gone.

Tom Bacon came to see me to say how sorry he were and he really did look upset. But I didna say owt about what me mam had sed afore she passed and neither did he. O'course, he probley didna know she a'told me.

Mebbe because folks were feelin' sorry for me but I suddenly found messen with plenty o'work. Time passed on as it usually does and I kept messen busy.

Then, one naight I were at hom suppin' a jog'a soup when Owd Tom called round.

"How you keepin' lad?", he said fallin' into me dad's old chair by t'fire.

"I'm OK, Tom," I thought t'messen should I tell 'im what I know.

After sittin' quietly for a few minutes, he said, "I want to mek thee a offer, listen me owt. I live in a family cottage on me own and thee's in this rented cottage now your poor mam's gone. How about movin' in wi me, there's plenty o'room."

Puttin' Tom's plan to one side, I thought now's t'time.

"Tom, neither of us is bein' 'onest wi each other. Afore she passed me mam told me that yo were me real dad."

Tom were tekken aback, I could tell. "Oh!" he said, I sat back lookin' at 'im.

"Well, 'ow does tha feel about that?"

"To be 'onest, Tom, I dunna know. I've bin thinkin' about it since she went. I dunna want to know th'ins and outs, it's years ago. We seem to get on alraight so I'll tek thee offer and move in your cottage up t'village. As far as I'm concerned it's our secret and that's that."

"I'm pleased, I really am. Mind yo, one a'two old ens knew me and you mam had a fling but nubdy seys owt, it were over twenty years ago. I never cheated on thee dad.

I could tell Tom didna want to go on about it and neither did I.

So, wi in a fortnaight I were living wi Tom. I had me own room and t'best thing about this were that this room had a case wi all Tom's books and papers. I found Thomas Paine's papers some bits by William Cobbett and other names that I adna heard of.

Tom told me I could read what I wanted but I were to tell nubdy unless he said so.

When Tom were at home, and he sometimes went away for a few days at a time, we used to talk about politics. We talked about why folks were poor, why they had no say, why

they had no votes and what he thought should be done. Tom didn't think much of parliament, that were obvious.

It were clear that Tom knew lots a'folks and travelled to meetings all over t'place. He told me that there were thousands a'men who wanted to change things. He told me about t'revolution in France twenty odd years ago when King and Queen and aristocrats were executed. It were interesting but it were also frightening.

"There's one thing tha needs to know," said Tom as we sat in t'corner of White Horse. "The whole county's full a'spies, dozens of em. Magistrates have spies, Colonel Halton for one, Duke o'Devonshire will have spies - yo met one didn't yo, and, worse a'all, there's government spies. Them are men who get money for reportin' on wot men are doin' and, even wos, what they are thinkin'. They're likely to be men yo know, men yo've seen around for years. Dunna trust anybody unless you are sure. Yo can trust Weightmens and Ludlam and a few others but be careful wi foundry men."

I were just goin' to say sommat when Tom went on, "And", he when on in a strong voice, "wots even wos is that some o'these spies tell lies about what's happening and try to get men involved in trouble only to get themsens arrested, sent to prison and even wos."

"Bloody 'ell, is it all worth it?"

"Yes, lad, it is; some bugger's got to do sommat else we'll all starve."

I began to realise that Tom were involved in sommat serious and that me living wi 'im meant he trusted me and, to be 'onest, I felt good about that."

We went on talkin' but I can't remember everything.

Any road, that's where I am now an we'll see wot happens. My life went on as usual, I dunna know if Tom sed owt around t'village but nubby sed owt about me move. T'Duke's agent put one of me mates into our old cottage after he'd got married. I dunna mind, there's too many bad memories there.

Prices were goin' up week after week and folks were allus complaining about food and loss a'work. Folks were leavin' every month, sometimes families settin' off on a cart wi all they had and, sometimes, walkin' to Derby, Cromford or Belper. I can only remember one or two ever comin' back.

I might a'mentioned this but there's problems being caused by bad weather, wos than anyone can remember - no sunshine and rain, loads a'rain.

Talkin' to me mates, most a'them young men looking for regular work, it were clear that there wos work on some farms but that were mainly family, Butterley sempt to be steady after t'loss of war trade. There wos work in some local pits but mosta me mates thought that were last ditch unless their dad took 'em there.

Well, I've rambled on about messen this time but I thought you should know. If I'm spared I'll get back to me usual tack next time.