

The Original Black Spider Letters

Pentrich May 1816

Since I started these notes I've been made to think more than I ever have before. I've never bin to school, except Church reading classes, but I do turn things o'er in me mind an I talks to Owd Tom about things.

Last week, t'Dukes agent visited Pentrich and probably most o'villages hereabouts. I were laying some bricks on a wall on t'main road where a drover's cart had knocked it down trying to get through t'mud.

There were two or three men who'd left their two-horse carriage by t'side of the Dog Inn. It were a dry day, for a change, and these men were walking through t'village. They stopped opposite where I were working, I'd just ignored 'em and kept on wi my job.

One of these man said, "What are you doing young man?" I thought to messen, it must be bloody obvious.

"I'm building up a wall some silly bugger knocked over last week."

He looked at me in a odd way and walked on.

One of t'other men came back to where I was. He kneeled down by the wall.

"Have you been told that you should show more respect to a gentleman. You should stop work, stand up and pay your respects. Remember that you might find yourself short o'work one day, mind what I say."

He tapped his cane on t'wall I was building and went to catch up with t'others.

It weren't until later when I sat down wi a mug a'beer me mam had brought that I thought about this afternoon's event. How did this man get to be a gentleman, what is a gentleman, wor he born a gentleman? I knew me dad weren't a gentleman even when he died. Can I ever be a gentleman? These ideas kept goin' round in me head.

Later on I met Tom Bacon in t'White Horse and I decided to tell 'im.

"Did thee see them men in t'village this afternoon, Tom?"

"Aye, I did lad and kept out their bloody way. They'd not want to see t'likes a'me, I can tell thee! We don't see eye to eye!"

"One on 'em told me off for not respecting a gentleman. Who does he think he is?" Tom smiled as tho' I'd sed sommat he liked talkin' about.

"Well, now you're beginning to learnt sommat, lad. We're what they call lower orders, that means we're at bottom a'pile. The only buggers behind us are them in t'workhouse."

I jumped to their side. "Some a'them in t'workhouse have done nowt wrong."

"Steady, I know that lad but it meks n'difference. There's three classes and we're all at t'bottom of 'em. There's lords at top, like t'Duke o' Devonshire and t'other landowners, then there's gentlemen, lawyers, priests, clerks and the like. We canna get there and it's bloody wrong - and sommat needs doin' about it." Tom was getting angry and banged his jug pot on t'table.

"Be careful Tom, tha'll spill thee ale."

"Now listen to me and say na more. Yo've already bin to a meeting, yo know what some think. Just keep yor 'ed down and wait and see."

One or two more came in t'pub. It turned out that Dukes men were tellin' villagers wi animals on Duke's land that he were goin' to enclose more land an they a'ter move their livestock. They were none too 'appy about this, it sempt to be another way of stopping folks mekin' a few extra pennies. They had to do it cos stockingers pay were going down and down.

Anyroad, I dunna want to be all gloomy. I found a old paper in t'Peacock other day and somebody had drawn a big circle round one bit - it were interesting. Oh, I should tell thee it were London Morning Post 17th April 1816 - it musta bin there for ages. Well, some poor bugger called Tim Higgins, who were a thief, had been sentenced to hang at Newgate. He'd wrote a poem to his mate and the hangman - I thought it fit in t'what we were talkin' about. I wrote it down and yo must excuse me mistakes!

Newgate Melody

Since the Jury and Judge, oh Jack Ketch!

Have agreed that Tim Higgins must stretch;

Since 'tis too late to kick up a row,

Since I must hang, Oh, Jack, hang me now!

Now the run of my thieving is o'er,

St. Giles will behold me no more!

If the hand of a friend the cord bring,
There will be little pain in the swing.

And of this, my dear Jack, be now sure,
That Tim Higgins has pluck to endure,
Not only to hang - but he'd say
Not one word, tho' dissected next day.

Tho' the virgins of Newgate lament,
Be Jack Ketch, be my hangman unbent:
My mother's transported you know,
And my father you hang'd long ago.

When my body's been picked by the crows,
And my soul gone, where, nobody knows,
Let my mem'ry be thy pride,
And forget not - I liv'd till I died.

Does like it - I know it's sad but it tells thee how some poor soul lost his parents and never had a chance. I know there are one a'two about 'ere who feel like this.

There were a cartload a'men in t'village t-other day - all old soldiers back from t'army - about six o'them. They were lookin' for wok. I heard as Nancy told 'em they'd no change in Pentrich, South Wingfield or Swanwick as most o'stockingers is starvin'; as it is. She sent 'em to try at Pentrich Pit but they didna fancy that - and I, for one, dunna blame 'em. They looked a desperate lot. Somebody told 'em they could try t'Ironworks at Butterley, but they'd bin layin' off after t'war, or t'new pottery at Denby - that's if they got skills to do it. Nancy gave 'em a glass each, but only a small glass - she never were too generous, and they trundled off - I dunna know where to.

I betta get to bed as I've to ger-up early and 'elp a man stick a cottage roof on at Ripley, near t'back of t'Cock Inn - I might ger a pint or two! Oh, I ought to tell thee its started rainin' again - wot a year we're gerrin'. Somebody sed it were Boney's Revenge! I dun know abut that but yo need a good pair a'boots to ger about even in summer!