

# The Bow Hunter

By Malcolm McBride

*This story is dedicated to the memory of all artisans who have created and upheld valuable traditions, promoted and preserved their craft for those that followed them and who are now doing the same.*

## Foreword

How often in this life are we inclined to think the worst of people, places or things? Although our preconceptions and prejudices are quite normal, how refreshing it is when they are proven wrong. We know how and why these feelings arise, but while certain types of individuals form part of the world's populace, then we shall never be rid of negative thoughts that can pervert our way of thinking. To counter the effect that these misgivings have on our lives, we should look for goodness in our surroundings, and where it is found we shall also see recognition of life's better qualities and notice that the unwanted aspects tend to retreat and eventually disappear.

The modern working environment has become an unfriendly place. Indeed in certain locations we find that this unfriendliness has gone one step further and has turned into downright hostility. If this trend had proved to be productive in providing industry and commerce with better, more stable people, then perhaps one could accept these changes, but sadly it is quite the reverse and we see that where previously a "thank-you," or maybe a small amount of praise was given, which cost virtually nothing but invariably had the desired effect, has, in many instances, been replaced by the necessity to engage therapists in various guises whose main occupation appears to be purifying the troubled minds of overstressed and very under-appreciated employees.

Admittedly working conditions at the beginning of the twentieth century in many firms and institutions were totally abysmal. This was mainly due to the lack of modern technology and thinking which today is taken for granted. Who knows, our descendants may talk of us in exactly the same way that we do, when recalling the Victorians and Edwardians. But in those times, without the luxury of hindsight which we now enjoy, the many discomforts were simply accepted as part of the way of life, simply how things were, and who was going to argue with that?

This state of affairs wouldn't last much longer though, as industrial revolutionaries were already forming their plans, which, when implemented, would change forever the 'way of life', as it was in those times, exactly in the way that the introduction of computers to workbenches has done in recent years.

Every so often appears a man who has, through circumstances that may have been beyond his control, seen life from both sides of the negotiating table. He was a man who had had wanted for nothing, who, through the mysteries of fate, became educated to the realization that alternative methods may be applied, methods that resulted in an efficiency that had been stimulated by showing a level of compassion to those that toiled for long hours and received little in return instead of the more usual sound of a harsh tongue.

This does not suggest that discipline was lacking in his company, very much the opposite, but it was used in calculated amounts that would balance the scales to exactly that angle which proved to give the optimal environment in which to be successful. The resulting respect from those above and beneath, came as a well-earned and deserved bonus.

A man in possession of these virtues was Joshua Smith. His example may still be used, even in this day and age, to illustrate that there is a place, and if one was honest also a great need, for understanding the ordinary person's apprehensions and fears as they journey through life. This kind of man would definitely not succumb to exploiting the weaknesses of his subordinates to subdue, punish or coerce them, but use his extraordinary understanding of people to produce a positive effect that will enhance more fully their loyalty and trust, rather than alienate them into becoming contemptible and useless beings.

## Chapter One: The Start Of It All

Buried deep in the bustling chaos that was London's East End, which gave then, as it still does today, hearth and home to a myriad of houses, shops and businesses, there existed a small, but very successful firm of stationers. This was in an age that modern historians have since given the title of, "The Second Industrial Revolution."

It was an era when literally everything was humming and buzzing, the wheels of commerce and Industry turning continually throughout all parts of the highly prosperous 'British Empire', increasing its wealth and prosperity to never before imagined heights.

The mental horrors and physical scars of the Great War, which were still carried by millions of people who had survived that dreadful ordeal were, with the passing of time, slowly beginning to heal, and Londoners, of all classes and occupations, genuinely saw the future as being one that would last forever and a day.

Though poverty was still rife and good health had to be paid for, and with no guarantee of a cure, this proved to be of no hindrance to people living in an age when traditions were being created, when history was being made, and in a time when even the land's grubbiest street could give its residents festive occasions that they, and the rest of Britain, would never forget.

In those heady times, when the "Roaring Twenties" were really getting under way, it could only have been foreseen by the most gifted of prophets that within the remaining span of most peoples lifetimes, these same city suburbs would be reeling once again under the onslaught of a foreign enemy and its weaponry, this time in the shape of Hitler's bombs, and missiles. If one could have observed this unraveling of life from a distance, it may have been comparable with browsing through an old photograph album, which a child might have found, secreted amongst the treasures in Grandma's parlor cabinet. The fading monotone images held within those pages released very real impressions of how the world then appeared to ordinary folk. Pictures of proud fathers with their families surrounded by the foliage of the photographer's studio, busy street scenes or views of foreign places and portraits of music hall stars showed a very fair picture of that era, but all the good times and gaiety only masked the reality of how bad things really were, and how much was being paid for this new prosperity.

Outside of Grandma's best room the sulphurous clouds of poisonous dirt that were belching forth from countless chimneys and newfangled engines, swathed the already grimy city in a suffocating blanket of dust, which imparted it with a stark and colorless quality. Could this have been the silent but deadly

announcement of the invisibly approaching ravages of war, and the undeniable and urgent necessity, for some radical redevelopment that was now in many quarters long overdue?

All these factors would soon be putting their mark on the city and which would inevitably obliterate once and for all this cherished and longed for lifestyle.

It was a time when, without much difficulty, one could easily find the actual backcloths to many a Dickensian novel that had been written about this part of the capital, and of the people who lived and worked there.

Many vistas thereabouts hadn't changed for decades, and produced an environment that could not have been found anywhere else in Britain, or for that matter the world.

All manner of trades people and enterprises had, mainly due to the close proximity to the city and because rents there were still affordable, planted their roots in this part of the town, and Joshua Smith's printing establishment was no exception in using the opportunity to prosper.

Settling into its brick walled corner of Bow most comfortably, and giving the appearance that it had been there since the very beginning of time, Joshua's firm was housed behind a rather anonymous looking facade in a building that both inside and out, bore the scars of use and abuse, which it had collected since before the start of the nineteenth century when it had been built.

Over the years the premises had been the home to a host of different enterprises, until, through some commercial misadventure, it had once again fallen into disuse and was finally bought by Joshua.

During the firm's early years, and beyond, the view from his upstairs windows would let Joshua Smith witness London being prepared for the next century. Broad railways were being pushed through to the capital city's grand termini. Dockland's squalor was being modernized to accommodate ever larger ships. These used the great port of London to unload the Empire's wealth onto its quays.

Myriads of terraced houses had been, and were still being built. These were to house the workforce of thousands who worked day and night, turning these steaming monsters round, receiving cargoes from the Empire and, in return, sending off Britain's valuable produce to every conceivable corner of the world.

Gangs of perspiring men toiled under the gantry cranes that swung about high above the decks and rooftops, depositing their loads in front of hungry warehouses, or similarly into the deep, black bowels of smaller boats and barges that took raw materials further abroad, to the insatiable mills and workshops of industrial Great Britain.

Joshua could see new and larger buildings springing up everywhere. These would later

accommodate the many new companies that would be needed to help the City keep pace in the world. Electricity, no longer a novelty, became the new driving force for the nation, taking over the role that till now wood, coal and gas had occupied, and had given of its trapped energy to get the Empire going.

## Chapter Two: Joshua

Joshua Smith, trade master of the City of London, was, during the second half of the nineteenth century, an aspiring young man and had, through his own endeavors, hard work and with the help of a little family money, been able to start up his own firm, practicing the skills which he had learned the hard way whilst in his uncle's employ. This had been in an even older building near to the north end of London Bridge.

This area of London, where he had worked and first learned the ways of business, was literally riddled with similar sized firms as the one in which he started his career. They all served, in their own particular ways, the City's various needs. It was a regular beehive, though deviated greatly from the beehives of nature, simply by the fact that here capitalism, power and self-esteem, were the driving forces, where profit was the motivation and individual success stimulated the victory chant.

The well-being of the whole hive came very low on the list of priorities. Here the strong, and often ruthless survived and the weak were mercilessly eliminated.

It was in this harsh environment that Zechariah Smith had established himself, profiting from anything that business or society would cast his way. He was the not at all unsuccessful proprietor of a stationary store, where, not uncommonly included at the rear of its premises, was a modest printing shop. This provided the retailing counter with much of its requirements, as tradition dictated that good stationary was a must for any aspiring company or individual.

Joshua, although indentured as an apprentice engraver, had to learn about all the aspects of Zechariah's products, and working upwards of twelve hours a day in an ancient, pokey, rat-infested workroom, spent some considerable time in the printing and retail areas of the firm. During his seven year apprenticeship, he became not only proficient in mastering the many techniques involved in his profession, but was also quick to build up many useful connections in the city. These included mainly other lads and some of their employers, who came from the many businesses supplied by his uncle, but at that time Joshua did not realize the importance of having made so many good friends and this would be to his enormous benefit later on in life.

In a rare bout of self-righteous benevolence, Zechariah had taken on his nephew to learn the trade.

This proved especially convenient to him, as family was always cheaper to employ than those from outside and also gave less trouble, plus the fact that it earned him some substantial merit within the Smith

household for, he was seen to be “looking after the boy.” Joshua’s father, being an elder of the Plymouth Brethren, was disappointed that his son had not followed his lead in the Church, but nevertheless was satisfied that the boy would be involved in a “respectable” business.

Joshua though, after growing wise to this very one-sided arrangement with his uncle, was increasingly determined to escape from this yoke of patronization and near slavery as soon as was possible.

He served his time and quickly earned himself an enviable reputation amongst his peers and uncle’s customers as a respected and competent craftsman, and much to his uncle’s displeasure the fact had also risen to the status of master within his Guild. ‘Till then, Zechariah had continually stifled any ambitions that Joshua might have had, so that he alone should reap the benefits of his nephew’s labors.

The situation for Joshua became increasingly intolerable. Before it became too late he finally made the life-changing break from his uncle’s tyranny. This was much to the astonishment and unfounded displeasure of his mislead aunts, uncles, cousins and all the other family busybodies who proceeded thenceforth to call him all kind of derogatory names, from ingrate to ignoramus.

Defying all odds, he shunned the fabricated warnings of Zechariah, family, and other interfering folk, disregarded entirely the predictions of doom for his venture, and established his very own company.

This he did in what was then a rapidly developing area in the East End of London. The business situation he chose was well planned, and proved very convenient for securing customers from the many shipping and transport companies that were to be found in the nearby dockland area, but still allowed him to serve important clientele from the City. The majority of these were mainly his apprenticeship friends and their employers, and many of these remained with him both as client and friend for the rest of their working lives.

So from very small beginnings, assisted by a couple of men who were satisfied to work for him, sharing, even in those difficult times, his confidence that in a few years, things would get better.

## Chapter Three: Smith's Of Bow

Disregarding the many and varied hardships of getting a business on its feet, and keeping it there, the trio gained experience from all their new undertakings, got down to it and began to produce, and indeed, just as Joshua had promised, things did get better. A lot better in fact, and very soon Joshua found it necessary to expand his premises as the firm seemed to grow of its own accord and demanded that he make it grow even faster, faster in fact than he had ever imagined in his wildest dreams.

This now renowned company, which was easily recognizable from the street by way of the distinctive, though modest, black and gold sign, which hung proudly, but quite discretely over the main door. Included in its products was the manufacture of prestigious business calendars, high-class stationery of course, and many other printed articles, the like and quality of which nowadays would be hard to find anywhere, if at all.

Joshua Smith, Printer to the Trade and Gentry, was firmly established in its part of the world and the fact that through merit alone, it attracted custom from many of the professions in the City and indeed beyond, this was satisfaction enough for Joshua.

In the course of time Smith's became, as did many firms in those days, a truly family one, with Joshua, no longer a lad but an older, wiser and very experienced businessman. His marriage had been richly blessed with children and his dear wife Edith, now sadly passed on, had also been his best friend and stand-fast through both the hard and benevolent times. He had, despite many an offer, remained the sole owner of his domain, and was in complete control of the whole operation, his sixty-five years having been till quite recently of no hindrance to him in running the business. Though still quite astute in trading acumen and enjoying a mental ability second to none, his aging body was beginning to prove the only enemy, but, as he had hoped, and indeed planned for, was now most ably assisted by his eldest son David, who acted as his right-hand man, and in just about every other capacity for that matter, from works-manager to chief sales representative and executive errand-boy.

For him it had not been a simple procedure in having the golden words, "& Son," included into the firm's title, as Joshua had made quite certain that he wasn't going to leave his dream and fortune to someone who did not appreciate what he was about. So David had earned the respect he was shown by both employees and his father and fitted just nicely into the position that years previously Joshua had thought out for him.

It was a close working community that existed within the Smith's building. Joshua's employees

were not simply workmates, but in the majority of cases very good friends. The working atmosphere was a direct reflection of the way old Joshua was himself, friendly, businesslike, knowledgeable but above all totally honest in his dealings with everybody. His commercial success was entirely due to his own professionalism. His relationship with the staff was based on trust but not omitting the fact that he knew personally everyone who worked for him. After having experienced that abominable time himself, whilst a young man, he was determined at the outset, that one day, should he have his own company, he would never subject his people to the torment and misery that he had endured under his uncle Zechariah, now long since dead, and a man missed and remembered by no one.

Progressively achieving his different ambitions the firm had developed quickly under his ever watchful eye. He made quite certain that it was how he wanted it to be, and not according to the dictates of those sometimes hard and difficult times, which generally had improved little since his early days in the business world. So it became as he had planned, and Joshua would have it no other way.

Further reason for his personal satisfaction in what he was doing was that he had built up the most enviable reputation through following the two most important maxims in business, those for quality and reliability. This to a tradesman, as Joshua certainly was, gave the real proof that whatever he was doing, he was undoubtedly doing it properly. This was no doubt due to the fact that he was not afraid to innovate or try out new methods of production, and whatever he undertook in his firm, it was given the benefit of the vast and varied experience of his handpicked staff, which for the most part was the product of his own personal choosing and training.

## Chapter Four: The Business

In the period of Joshua's prime, it was traditional for nearly all firms and companies of good standing, and of course those who aspired to this status, to have their business stationery printed on fine paper or card from hand-engraved steel or copper plates.

After the new stock had been printed it was possible to feel, with ones fingertips, the raised characters of the text on the paper's surface. The finished product was altogether most elegant, imparting prestige to the company image and adding class to its produce. Some stationery sported a firm's embossed emblem, or, where possible, the family coat-of-arms, this really contributed a high degree of status to the finished article. These additions were instrumental in separating the better class of clientele from the riff-raff, though no self-respecting printer would have said as much, as all clients were highly valued.

As was then fashionable, the style of text chosen was often a very superior looking script, Old English, or maybe Roman, each letter complementing its predecessor in perfection, all faultlessly created, not one indiscernible from the other in its height, angle or depth of cut. The printed image was that of professional excellence and, as was the intention, recognizable as such to the firm's clientele and business partners, for it was these who would receive their correspondence on such stationary. In this way the sender was hoping to mirror the quality of the product being offered or supplied. After all was said and done, it was just simply good business practice to impart to these important people a high degree of confidence in the goods that they were purchasing.

Surprisingly, Smith & Son, Printers to the Trade and Gentry, was in fact quite modest in projecting their own name, but this very fact would be highly regarded by many of their customers, as modesty, and in many cases strict confidentiality was demanded, even secrecy was a priority regarding aspects of some accounts, which furthermore, had to be guaranteed, but then Smith's were well known for their expertise in handling all aspects of business they undertook with the utmost discretion.

Within Joshua's firm, especially employed for the exacting work that they did, were gathered together some of Britain's finest engravers. The pride that they took in their work was unparalleled, and though all had served the arduous seven-year apprenticeship and had since spent their entire working lives at the bench, the time of learning never ended. Not in their lifetimes would they achieve the status of knowing everything there was to know about their trade, or even ever meeting anyone who did. Each time they took up their engraving tools to produce a new plate, their intention was to improve on the last piece of work that had been completed. They were continually learning and developing new skills that in turn

would better them in their profession, and just occasionally giving them that elusive and short lived pleasure of being better than rest.

The fabric of the building in which they worked was positively ancient in all respects. It was the type of place that may now be utilized as a museum, to show off displays from past industries, ones made up from articles and produce that were in daily use when Joshua himself was a mere youngster. The interior walls of the ancient workshops were paneled entirely in dark wood and was very typical of its period. Implements of steel and brass adorned the bench-tops. The basement floors were made of great flagstones in which distinct pathways could be seen. These had been worn into the surface over the years by the iron-studded soles of countless worker's boots and shoes. The slabs were now stained with oil and printer's ink, whilst floors on the upper levels were of wood, equally corrupt, and full of in-trodden metal cuttings, shavings and the like, that had fallen or had been swept from the engraver's benches and subsequently ground into the wood by the shoes of the men who had made them. In the edges and corners of the rooms, paper dust had gathered, and together with both grease and oil, it had solidified and practically become part of the building. It all contributed in creating what may be seen as a typical printing house of that age.

In the engraving room, each man had his own place at which he carried out his very precise craft, that of conjuring rows of perfect lettering into steel, brass or copper plate. They did this with tools that had in principle had hardly changed from those of the men who had cut the hieroglyphics into the very stone that was used to build the pyramids of Egypt. The idea of these tools had been handed down from this very professional ancestry, and was part and parcel of the many trade secrets being continuously passed on from master to apprentice. Many of the instruments used by the tradesmen were hardly recognizable to a layperson, but each was created, shaped, sharpened, honed and polished for its own specific purpose. This allowed the trained hand to accomplish a quality of work that, in a machine age, may seem an impossibility for humans to produce. On the technical side it should not be forgotten that because the engraved plates made by these men were to be printed from, the printing image had to be engraved in reverse, or mirrored, as it often called, a difficult concept in some ways to fully appreciate but second nature to those practiced tradesmen.

So there it was, half a dozen men and a couple of apprentices working quietly in this graphical haven, the peace disturbed only by the background rhythm of the printing presses or the clatter of iron shod horses hooves in the yard outside that was bordered on one side by an evil smelling stretch of water, along which barges chugged by, on their way to and from the River. Rats moved about the yard, brazenly

challenging Richard, the Jack Russell, whose job it was to keep the vermin out of the building, which he did most efficiently.

On warm days the small grimy windows, through which usually shone heavily filtered rays of sunlight, would be opened to let in a draught of cool, fish glue scented air and the men could then clearly hear the grinding of the iron cartwheels on the cobblestones outside. This was accompanied by all the other familiar sounds that echoed over the rooftops from the Old Ford Road. Great sweating horses pulled enormous wagons, which transported the many kinds of merchandise, including wood from the nearby sawmill, destined for the docks, or to be sold in the busy London markets, and the encouraging shouts of the drivers to the horses could be heard all day long.

This general hubbub was regularly interspersed by the rattle and screech of tormented tram wheels on iron rails that led from the busy terminus to the heart of the City to the suburbs. The harsh cry of the paperboy on the street corner selling the mid-day editions was often drowned by the sound of delivery trucks, which at that time were becoming increasingly popular, and no special attention was given to the clouds of poisonous fumes that were belched out, as they carried their loads to mercantile destinations throughout all of London and beyond.

Frequently a great commotion was caused when the normally docile horses were scared by a lorry or car backfiring, or by the driver braking so sharply that horses, wagon and driver, would go ploughing into the back of the now stationary vehicle.

Invariably on difficult days, the willpower of the men working inside Smith's was sorely tried, as the exquisite smells that emanated from the eel and pie shop on the main road floated in on the breeze. The aroma of the steaming liquor blotted out even the stronger smells of coal, wood-dust and glue, to say nothing of their own fumes coming from the printing shop below them. Never a week went by without the culinary delights of Albert's Eel Bar overcoming their resistance, if that's what it could have been called, 'forcing' them into buying at least one mid-day meal there. They were all quite positive in their declarations that there was no other in the whole of London town who you could compare with Albert's for a plate of eel pie and mash, swimming in glorious liquor. Only one of their number was unable to share this relish and that was Edward who, as a young lad, had been teased by a seafaring cousin of his who'd brought back a snake from one of his voyages to South America and Albert's eels were by far, too serpent-like to contemplate eating. Though squeamish as Edward was, he had no qualms whatsoever in conveying to his stomach countless shiny bright red saveloys, whose origins defied any kind of speculation, to say nothing of the pickles that were consumed in great quantities with them!

## Chapter Five: Joshua Calls It A Day

Early, one spring morning, the normal routine of the engraver's workroom, and indeed the whole firm of Smith and Son, was disturbed, when an announcement was made by way of a managerial memorandum, which was in itself quite an unusual occurrence, as personal contact was preferred for internal communication purposes. The message it conveyed to the departments of Smith's, was that

Mr. Joshua, or "The Governor," as he was known to all, after a bad winter had finally decided to give up his active role in the firm's daily commerce and would take his retirement.

The response from Smith's lower management to the old man's unexpected decision, was a mixture of dismay and bewilderment. For some it produced in them a high expectation of promotion, and indeed this would be the case of his own son David, who would now, earlier than expected, be stepping into his father's shoes. He admitted later that his private reaction to the news that day was that shock, verging on panic.

After a short of time, which for some employees meant exercising a little mental adjustment to the impending change of affairs, people slowly became accustomed to the idea of Joshua's departure, and in order to properly commemorate this unique occasion it emerged that Mr. David would purchase a solid gold, full hunter watch which would of course be suitably engraved, and formally presented to his father, this as a token of the combined esteem of both company and its employees. It was further decreed that a full half-day would be set aside for this memorable episode. The day of celebrations would be attended not only by all the employees of the firm and their families, but also many of the firm's more important customers would receive an invitation to be present. A modest, but suitable array of light refreshments would be provided by a nearby firm of caterers, and there would be lots of speech-making by family, friends and colleagues. Altogether it would be a grand affair, and would be made as memorable an episode as was possible, it would in turn add yet another colorful chapter to the ready glorious history of the firm.

No one who read the note begrudged the old man this amount of attention, for, as an employer, he had served them all so well over many years.

All these plans were quickly, but with typical efficiency, discussed and arranged. Wheels were set in motion that would see the hiring of a suitable venue for the function, impressive invitations for the presentation day were produced, these of course were to be engraved and printed on the firm's premises itself, and there were was an unusual buzz of excitement throughout the building, the like of which was

usually only to be seen or felt, as the Annual Christmas holidays were approaching, when the firm resembled something from a Charles Dickens novel, though here there was no Ebenezer Scrooge or Bob Cratchit to be seen!

So much had to be done and in so little time. Of course the chief problem for everyone was keeping these arrangements secret from the “Old Man,” as he openly prided himself on knowing all and everything, that ever happened inside his firm. Employees were sworn to secrecy and invited customers notified of the firm’s wish for the utmost discretion to be shown during conversations with Joshua.

## Chapter Six: The Hunter Arrives

A week before the planned presentation, the owner's son David, finely dressed, though not at all fancy, entered the firm's engraving room. All employees were, as usual, diligently working at their various positions. He strode purposefully towards the Foreman's office, on his way paying the compliments of the day to his staff, who in their various ways, according to their position, returned the same. At that juncture they were not at all curious as to know what he may have been carrying in that square package. It was neatly wrapped in brown paper and tied securely with a length of cord.

This was not at all an unusual sight for the men, as much of the firm's engraved work was similarly transported about the premises. But this was neither plate to be engraved, nor any other ordinary parcel.

That morning, Mr. David had been to the City. There, in Ludgate, he had purchased from a business acquaintance of his, the very gold watch which, in a few days' time, would become the focal point of his father's retirement celebration.

Percy, foreman of the engraving room, respectfully welcomed the frequent visitor and offered him a chair. This stood behind his old wooden writing table, which, as usual, was covered in job packets and order sheets of various kinds. A miscellany of items relating to the diverse workings of the department, were stacked in orderly confusion about the office.

After clearing a suitable space and placing the parcel on the writing pad, Mr. David untied the cord and very carefully removed a layer of brown wrapping paper. This revealed a very ordinary looking cardboard box.. Folding the paper carefully he laid it tidily to one side.

He deftly released the flap of the cardboard box that itself gave no hint as to the treasure that was concealed within. The only clue as to what might have been inside was the name of the Ludgate clockmaker's shop printed in gold across the front. Mr. David carefully raised the lid of the box and pushed it back. Revealed only then, was the top of a most splendid wooden box. This, in itself, was a pleasure to behold. Fashioned in walnut and decorated with ebony veneers, it was further adorned and protected with inset brass corner-plates. Set into the edges of the box, on all sides, was a thin strip of brass. It had a lockable lid, which was affixed to the main body by finely made hinges of brass and steel. It truly was a most handsome object and altogether very worthy of performing its role in protecting the valuable contents which it held.

The men, and boys, in the workshop, had since noticed the box and had furtively stopped their

labors, their eyes no longer looking through magnifying lenses, but now directed toward the office. It was becoming obvious to them that here was really something special going on, but what?

The gentleman extracted from the left pocket of his waistcoat a square piece of brown card, from which, by means of a short length of string, hung two small, intricate steel keys. He inserted one of them into the inset brass keyhole of the box and proceeded to turn it. The action of the lock was smooth and silent but finished by making a solid sounding click, thereby releasing the lid, which allowed him to raise it. A square, purple velvet covered panel, was lifted by means of a golden tassel, and inside the lid could now be seen a brass plate which carried the name of the manufacturer.

The metal seemed to glow in the light of the single electric bulb that illuminated the office. Mr. David appeared to open the box as if he were unearthing the burial chamber of an ancient pharaoh, and the treasure, lying under the panel, could well have been worthy of being in such a place for there, nestling in the protection of the lined box, glinting in the mellow light, was the solid gold, full hunter watch and chain.

The timepiece was of such exquisiteness that it would undoubtedly give any modern-day antiquarian palpitations at the thought of being able to handle an article of this fineness. Its quality was absolutely incomparable, the embossed golden watchcase, exhibiting a degree of craftsmanship surpassed only by yet another wonder, the movement of the watch itself, which even though housed inside the inner case, its ticking could, in the deathly silence that now filled the room, be heard by all the men.

The magnificent pocket-watch was almost reverently removed from its wood, brass, and velvet sanctuary. It was laid gently upon the tabletop over which Percy had quickly spread a soft green polishing cloth. Mr. David removed the sturdy gold chain by depressing the clasp and slipping it from the heavy looking ring which in turn framed the winding knob of the watch. He laid the chain to one side following which he operated a release mechanism in the rim and the outer case. It sprung open revealing the gleaming gold inner shell. This was completely dissimilar in appearance, as it bore no adornment, its function simply to protect from moisture, dust and the elements the crystal face and inner workings of the watch.

Raising the lid of this inner case the two men finally studied the watch itself. They conversed knowledgably, in subdued voices, about the various aspects of style and manufacturing techniques employed in producing the outer case, the watch face and the intricate chain driven mechanism.

The virtual silence was suddenly broken as if by a thunderclap when the watch sounded the hour. Westminster chimes rang forth accompanied by the gasps of astonishment uttered by all whom where in

earshot of the timepiece.

After the melody had ended Mr. David reached into the right-hand pocket of his waistcoat and produced a piece of notepaper. Unfolding it, he spread it flat on a space next to the watch. Upon the paper, neatly penned, writing could be seen. This too was similarly studied and discussed in great detail, Mr. David clearly paying great attention to the foreman's points of view, as Percy's professionalism was highly respected and valued in all aspects of the firm's business.

The men in the main room were now straining their ears in order to hear what was being said.

Each one of them secretly with the same thought in his mind but not wishing to tempt providence by disclosing his innermost wishes, not even to his closest friends.

After about a quarter of an hour had passed both men came out of the office and made their way to a particular corner of the workshop where an elderly gent was now working. This was Benjamin, a journeyman who's age it was impossible to ascertain, but by all accounts appeared to have been installed shortly after the firm had been founded and had been there ever since. Benjamin, or Mr. Ben as he was respectfully known, was a craftsman of the old school, whose work had been admired by the gentry and even royalty of many countries over more years than anyone would care to contemplate. Evidence of his skills could be marveled at in many of the world's great museums and archives. Little did Ben know, that after all this time, fate had a surprise in store for him that would cause him grief of a magnitude that would easily have destroyed anyone of lesser character than he.

## Chapter Seven: The Deed Is Done!

Joshua's son David, and engraving room foreman Percy, were now standing next to Ben, who, although appearing to be busy at his bench, was fully aware of all that had transpired in the office during the past half an hour. Despite his age, and even after years at his trade, he still experienced a boyish thrill when it became apparent why he had been approached the two gents. The other men in the room realized also, and looks of disappointment could be seen on all their faces. But being professionals they all understood why they had not been chosen to engrave the presentation message on the Hunter's case. This was a privilege that belonged exclusively to their workmate who was respected by all, not only for his conscientiousness and loyalty, nor either simply for his ability as a craftsman but more so for the type of man he was, patient, tolerant and displaying no false airs or assertions that one may witness in the manner of masters in other trades or professions.

Following a short conversation, which ended in smiles and handshakes all-round the room, the fine gentleman departed, leaving Ben in possession of the wooden box, the hunter, the chain, and of course, equally as important, the piece of paper. His workmates and the apprentices quickly gathered round to ogle at the watch and to congratulate Ben on having the honor of being given this particular job.

Percy, after encouraging the other men to return to their workplaces, explained to Ben that he was to put aside what he had been doing that morning and henceforth should busy himself with the job of engraving the presentation message into the gleaming concave gold surface of the inner watchcase.

It was not necessary at all for Jack to emphasize the importance of this commission, and left Ben in the confidence that he would duly receive the watch, engraved and ready for the great day.

Ben picked up the piece of paper and read through the handwritten wording several times. Then before doing anything else he checked that nothing obvious had been omitted from the presentation text and that everything was grammatically correct. It always amazed him how often simple mistakes were made by those giving an order. Luckily, through systematic checking of the order form and customer's slip, he had not yet fallen into the trap of discovering a fault after the engraving work was complete. This was the horror of all horrors for any engraver, irrespective of his abilities. Even while reading the paper Ben was already working out in his head how the text would best fit into the space available. For Ben, and craftsmen like him, this procedure was all part of the trade at which they had been masters for many years now.

Swiftly making a couple of rough sketches, he satisfied himself that the finished image would

appear properly balanced within the rounding of the inner watchcase, the overall impression conforming to the dimensions of the watch's so that it did not seem clumsy in appearance when being read.

When all these criteria were fulfilled he set to work by firstly removing the watch's gold inner case from its hinge by withdrawing the steel fastening pin. This he did by using one of many special pairs of pliers that he had for such operations.

Placing the now separated timepiece into its box for safekeeping, Ben selected a small sized block of hardwood, of which he had many variously shaped pieces under his bench, and placed it in front of him. His job now was to firmly affix the gold watchcase to the wood by means of an incredibly sticky substance which, when heated over a flame, softened, and enabled him to hold the delicate article firmly in place during the engraving process. After the heating and positioning Ben then submerged the block, with the now positioned piece of gold into a bucket of cold water. This re- solidified the black pitch, which in turn firmly held the metal to the wood, and so it would remain, unmovable, until Ben had finished his work.

With an old towel, Ben dried off the block of wood and saw that the gold and wood were now as one.

Placing the work piece in front of him, on top of his well-worn engraver's bench, his rotund tummy fitting exactly into the recessed shape of the front edge of the bench, Ben wedged the work piece firmly to the surface and, when he was sure that it was suitably secured, he adjusted his light and began to measure off equidistant points onto the flawless metal surface. To do this he used an engraver's gauge, which was made of thin spring steel and shaped rather like a pen. Delicately, and with great precision combined with similar deliberation to a surgeon's hand Ben used the same set of gauges to rule out a series of parallel lines into the surface these would later carry the finely engraved lettering. Now using a second tool, which resembled an adjustable T - square, he marked off the oblique lines that would determine the angle of the text.

With the confidence that only years of practice can bring, the old man took once again the hardened steel point and deftly inscribed the characters of the text into the gold surface, not complete letters, as when one writes, but just guidelines. The skeletal shapes formed on the metal as if by magic, appearing perfect in size and inclination, and when all was completed he adjusted once more the large magnifying glass that rested at the end of a metal arm that swung round in front of him and began the painstaking work of engraving into the soft yellow metal.

Letter for letter, the wording of the presentation message was slowly revealed. Ben's left hand moved the wooden block in a rhythmic fashion on the shiny surface of a large leather sandbag upon which

the work piece was supported. He turned the bright metal into the point of the tempered steel graver, which was held securely in the strong grip of his right hand. Uprights appeared which were later joined together by finely angled lines. With the t's crossed and the i's dotted, fine decorative swirls and curls were added to enhance the appearance of the characters. It was perfect motion as Ben gradually removed the gold allowing the once hidden letters to project their message.

## Chapter Eight: Tragedy Strikes At Smith's

Some three hours had passed since Ben had started working on the watch. During this time the quietness of the workshop remained completely undisturbed, apart from the sounds of quiet talking and the usual noises of the work being carried out. It remained like this until about the middle of the afternoon when this industrious calm was suddenly, as never before, desecrated by a long tormented groan, describing an agony that was usually heard only at the approach of death in some terrifying shape, form, or circumstance.

All heads turned simultaneously and stared in the direction from where this awful sound had come. It was to Ben's corner of the room that they all gazed. The astonished eyes of the men were focused in time to see Ben throwing all his tools into the black leather bag in which he carried them to work every day. He stood up abruptly, jammed on an old homburg hat, grabbed his raincoat from its hook and left the room in anguished haste, all without uttering a single word, only that single soul-rending cry!

A total silence reigned in the workshop for what seemed like hours. The apprentice, Tom, was called by Percy to his office. After a couple of words the lad jumped up and hurried off in the direction of the yard entrance to see if Ben was still to be seen, but he was gone, completely disappeared in the hubbub of the afternoon East End traffic.

Back in the works meanwhile, astonishment was now turning to questions and the answers to these would soon enough reveal the awfulness of the situation.

Jack went quickly over to Ben's bench, to see if any clue was to be gleaned that might explain the irrational behavior of their old colleague. He surveyed where Ben had been sitting and there, at a glance, all was made agonizingly clear. Lying where Ben had left them not a couple of minutes before was the box, the hunter, and of course, on its wooden block, was the gold watchcase, which was now fully engraved.

Now, had this been a normal item of the firm's work, all would have been perfect and everyone exceedingly happy. The lettering was incomparably beautiful, cut into the gold with such skill that is only gained after a lifetime of dedicated practice. The freshly cut facets of the decoration around the lettering gleamed in the lamplight. The symmetry of the text was faultless; it was in fact as perfect as it could possibly be. Despite all of this there was one awful discovery that Percy made, it had all been engraved... backwards!

Old Ben had made one of the most feared for mistakes in any engravers life, that being the irreversible ruination of a customer's property, a crime that offended all the principles cherished by

craftsmen of any profession. That anguished groan had come from Ben's very soul as he realized what he had done.

Day after day for the past week he had been engraving the plates from which university diplomas would be printed. Line after line of text describing scholastic merit and achievement, every stroke of

Ben's hand perfection, every letter... backwards, and now through habit he had done exactly the same on the watchcase!

But what was he to do? His inner confusion and shame forced him away from the scene of this heinous deed, he felt as if his whole life was in ruin.

## Chapter Nine: The Hunt Is On!

Total consternation filled the workshop, concern being voiced equally for Ben's well-being as also to the repair of the hunter. Sydney, who was Ben's longest serving workmate, apart from Joshua of course, was positive that no harm would come to him, despite his anguish, and he was sure that he would eventually return, possibly on the following day at normal starting time. Though Percy was somewhat doubtful about this notion he agreed that nothing needed to be done for it intensified the tragedy of the watchcase even more.

The following day arrived, but Ben didn't, and painfully the hours dragged by and still there was no sign of their colleague returning. At midday the foreman decided to send out Tom, the oldest apprentice, in the hope of discovering Ben's whereabouts.

Tom was a good lad and knew just about every corner of every building in this part of London.

Because he lived in at the firm he was well known to all the local business people, tradesmen and even private residents in the neighborhood, and if anyone could find old Ben it was sure to be him.

Acting upon Percy's instructions he disappeared hurriedly into the smoky streets and lanes of an east London afternoon, on an errand this time unlike any other he had so far performed for his employer, that being to find the errant Benjamin.

Sydney told Percy that if Tom's search this afternoon was in vain then he would visit Ben's house that evening to talk the old man into coming back to work. He had no idea how he would do it but Ben was after all his oldest friend and he must do something.

Upon hearing the news regarding Ben, Mr. David had been understandably most concerned, he did not overreact, but went directly about making positive moves to remedy the sorry situation. His father, unbeknown to him, had been in the adjoining office when the devastating news had been related to his son. He had heard all regarding the watch and of course Ben's sudden disappearance, which disturbed him most deeply. As his son was about to depart with the intention of getting things put to rights at his watchmaker friend's, by having a replacement case made, the old man stepped forward and stopped David in his tracks, "David," he said gently, "Stop what you were about to do and wait to see if Tom has any luck this afternoon, and if he doesn't return with good news then send him directly to me, in my office."

David stood in front of his father, amazed to think that the old man already knew everything about the affair, although in his heart he knew that he shouldn't have been surprised as this was his father, from whom he had never been able to keep anything since he was a boy. He agreed to his father's suggestion

and went about his usual business, worried of course, but now at least with the reassuring knowledge that his father's hand was still firmly at the helm.

Later that afternoon, shortly before five, Tom reappeared but without any good news to offer. No one he knew had seen old Ben since his having disappeared, and even though Tom had visited all of the old man's usual haunts, the cafés and tearooms, the public houses, stations and libraries of East London, it was all to no avail. It appeared as though Mephistopheles himself had recalled one of his disciples into the bottomless pit. This definitely was how Ben felt and saw himself now!

## Chapter Ten: Joshua Takes A Hand

Tom, as requested, was instructed to go upstairs, straight away, to the governor's office, a place he had visited only once before, when his father had taken him there to sign his apprenticeship indentures before starting work at the firm. This was five years ago but Tom felt just as nervous now as he had done then. Into the hallowed regions he went. The atmosphere of calmness struck him.

There existed here such a contrast to the commotion that he had just left in the London streets and the factory workrooms, it was, he thought, as though he was entering another world. It hadn't changed at all since he came at the age of thirteen to be placed into the service of the man he was now about to see.

The heavy perfume of lavender and beeswax wood-polish permeated the long, wood paneled corridor leading past a line of office doors, from which no sound came, and on, to the marble-floored entrance hall. Through the crystal glass windows, framed in the firm's front door, a shaft of afternoon sunlight illuminated the millions of ever-present particles of paper dust, which hung motionless in the still, scented air.

On his way Tom nodded courteously in the direction of a middle-aged lady who occupied the reception office desk, just as she had done five years earlier, as he and his father had sat nervously in the hall waiting for his interview. And then, turning left, Tom went up the wide, wood paneled staircase to where the Governor had his suite. Ascending the carpeted stairs he noticed again the old sepia tint photographs, rows of impressive looking certificates and diplomas that adorned the dark walls. These were the mementos of the many proud moments in the firm's history. On the wall opposite the top of the staircase was hung a portrait in oils of Joshua himself. This had been presented to him at the time of his fiftieth birthday, long before Tom had been born. Seeing it, restored Tom's confidence, as Joshua was more like a second father to him than an employer, though neither of them would have admitted it. With his fingertips he quickly combed his tousled hair and deftly polished the toes of his boots on the back of his trouser-legs.

Standing outside the heavy door of the Governor's office, he caught his breath for a moment before going in, thinking of how best to relate his story to Joshua. In front of him now, at eye-level, was an impressive brass plate that bore his employer's name. Tom respectfully knocked on the polished wood. It made a loud hollow sound, which echoed, down the silent corridor behind him. A disembodied voice from inside the office invited him to enter.

Turning the large brass doorknob Tom pushed open the door a little and nervously entered. He saw exactly the same view that he had seen five years ago. Nothing noticeable had changed in the slightest, except that was for the copy of the Times newspaper, which now a different date on the front page.

His eyes were attracted across the carpeted floor to the other side of the room, where he could see the silhouette of Joshua who had turned in his chair and was looking out over the evening aspect of the London skyline.

From here the Thames was just visible and the distant funnels of huge cargo ships tied up in the royal dockyards were lazily pushing up long plumes of wispy smoke from their restless boilers while they waited to be loaded up and then to cast off for some far-flung foreign part of the world that Tom had never even heard of. Tugs and barges pushed the heavy waters of the river from under their bows as they transported a multitude of cargoes away from the grimy wharves of London to the equally grimy wharves of another waterside town somewhere on a river or canal in England's heartland.

Joshua was sitting behind an enormous magnificent mahogany table upon which were neatly arranged the few utensils he needed for running his firm. The old man turned in his chair to see Tom coming into the office and rose to greet him, at the same time indicating that he should sit down on the opposite side of the desk. Tom nodded as he touched his forelock and obediently slid into the large soft leather seat, sitting upright as his father had told him to the last time he had been there and sat in that very same chair.

The quietness was broken only by the regular sound of an ancient grandfather clock, which stood majestically halfway along the sidewall of the room. Two enormous aspidistra plants, whose dark green leaves seemed to fill the rest of the wall space, appeared to be standing on guard, flanked the clock in dutiful silence.

Joshua eased himself forward in his comfortable, high-backed leather throne, reached over the top of the desk and took the earpiece from the hook of an upright telephone, which stood erect like an exotic black bird in front of him. A metallic sounding voice answered his call and Joshua ordered tea and cakes for two. He smiled genially in Tom's direction and replaced the earpiece back to its hook after which he enquired of Tom how his search for Ben had progressed thus far.

Reassured, this time by the old man's gentle voice, Tom explained in detail where he had looked so far and with whom he had spoken in his quest, and though he desperately wished otherwise no one he met had seen neither hide nor hair of Ben. Tom then ventured to add that even though he'd had no luck

he was not discouraged, and told Joshua that he would try again that evening after work, as there were still many places where the old gent could be. The old man was pleased to hear this as it fitted in ideally with his own plan and said,

“Tom, now listen carefully to what I have to tell you.”

Just as he was about to continue there was a knock at the door and the middle-aged lady entered, carrying a silver tray. On the tray was a sight that Tom had only seen before in the local confectioner’s shop window. French fancies, cream horns and Chelsea buns were arranged on a china plate.

Joshua asked Tom if he would care to choose something from the plate. Meanwhile the lady busied herself by pouring freshly made tea into two, most elegant bone china cups. Tom, not noticing the silver tongs put there for the purpose, used his fingers and picked up a cream horn and put it on the plate that the lady had placed before him. Joshua took a Chelsea bun, also with his fingers, so as not to embarrass the boy.

When they were both served the lady asked if that would be all, and understanding it to be so, took her leave, closing the door silently behind her. Joshua offered the sugar lumps to Tom who took two and dropped them into his tea. He accepted the old man’s invitation and served himself with milk from an ornate silver milk jug. Joshua took a sip of his tea, bent forward, looked at Tom and said in a relaxed voice,

“That’s better, now we can get down to business, enjoy your cake Tom, while you listen to what I have to say regarding finding Mr. Ben.”

At this Tom leant nearer to the desk to hear Joshua’s every word, their heads nearly meeting as the old man began to speak.

Joshua spoke and Tom listened attentively, doing his best to eat, drink and attend to what was being said all at the same time, which was difficult for someone not accustomed to such refinement or surroundings such as these.

Their conversation finally ended, during which time Joshua had revealed to Tom what his carefully considered plan of action was regarding the search for Ben. Joshua reached into a drawer and took from it a sealed envelope. Tom saw directly that it was company stationary Joshua had used and that it was addressed to Mr. Benjamin Green, Joshua said to Tom, “Take this letter that I have written with you, and when you find Mr. Ben tell him that I have sent it, and that I want an answer from him as soon as is convenient.”

The old man spoke in a way that put confidence into Tom and inspired him to take new initiative in his search, and he felt as though he knew for certain that old Ben would be at the end of his trail.

Tom took the letter and placed it carefully into the inside pocket of his worn jacket. The two stood up and Joshua thanked Tom for what he had done so far, patting him upon the shoulder as he did so.

He wished him good luck in his mission, secretly wishing that he himself could also take to the streets and join in the hunt, but his advancing years and the cool evening air demanded that he stay put and patiently wait.

Tom, after getting up, replaced his chair under the table and eager now to get away but still remembering his manners, thanked Joshua for the tea and cakes, then, as he walked backwards towards the office door, Joshua indicated a shilling piece that was on a small table by the door saying,

“Take that to get yourself a drink and a hot meal later.”

Respectfully Tom said thank you, turned and made a hasty exit from the room.

Quickly retracing his steps back to the works he related the gist of the conversation with the Governor to Percy, who was of course also eager to learn more regarding the hunt for his old mate Ben.

Meanwhile, back upstairs, Joshua, confident as only he could be that soon everything in his firm would soon be restored to how it was, crossed over to the coat-stand that stood by the office door, took a white, tasseled scarf from its topmost hook and wrapped it securely round his neck. A heavy black coat followed, one that would have kept the cold of a Siberian winter away from his old bones and after buttoning it put a handsome looking Homburg on his head. Finishing the ensemble with a pair of wool-lined, black leather gloves he was now ready to venture out into the chilly evening air.

Checking his reflection in a long mirror that stood next to the coat-stand, he saw that his appearance was not wanting in any way. He paused for a moment and smiled to himself, then picking up his well-worn briefcase and broom he glanced about the office. Reassured that everything was in order he left the room, and following Tom's trail, made his way downstairs, and where Tom had turned right for the works entrance in the downstairs' hall, Joshua turned left. He inclined his head to the right and raised his hat to bid a courteous farewell to the middle-aged lady, she smiled as he walked across the foyer and finally through the varnished wooden frame of Smith's front door. He emerged from the building and stepped out on to the busy high road. A paperboy seeing Joshua, nipped over from his stand and offered him a folded copy of his usual evening paper. Joshua took it and in return gave a coin to the lad, who smartly touched his forelock and went off, calling out the day's headlines to others who were hurrying by on their way home.

There at the roadside, as on every evening at that time, a black cab was waiting to take Joshua home and, as he climbed into the vehicle, just caught sight of Tom as he disappeared eastwards in the

direction of the docks. Smiling once more to himself he sank back into the soft worn leather of the cab's seat and opened his paper.

## Chapter Eleven: Tom Follows The Trail

It was starting to get quite dark by now, and Tom, as he was going in that direction anyway, decided to drop into his mum's house for a cup of tea. This he thought would warm him up a bit on what might turn out to be a long search. He knew she would have just made a fresh pot as she did every day at that time, "Part of my service," she said, "to welcome the lodgers back home after work."

His mum lived nearly a mile away from the firm and she earned a living by taking in lodgers, usually laborers from the docks. Since Tom's dad had been gassed in the war he wasn't able to work anymore and the money she earned together with a small pension he received kept them relatively comfortable.

Tom grinned as he frightened the life out of them both with his tale of what he was about, and when he'd emptied his cup he put his cap and jacket and scarf back on, said goodbye as he made his way swiftly back to the very familiar streets of east London. His mum called out after him to be careful. Tom turned, gave her a wave, and vanished round the corner, expertly dodging the home-coming pedestrians.

The main road would stay busy for at least another hour with all manner of people striding it out or sitting on busses and trams. The pavement echoed to the sound of their hobnails and was accompanied by the harsh clatter of wooden roller blinds being lowered by the shopkeepers as they shut up for the night. The lamplighter was making his way slowly along the high street. On his shoulder he carried a long pole at the end of which was fixed a metal hook. This he deftly used to pull down on the chain that hung from the bottom of the lamp. This would turn on the gas supply to the burner and with a hiss and splutter the pilot light lit the mantles which cast first a yellowish glow, then after warming up threw a brilliant white light across the cobbles on the road below. In the road, boys were leading pairs of tired horses to nearby stables at the end of their day's work. Sparks flew brightly from their iron shoes as they hit the cobblestones a sign that nighttime was falling fast on the city.

Tom had a determined look on his face whilst following the instructions that Joshua had given him.

As he walked and half ran along the uneven pavements, the roads turned to streets, streets to lanes and finally into alleyways and paths. Here the only light to be seen was the occasional gas lamp illuminating a patch where two ways met, or the glow coming from lamps in the hallways of hundreds of terraced houses. The smell of evening meals being cooked seeped through letterboxes and occasionally Tom heard a wireless set from which came the crackly sounds of a dance-band.

City cats were waking up, stretching, and generally getting ready to chase rats and mice who over day inhabited the basements and sewers, but which at night came out to join in the great fight for survival

that took place after dark in all parts of the city. It was a contest that went unheeded by most people except at night by those who were forced to make their home under the stars.

As Tom made his way he occasionally heard the loud 'plop' of a rat as it sprang from one side of a canal to swim through the oily waters to the opposite bank. Where they now swam may once have been a proud river but who's only purpose now was to accept the refuse from the markets and surrounding houses then sluggishly transport it in the general direction of the Thames. Despite the dreariness of what he saw Tom thought himself very lucky, as that evening the air was quite clear and his way was not made more difficult by one of those thick choking fogs, which all too often shrouded the city at that time of year. Had it been such an evening Tom would not have been able to see where to put his next footstep let alone find his way to the unknown destination, which Joshua had earlier described to him.

Halfway down a long street that led to one of London's once famous docks, Tom found the alley he was looking for. Between the houses at the end of it he noticed some short distance further the ghostly shape of an enormous freighter, as it edged out into the mainstream of the Thames. The river would carry it first through Woolwich then Greenwich, steaming past Dartford, and finally out into the estuary and then on to who knows where? Bright, bare electric light bulbs casting stark shadows lighted its decks, and the mist glowed as swirled across the superstructure. This gave it a very eerie appearance, making it look quite unnatural as it drifted silently along what in any other neighborhood would have simply been another road.

Tom watched, completely entranced, until the ship disappeared into the mist that was now forming on the river as the temperature began to fall and with thoughts of foreign lands in his inquisitive head he turned off into a lane to which Joshua had earlier directed him.

## Chapter Twelve: Joshua Guesses Right

Tom was now in an area of dockland that he was not at all familiar with, and doubts were creeping into his mind as to whether this really could be a place where he might find Mr. Ben. A short way further down the lane and his trust in what Joshua had told him were fully restored when he saw the dimly lit sign of the pubic house he'd been told to find.

The gaslights inside lit up the dusty, stained-glass windows of the pub, and Tom saw the shapes of people moving about the bar. Gruff voices and loud laughter could be heard but Tom was used to this and it didn't put him off from going in.

Entering through the half-glazed doors, which had the pub's name etched into them, Tom, unobtrusively as possible, made his way across the smoky room towards the bar. Despite his attempt to remain unseen, all eyes were upon him, which even him feel just a little uncomfortable. In the shadowy booths that lay left and right of the grubby strip of carpet leading towards the fireplace, Tom noticed more of the customers, some raising a jug of beer, and others simply relaxing and chatting before eventually making their way home.

Behind the bar the balding, middle-aged publican was standing, leisurely pulling a pint of mild from a brass tap in front of him. Tom could hear him, quietly puffing a tune through his moustache as he worked. Smiling proudly at the sight, he placed the foaming pint in front of the waiting customer and with a nod, took the coppers offered, he then turned to ring up the sale on a huge black and brass cash register that stood majestically on the counter behind him. He wore a clean but collarless white shirt under which a stomach, the shape and size of a well inflated football was tucked away, and as he pushed down on the keys, the drawer of the register sprung open and hit the football with a thump. He cast the money into the till, and with a well-practiced movement used his tummy to push the drawer back in.

As he gingerly approached the bar Tom was asked by the landlord, who turned out to be a friendly sort, what he wanted.

"I've been sent 'ere to look for Mr. Benjamin, 'ave yer seen 'im at all?" Tom enquired.

"Oh"! exclaimed the publican, obviously delighted and relieved at hearing this request, "I'm so glad to hear that, he's been sitting there for some time now, yesterday evening as well, and to tell you the truth I was getting a bit concerned. All he does is keep mumbling something about a watch. Has he lost one perhaps, or had one nicked?"

"No it's not that"" replied Tom, "but I've got a letter 'ere for 'im and it's very important." "Over

there then lad, behind the fire screen.”

The publican pointed toward the far end of the bar where Tom recognized a pair of boots he saw, poking out from behind a rickety looking wood and bamboo construction. Tom ventured down the room, past a few guests, the sound of his hobnailed boots now muffled by the sawdust on the smooth wooden floor.

“Hallo Tom lad,” said the boots with a tired voice. Tom stuck his head round the edge of the screen to see Ben, slumped in a chair, unshaven, disheveled and looking easily twenty years older than he did a couple of days ago.

“Sit down lad,” Ben told him, “I heard you come in.”

Tom did just that, pleased to have found Ben so easily, but glad to get the weight off of his aching feet, which that day had carried him not a few miles.

On Tom’s face was the look of disbelief. He’d never seen Ben, or anyone else for that matter, looking like this before, apart that was from the down and outs who, together with those who had a right to be there, occupied the graveyard near to Smiths. He noticed on the small round table next to the fireplace Ben’s two glasses. He knew from his experience of the Firm’s outing that Ben’s favorite tipple was a jug of dark ale followed by a tot of Caribbean rum. “Made him feel like a king.” he’d said, and after a few of them he turned into the King’s jester and was the life and soul of the party until he fell asleep and became human again.

But what Tom saw this time was a completely different Ben. The drink now had had quite the opposite effect and Ben really looked as if he were on his last legs.

“How did you find me lad?” asked Ben, “The governor told me ‘ow to get ‘ere,” answered Tom, “That figures,” said Ben, “me and him used to drop in now and then when we were delivering to the customers round here, but fancy him guessing like that, that I’d be here of all places.”

Suddenly, from nowhere, and without warning, appeared the most enormous lady. She confronted Ben and Tom square on. She was dressed in the familiar uniform of the Salvation Army. Her bonnet perched almost threateningly on her head. It was made even more predominant by a bundle of steely-grey hair that was pushed up underneath it.

Cold as ice, she glared at Ben through her steel framed spectacles. She had seen straight away the two half empty glasses on the table, and needed no more evidence than that to know what he was up to. Now bending down over Ben, which put him into total eclipse, she admonished him with such severity, not only for drinking himself, but for openly enticing and encouraging a young person into that satanic

pastime. Drinking the demonic liquid, as she called it, was bad enough but to set such an example to a mere child was the Devil's work itself. He should be thoroughly ashamed of himself.

Things were looking bad for them both, and there was no support at all from the landlord, who perhaps from past experience knew better than to interfere.

Ben, already in pretty poor shape, was mown down by this onslaught of verbal flagellation, and after groping within his trouser pocket, meekly proffered a penny coin, in exchange for a copy of the "War Cry," a bundle of which the major had tucked under her ample arm, this in the hope that she would take note of his regret and go away.

This wasn't to be! She had presupposed Ben's intention and had trust a copy of that often bought but much less read publication under his nose.

"Read it, you shameful man, and keep your miserable penny," she commanded, "Every word of it mind, and you young man"! She glared in Tom's direction. Tom winced and shrunk even deeper into his chair.

"You should be at home, and not in the company of such a living disgrace as this," she pointed a very dangerous looking digit in Ben's direction. He was now looking even more withered than before. The tone of her voice crushed any thought that Tom had of trying to explain the situation.

"I shall be here again shortly, and may the Lord be with you if there is anything stronger than lemonade on that table the next time"!

The two spiritually mutilated fellows both breathed a sigh of relief as she left them, heading full tilt for the next poor soul who was just minding his own business, or foolishly not having had the wisdom or physical agility, to vacate the premises immediately upon her arrival. In departing from their company she caused the kind of draught that one usually associates with an electric train as it emerges from a tunnel!

Ben shuddered, while Tom needed to relieve himself! This confrontation though, had had one positive effect, it had brought Ben out of his state of melancholy and he was now sitting more upright than before, more through shock than from anything else. Also coming round from this ordeal was Tom. Remembering now his orders, he fumbled through the inside of his jacket and pulled out the now well-crumpled envelope that he was instructed to pass on to Ben.

"Ere you are Mr. Ben, 'ere's a letter from the Guvn'r that I'm to give yer."

"I suppose it's my notice," remarked Ben, as he took the envelope from Tom.

"I'll bet there's a right to do back at the firm just now, what with the retirement presentation coming soon and all that."

Tom told Ben that it was quite the opposite, with no great upset or commotion, except that everyone was worried where he was.

In the office earlier that day, Joshua had told Tom that he must not alarm Ben in any way, so Tom told him how it was, that everything was being looked after and there was nothing to worry about. Sydney was taking care of Ben's cat and would be making sure that his house was alright. "Good old Sydney," muttered Ben.

Tom then told Ben of how he'd been sent looking for him since he disappeared, and about all the people who he'd met on the way. Tom hoped that this might take Ben's mind off his troubles and cheer him up a bit. This news only made the old chap start groaning again and he apologized to Tom for all the bother he'd caused him, and to the others back at the firm. Tom realized his mistake and told Ben to open the letter and he promptly disappeared in the direction of the back door and the toilet.

Ben took the letter out of its envelope with the intention of reading what his employer and old friend had written. Ben's attention though was grasped directly by seeing once again the firm's stationary, as it was he, who had engraved the very plate used for printing it.

"Shan't be doing any more of that ", he thought regretfully to himself.

Nearly not daring to look any further, he nevertheless read what Joshua had written in his finest hand, and as he read, a tear ran down his wrinkled old face.

## Chapter Thirteen: Heading For Home

Tom, now feeling much better, returned, and sitting there in silence for a moment or two wondered if he should say anything or not, wisely he decided not to, then suddenly Ben stood up. He appeared to be much relieved after having read the letter and said, "Come on then Tom lad, let's get you back home, before the Major comes back."

Nothing that anyone might say could have inspired Tom more positively to move, than this threat of the Major's return. He was most certainly in no need of any such salvation as she had to offer at the present time!

The two colleagues, their ages separated by nearly fifty years went arm in arm through the same somber streets through which Tom had hurried through earlier that evening.

Once on the main road Benjamin bundled Tom into the smoky interior of a westbound bus. The 677 had conveniently ground to a halt, to drop off a group of ladies as they made their way home after finishing their evening cleaning work at some dockland offices. They bustled off in different directions, chatting and giggling, not noticing Ben and Tom as they climbed aboard.

Having sat down the two then jolted and swayed their along the streets, leaving the now slumbering Limehouse to finish off the night, but without their company.

The conductor clipped two tickets, which Ben paid for, and through a hole, that Tom had cleared in the condensation that covered window, they sat back and watched Burdett Street float by, lit by the glow of light cast from the bus as it pounded the cobbles of the now nearly empty highway. A few shadowy figures walked past the shuttered windows, turning off down narrow side streets to where their families were waiting for them to join in the evening meal.

Despite the rigors of the ride Tom soon fell asleep, and when they arrived at their destination Ben gave him a poke to wake him up. Together they alighted, not far from the front door of Smith and Son. Ben made sure that Tom got back safely inside and said goodnight. He made his own way now to catch a tram that would take him off to where he lived, somewhere deep in suburban east London. Arriving back at the firm, Tom, as usual, quickly did his evening round of the factory before going to a room at the end of the paper store, where he and another lad called Fred lived. Joshua had arranged this accommodation so as to help both the lad's families that had come into difficulties after the war. This situation might seem strange today but for Joshua, when he was an apprentice, it was quite the usual thing, and many boys and apprentices lived on the premises whilst serving their time, in fact one of the conditions in his indentures

was that he should receive fresh straw once a week to sleep on!

Tom got himself a bite to eat from the store cupboard and made two cups of hot cocoa on the gas ring. While he was doing this he told Fred of his evening's experiences. Fred sat open-mouthed whilst listening to Tom's very colorful account of his travels, and what happened with the Major. Back in Limehouse, in the pub where Tom had found Ben, the publican was busy doing his last rounds as well, collecting up the empty glasses and throwing the contents of the ashtrays into the fireplace, wiping spilt beer from the tables and clearing some abandoned copies of the 'War Cry', until suddenly, something on the floor by the fireplace caught his eye. There, lying in the sawdust under the table where Ben had been sitting, he found a letter that had fallen to the floor.

He very nearly just tossed it into the hearth, where the embers were still glowing warmly. At the last moment though, observing the quality of the notepaper he decided to open it and see to whom it might have belonged, just in case it was important. Directly his eyes made contact with the writing a look of puzzlement came across his face as he tried to read it. He sat down under a lamp, put his damp cloth over his shoulder and slowly deciphered what was written. He read....

"Benjamin, my dear old friend. I would be most honored, and truly delighted, if you will share my day with me tomorrow, and please know now that you have nothing to fear from me or any other. Be assured also that I would have my watch engraved in no other way than how I taught you myself all those years ago, not far probably from where you are sitting right now, in that seat by the fire."

The letter was signed simply, "Joshua."

"Ere Flo," the landlord called to his wife, "Come and look at this. How many people do you know round 'ere what writes 'is letters backwards?"