

Jack And...

By Derek G Rogers

The green numbers of the digital clock on the dashboard said two minutes past one. Time, I thought, to knock off, have a cup of tea and get something to eat. I never thought I would ever want to eat at that time in the morning but after six months on the night relief I had got used to it.

I turned the car off the A13 into the lay-by where Guido's battered but spotlessly clean all-night diner stood. Guido had inherited the diner from his father who had been there since the end of WWII. He was a good cook and well known to lorry drivers that used the road to and from Tilbury Docks. Not much happened in that area that Guido didn't hear about one way or another. Which is why I made a point of dropping in there a couple of times a week. Len, my partner, had been dozing but feeling the car come to a halt opened his eyes and said. "Wonder what's on the menu tonight." He said that every time we pulled in there and since the menu was always the same, I couldn't even raise a smile at his joke anymore.

We walked over to the counter, turning up the collars of our jacket as we went, the wind that blows in off the Thames at night is cold even in summer and in our plain clothes we missed those heavy jackets with the high collars. I nodded to Guido and said. "Morning!" He returned the greeting in a heavily accentuated Italian accent adding "Anda wota can I do for you and your frenda this morning, Signore."

"Two teas and a couple of ham brevilles."

"Si, Signore subito."

I caught Len's eye. "I wonder if he really does speak Italian, off the site he has a thick cockney accent you know." Len nodded. "Yeah, I know. Still he does serve the best brevilles in Essex so I don't care a sod what language he speaks." They both grinned and watched as Guido in spotless white chef's outfit busied himself around the small kitchen.

"I first came here with old Jack Benson years ago," Len told me, a faraway look crossing his face. "Guido's dad was here then. Jack reckoned that every villain in the south of England stopped here at some time or another. He used to pick up all sorts of information from him." He was interrupted by Guido's arrival carrying two steaming mugs of tea, quickly followed by two plates with perfectly cooked ham brevilles surrounded by a small selection of salad which he deposited onto the counter with his usual flourish "Buon appetito." He said; took the money I

offered and turned to serve a solid looking man who had just strolled up to the other end of the counter.

"What happened to Jack Benson Len?" I asked knowing he had been something of a legend in the Romford nick for years.

"Retired early," he said thickly as he savoured the breville. "Lived happily ever after." He warmed to his subject, stopped for a second, flicked a bread crumb from the side of his mouth and continued. "Odd sort of a story about old Jack y'know, lives just outside Southend now, fabulous house, plenty of money, no problems. Mind you he earned it."

"Plenty of money?" I raised an eyebrow. "Was he bent?"

"Jack? Bent? Christ No! He was as straight as a die. Hated villains and put a lot of them away too."

"So where did the money come from."

"It was a legacy; he helped an old Chinese man soon after he came to Romford and the old man left him a fortune in shares when he died."

My interest in Jack Benson now thoroughly aroused I urged Len to tell me more. He was only too willing. "Well!" He said. "He was from Whitechapel originally, very hard times when he was young, no money, his mother often ill, moved house a number of times. His dad had bugged off when he was very small and yeah, life was hard. He came into the force straight from school. Didn't take him long to establish himself as a good copper. Big fella he was, went to the gym two or three times a week in the early days. Won a black belt and several dans on it too. Not someone to have a go at if you take me drift. If he told a villain he was nicked...he was."

"The story goes that he was on his way home late one night when he came across a fight in an alley in Limehouse. Three or four hard cases were giving an elderly Chinese bloke a very nasty seeing-to. Jack told them to get lost or words to that effect, they went for him and he nicked the lot of them...after they had been patched up by the doctor at the Limehouse nick. The old boy was so grateful he asked Jack if there was anything he could do to repay him. Jack of course said no, it was all part of the job." He paused, finished the last of the breville and took a sip of his tea. "But he did help him in the finish, though I'm not sure he realised it at the time. The following morning a young Chinese man came into the station and left a package for Jack, no names, no address. Inside the package was a single item. A Gold bean! It looked just like the seed of a runner bean but it was made of solid gold. A note with it said Wear it on your watch-

chain it will protect you and bring you good fortune. So he did."

"Several years later he was working from Bow Street having been made up to DCI. The case he and a lot of others had been working on for ages was no nearer a solution. Then one night Jack and his missus were celebrating their tenth wedding anniversary in a night-club called The Golden Goose when in walked Adriano Gigante. The very man he had spent the last couple of years trying to put away. He owned this club, his pride and joy, and a number of other clubs in various places in the UK and Europe. He was into every form of crime you could think of and had never been even arrested on suspicion let alone a charge.

As he walked by with minders ahead and behind him Jack noticed that he wore a watch chain that was identical to his own, what's more he too had a lucky bean in the chain exactly the same as Jack's. That's how Jack nabbed him." I waited for Len to go on but he didn't, he just sat there finishing his tea. I got impatient "Well what happened? How did he nab him? Lasso him with the watch chain? Come on don't stop now." Len grinned. "Well" he said dragging it out, "To cut a long story short he organised someone from MI5 or 6 or somewhere else equally secret to exchange the bean on Gigante's watch chain for the one from his own...after having had a bug planted into it by the lads in the basement. It took six months but the transmissions they monitored were enough to put Gigante away for twenty years. The crash as he fell could be heard as far away as Istanbul." Len stopped for a moment then with a smile spreading across his face said, "We pulled his leg about it for ages afterwards...Old Henry the desk sergeant dubbed the case Jack and his Bean's Talk." I grinned "Some story, but I'm not sure I believe it."

Len laughed "That's what everyone says, but it's true. The old Chinese chap conked out a few years later and Jack copped ten per cent of his company, which by that time consisted of hundreds of Chinese chippies and restaurants all over the country and the chain of night-clubs called The Golden Goose, you must have heard of them. Jack's ten per cent turned out to be the night-club chain. He opened a martial arts club for boys in Limehouse as a sort of Thank You and it is said that he need never pay for a meal anywhere in London ever again. Yeah" He added thoughtfully, "they don't make them like old Jack any more, can't think what he would make of the mob we have to deal with these days."

"He should worry!" I said "Come on let's go I'd like to see what's inside that lorry that pulled out a few moments ago, I can't believe the driver can eat seven of Guido's brevilles all on his own."