

Amidst the hugging and weeping, kissing and promising, there stepped a burly man, whose bald head brought to one's mind a hard-boiled egg, but with a trace of bushy yolk on the outside. He was attempting to extricate each of the apprentices from their mother and drag them out to the waiting wagon. The emotional huddle of four people were not about to give him the time of day, let alone any hint of co-operation to allow him to carry out what he saw as his "duty as a bailiff". A few squeals from the women and shouts from the young men worried the watching old Watchman.

Arthur Payne stepped up to the crowd and spoke to the bailiff whose name he'd recalled, 'Eh up, Bull, what yer abart? There's no need fer any o' that strong arm stuff.'

'It's all right, Arthur, mate, I'm just gonner bring 'em art to yer wagon. Ye can just wait art there wi' the driver. Gi' us a minute, eh?'

'Ye ain't listenin' to me, Bull. Stop all o' that pullin' and pushin' an' go an' 'ave yerself a cuppa rosey lee, will yer? I'm in charge on' 'em all nah, an' I've agreed it wi' 'is worship, see. Ten minutes wi' their family.'

But Bull was not about to give way to Arthur and ignored him. Joseph's tear-filled eyes were turning red with rage and he suddenly gave the big man a terrific shove in his mid-riff with all his might, which winded him. Arthur quickly stepped in between the two and told Joseph to wait outside with his mother who saw the sense of it. She hustled Joseph outside and Thomas and his mother followed them. The panting bailiff stared with malevolent eyes at Arthur and said, 'Right... old man... yer a witness... to that assault on... a court officer... I want 'im back 'ere... Now! I'm gonner arrest 'im!'

'Nah, you ain't, Bull. Ye go an' calm darn wi' a cuppa like I said. An' we'll be orf to Cheshire like I bin ordered.'

'Nah, nah, Arthur. I wants the lad in custody for assaultin' me. If yer don't go an' get 'im I will.' He made a move towards the door prompting Arthur to put out his arm.

'Bull, mate, don't do that. Yer causin' a delay ter me written orders from Max – an' that could get yer into a whole heap o' new trouble. I ain't forgot yer bit o' bovver in the past wi' bashin' too many skulls when it weren't needed.'

'What you on abart? That all got sorted – sort of. Anyway, Arthur, you ain't even official no more. Yer retired.'

'That's what I'm tryin' to tell ye, see. I'm specially appointed, by Max, ter this job o' taking the lads back to their master in Cheshire. Gotter be immediately arter they bin examined in 'is courtroom – afore noon. If Max hears abart all this delay, well... Just let me get orf will ye?'

'Make sense will ye, Arthur! Who's this Max?'

At this Arthur stepped back a little from Bull, raised his eyebrows in surprise and, just as he opened his mouth to reply, the enormous clock on the outside of the assizes building began to chime. The men counted and on the twelfth ring Arthur said, 'Oh, my Lord, it's noon already. I gotter be orf, Bull. Max is probably still in 'is courtroom if ye need to check wi' 'im.'

'Max who?'

'Max! Maximillian Leodet, the bloomin' magistrate. Who d'yer fink? We've become good friends since I retired, Bull... See ye, mate.'

Arthur hurried away and Bull thought about things for a few seconds, then he went away to make himself a cup of strong sweet tea. Outside the two apprentices and their mothers had naturally taken advantage of the few extra minutes to reacquaint themselves. The little snippets of news they'd exchanged together would never be forgotten. When Arthur ordered the boys to assist him load up the wagon they did so almost willingly, encouraged by the women, none wanting to disappoint the old man. Each son was shouting, earnestly repeating his promises as the wagon rolled away.

It gathered speed and the huddled pair of weeping, waving mothers grew smaller and smaller in the distance. Both runaways felt grateful to the Lord for the precious seconds they'd had to embrace their mothers once more. Desperately swallowing their grief at the parting they continued to yell and shout, louder and louder with every few yards, with every anxious utterance.

Joe called out, 'When I'm earning enough I'm going to buy me a farm an' settle down an' get married - an' then you an' Daniel can come an' live with us, Ma. Her name's Ellie an' she's an artist - an' she's beautiful - just like you, Ma.'

Unable to hold back his tears Tommy's broken voice was almost lost on the wind with his last assurance, 'I'm going to learn me all about the cotton trade, Ma, an' to learn to read an' write - so's I can send you letters. Then I can tell you when I'm comin' back 'ome again, to keep you an' Lizzy an' Eddy safe in our old house. We won't have any debts ever again, Ma.'

The mothers started forward suddenly when the wagon reached a bend in the road, in a hopeless attempt to catch it up. And then it was gone, lost to sight, heading for the same drovers road, the Roman Road, which would take them back to Quarry Bank Mill in Styal, Cheshire.





Epilogue

The general story of the children, who were “apprenticed” to work in factories and mills, during the Industrial Revolution, is doubtless one of great unhappiness. When many of the children were as young as seven and working twelve, or more, hours a day for six days a week, then how can any modern person view such a situation with anything other than horror? However, there are several examples of employers and organisations who took their responsibilities towards their employees very seriously; such as, famously and later in the 19th century, the Lever Brothers, the Cadbury family and the Rowntrees; plus at this book’s earlier time, Robert Owen. The Gregs, together with the Arkwrights and Samuel Oldknow, can also be included in this group of more enlightened employers within the textile industry.

Provision of bed, board, clothing and even the basic elements of an education was not common amongst mill owners but some, such as those listed above, felt it was their moral duty to do so. Many of the boys employed by the Gregs rose to become overseers and clerks with several achieving positions at the level of management. For example in the 1840s a manager called James Henshall actually began as an apprentice at Quarry Bank. His practical knowledge of the Mill and later business education led to him being promoted to run it on a day-to-day basis. We do not know what destiny had in store for our young heroes, Thomas Priestley and Joseph Sefton, but we can hope that things also turned out well for them.

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