

## **Bang Goes Christmas**

The winter of 1846 was a bleak one. I remember. Snow came in sheets outside the window of my shop and covered the already white London streets. People bustled round in their hundreds, their heads huddled so far into their thick, long coats that only top hats and bonnets could be seen. In the distance, the spire of the church stood out against the grey sky, heavy with more snow. The cotton factory that blocked the church itself added smog to the laden sky.

It was early in the morning a week before Christmas. I was in the back of my shop preparing for the day ahead. Two years ago I had taken over my father's confectionery business although I had been helping him make up the stock for years. This morning as I wrapped the chocolate and mixed the Turkish Delight, I considered the past year.

It had been very hard on the people of Great Britain. The crops had failed badly and famine had spread the length of the country. Even businesses like my own had been short of supplies and forced to raise prices. I went across the room to find a jar for the limes. On the top shelf of the cupboard was paper for the chocolate. On sudden impulse, I took the paper down and began to make small square boxes. I filled them randomly with collections of the fresh sweets. "After such a hard year" I thought, "People could do with a pleasant surprise."

The little sweet parcels sold well. I watched smiles light the faces of the children as they pulled the paper apart. Bag after bag of goodies hit the snowy ground, only to be picked up again by a gleeful child. All of that day my shop heaved with customers wanting in on this new game. The store, usually sizeable and spacious, shrunk in the excitement. There had been many inventions under our Queen Victoria. Three years ago had had people cramming into the local post office for the new penny greeting cards and last year there had been rumours of a tree appearing in Windsor Castle covered in ribbons and tinsel. Christmas seemed the time for inventions these days and this time it was my turn.

That night I went up to my living quarters above the shop, tired but eager to show my wife my idea. Our house was warm against the frozen winter. A bright fire crackled away merrily in the hearth. The smell of the stew cooking above it scented the two rooms pleasantly. As I walked in, Christina was standing dusting my desk in the corner of the living room. The pine floor shone from the pride she took in our home. Hearing the door, she looked up and smiled

"There you are Tom!" Christina said, "You're just in time. Dinner is almost ready."

"I trust there's time to show you a new product for the shop?" I asked excitedly.

"I couldn't go down now, No".

But I have it here!" I announced pulling a parcel I had saved from the folds of my coat. I set it down on the table between the armchairs at the fire. Hanging up my coat and top hat at the door I sat down and beckoned my wife to me.

“Come here and I’ll show you!” I encouraged her.

We pulled the wrappings apart and the little bag fell out. I looked at Christina beaming. “Well?” I said, “What do you think?”

“Is that it?” she said with a small frown of disappointment.

The day’s success had left me unprepared for such a response. “What do you mean?” I asked taken aback.

“Well.....” Christina sighed thoughtfully, “I thought there should be more. Like a toy or a paper hat. These are mostly for children are they not? And they seem a little quiet too.”

I grinned stupidly with her inspiration. “Well that’s just what we will do!” I said jumping up. “I’ll make little hats and we could get someone to make some wooden figures. We’ll make them crackle like flames.”

Work began immediately after dinner. While I began to make some paper hats, Christina went out to see about the figures. She returned a couple of hours later bearing good news and a bag of coalite sticks. “The toy shop at the far end of our street has agreed to supply the figures for a small price” Christina announced happily, “And we can have as much coalite as we wish.”

I got my wish that Christmas. Ever since I had taken over my father’s business I had wanted to make it my own in some small unique way. The year 1846 was the year I, Tom Smith, invented the Christmas cracker!