


opening extract from

# the joke machine

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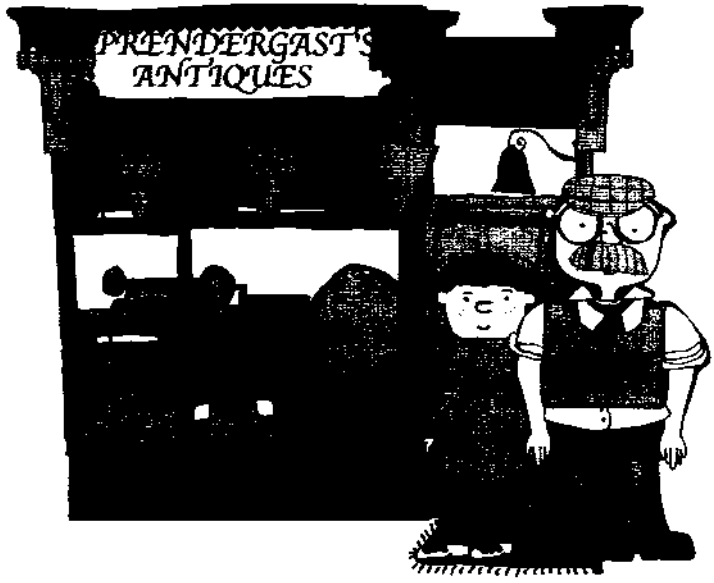
CHAPTER 1

# A Very Peculiar Discovery

Jeffrey had a Saturday job in a junk shop. Other boys had newspaper rounds, and earned pocket money by stuffing newspapers through front doors. Jeffrey had tried that, but had never really enjoyed waking up early on cold mornings. And so, when the owner of the junk shop, Mr Prendergast,

asked him whether he'd like to help out on Saturdays, Jeffrey did not take long to make up his mind.

It was not much of a shop really. Mr Prendergast had run it for almost forty years, and in all that time it had hardly changed. Outside, in peeling paint, there was a sign which read: PRENDERGAST'S ANTIQUES. This made people stop, but once they looked in the window they realised that it was not so much antiques that were sold there as good, old-fashioned junk.



'People may say all this is rubbish,' said Mr Prendergast, pointing to the shelves stacked with dusty old bits and pieces. 'But everything here has a use. You take that old tin box up there.'

Jeffrey looked up at the tin box on the second highest shelf.

'It just looks like an old tin box, doesn't it?' Mr Prendergast went on. 'But if you open it up, you find that it's a machine for counting coins. It was used in a bank a long time ago, and it still works perfectly.'

'And that?' asked Jeffrey, pointing at a large glass jar with a red handle sticking out of its top. 'What's that?'

'That,' said Mr Prendergast proudly, 'is a butter-making machine. You put the cream in and you turn the handle, and you get butter for your efforts. And very delicious it was too, I can tell you!'

There were many other things besides. There were old flags and old trumpets; there were boxes of tarnished coins and medals;

there were ancient typewriters; and there were gramophones which only played when you wound up the handle. If anybody ever needed something old and almost impossible to find, they knew that Prendergast's was the shop to find it in.

Mr Prendergast always closed up on Fridays. On that day he would set out by himself to buy things to sell in his shop. If ever he heard of a sale or if he knew that somebody was clearing out an attic, he would be there to see if there was something old and dusty which the owner might be willing to sell him. He never failed. On Saturday mornings, when Jeffrey came in to help, there would usually be a box or two of old things to be sorted out.

'This is very useful,' Mr Prendergast would say as he lifted some strange-looking item out of the pile. 'Somebody's bound to want that!'

Or, sometimes he would say, 'I don't know

why I bought that. I'm sure nobody will want it. Whatever can I have been thinking of at the time?'

Jeffrey would rub the dust off the new purchases and find a place for them on the shelves. As he did so, Mr Prendergast would enter the details of each item in his book and note down the price he had paid. In this way, he would always remember what he had to charge for something, even if it was not to be sold for years to come.

One Saturday, while they were sorting out a very large box of things which Mr Prendergast had bought from somebody's attic, they came across a very peculiar machine. It was not very big – about the size of a typewriter – but it was clearly very old. On the front it had a row of keys and at the back there were wheels which could be turned to different positions. And on the right-hand side there was a lever and a place for a roll of paper.



'This really is very strange,' said Mr Prendergast, scratching his head as he spoke. 'It's rather like an old adding machine – you know, the ones they had before they invented calculators and spoiled everything. And yet . . .'

He turned it upside down and looked at it from below.

'No,' he said. 'It's not an adding machine. In fact, I have absolutely no idea at all what it could be.'

Jeffrey gazed at the machine and shook his head.

'I can't work it out either,' he said.

Mr Prendergast laughed.

'Well, I can't really sell it to somebody if I can't say what it is,' he said. 'I suppose I'd better throw it away.'

'Don't do that,' said Jeffrey. 'I could try to make it work.'

'But you don't know what it's meant to do,' replied Mr Prendergast.

'I could try to work it out,' Jeffrey said.

Mr Prendergast shrugged. 'If you really want it,' he said, handing Jeffrey the strange machine, 'then you're welcome to it. Here you go.'