

THE TWISTED THREAD

Short stories by Mark Bastable



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I wish I sported headgear, because I saw something in a week-old London Times today that would have prompted me, had I a porkpie hat at my disposal, to set it at a jaunty angle. In the absence of a tither, I contented myself merely with putting a spring in the step and a smile on the clock.

The piece that gladdened my old heart began as follows:-

Anyone with a memory of childhood bedtime will have been dismayed by the sudden death last Wednesday of McKuen Cray, creator of Piggledy-Poppet the Forgetful Piglet. It's a measure of the affection in which the character is held that few of us, following some moment of absentmindedness, have not cried, "Bless my trotters, what a silly piggy I am!"

Well, I, for one, never cried any such thing. I have, however, written it. I was the first person ever to write it – in an attic above a haberdashery store on High Holborn in 1939.

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At the top of a gloomy flight of stairs leading from the pavement just east of Holborn Viaduct, there was a cramped room containing two diligent souls: to starboard, at a small oaken desk, the proprietor of Cutie Pie Publishing; and, to port, his copytypist at a yet smaller desk hewn, one might imagine, from an even smaller oak. The former incumbent was Mr Mallory Pegg – a round little man, like a cheerful damson. The latter was Miss Hepzibah Pegg, only daughter of the prop. and – to stretch the drupaceous conceit – a peach. A perfect peach.

Such, at least, was my view. And my view was taken from the top of a second flight of stairs – narrow, steep, not much more, really, than a ladder with pretensions – leading to an attic room that Mr Pegg called ‘the hub of creative industry’. It was from this lofty vantage that my gaze rested on Hepzibah Pegg, and I apprehended her with the eye of a young man in love, committing to keen memory her hair of burnished mahogany (or possibly walnut, or larch – I was never a prize student of the arboreal), her eyes of deepest azure (I was pretty sure about that – blue, essentially), her skin of purest alabaster (though, to be frank, I don’t believe I’d ever at that time seen any alabaster, pure or otherwise). Turning with a sigh, I clambered through the trapdoor into the upper room and returned to my station. Stretching a leg over a pile of Cutie Pie publications, I slid onto the geriatric scrivener-seat from which I commanded half a writing desk and a fifty-percent share in an inkwell.

“I don’t have an idea in my head,” announced my fellow shareholder, flinging down his pen. The speaker, heir to the Earldom of Rendleshire, was McKuen Cray – may he now rest, at best, intermittently. “I was never intended to churn out this nursery pabulum.”

In fairness, his was a supportable assessment of Cutie Pie Publishing’s *oeuvre*. Mr Pegg had cornered the market in colourful, simple, inexpensive storybooks for the discerning middlebrow toddler. Even fifty years later, I am certain that there are white-haired matriarchs and rheumy-eyed grandpas the length and breadth of the United Kingdom who, clueless though they may be as to what they ate for supper last night, would remember with alpine clarity the colour of Leaping Lottie’s Magic Shoes, or the names of all the Cuddly Cubs, or the eventual resolution in the matter of Kitty Kitten’s misplaced milk bottle.

All these confections were my work. I was Cutie Pie’s senior storywriter – albeit senior only to McKuen, who had joined us a fortnight previously.

“It’s all right for you,” he continued. “You’re prepared to turn out any old rubbish. But I have the soul of a poet.” Wincing, he indicated a poster on the wall. “The very sight of Korky Kangaroo is a dagger-thrust to my breast.”

I frowned. “When I came down from Cambridge with a degree in Mediaeval History, this was not quite the career I had in mind,” I said. “But I’ve checked the door of my flat in Notting Hill and it appears to have no wolves at it, so I conclude that my labour here serves a purpose.”

“Money!” my colleague spat. “It all comes down to blasted money, doesn’t it? My very being cries out for Art, and I am obliged to consider filthy lucre.”

He was not referring to the modest stipend offered by Mr Pegg. *In re* lucre, McKuen was accustomed to a level of engrained filth unimaginable to one such as I, who subsisted on

mere grubbiness. The scion of the house of Cray was, theoretically, stinking rich. But McKuen's father had declared that his son must hold down the Cutie Pie job for at least a year (his previous best being three weeks), or else the generous monthly allowance would be withdrawn, the Mayfair apartment would be shut up and the Cray account at the Savoy Grill would be settled and closed for good.

"I'd have to go home and rot in that bucolic dungeon of a house," McKuen moaned. "The flowering of my genius would be stunted in the bud."

I was about to suggest that twenty-six was a bit past the budding stage, but at that moment Mr Pegg's rubicund head appeared through the trap like a miniature sunrise.

"Edmund, my boy," he said. "We are at last in receipt of boxed copies of *Roderick Rabbit's Seaside Adventure*. Do come and look." Before disappearing back down the ladder, he regarded McKuen with a kindly but quizzical eye. "Any progress, laddie?"

"Ha!" replied the budding genius, in a tone such as the ambergris-streaked Jonah might have adopted when asked whether he'd enjoyed the journey to Nineveh.

"I see," said Mr Pegg. "Hm." And after a few thoughtful moments he added, "Well."

It was a brief exchange, but enough to bode ill for McKuen Cray's future flowering.

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Here on a shelf in my study, I have copies of most of Cutie Pie's output, including *Roderick Rabbit's Seaside Adventure*. My name doesn't appear on the cover. Edmund Fazakerley is no name for the author of children's books. It would take up so much room that there would be little space for the pastel illustration of Roderick and his prize-winning sandcastle. But inside, on the page that records the catalogue number and the fact that the copyright is owned by Cutie Pie Publishing Ltd of London, my name does appear. *Written by Edmund Fazakerley*, it says. When, as was his habit, Mr Pegg poured me a dry sherry and showed me the relevant page in a press-fresh copy of the book, I believed that that was as large as my name would ever be writ.

"You have a talent for this work, dear boy," my boss told me, laying the new book back in the box. "I think it's because you lack any ambition whatsoever." He meant the words kindly – he was suspicious of ambition – but he was wrong about me.

Though I had little expectation of myself professionally, I harboured one very lucid personal aspiration. I intended to marry Mr Pegg's daughter, Hepzibah. I was determined to win her. And any day soon, in pursuit of that triumph, I would act. Decisively. Unmistakeably. I planned to approach her boldly and say something other than, "Would you mind terribly typing this up? Do excuse the ghastly scrawl." Oh yes. Pretty suddenly, pretty imminently, the diem would find itself carped like it had never been carped before. Edmund Fazakerley was mostly primed and very nearly ready.

And so it was with some shock that, walking home through Hyde Park later in the evening, I espied, on a bench by the Serpentine, my alabaster-complexioned prospective fiancé canoodling – and I use the word in its least appetising sense – with the Rat of Rendleshire. He

was holding – I could scarcely believe it – her small and delicate hand. I stood transfixed for several seconds and then I hurried on, averting my eyes.

The following day in the attic room, the atmosphere was chilly. I said nothing of what I had seen, but I endeavoured to make it obvious that I was displeased. McKuen appeared not even to notice – so much for his sensitive and poetic soul – though he seemed distracted by other woes.

“I say, Fazakerley,” he ventured, a little before noon. “Take a peek down the hole and see if the guvnor’s nipped out for lunch yet.”

I peeked. “They’re both gone,” I said.

He nodded. “Listen, old man, I want to give you five pounds.”

“Do you? Why?”

“No reason. Just a token of friendship. Think nothing of it.”

“I don’t intend to think about it all.”

“You don’t want it?”

“Not a bit of it.”

“As you wish.”

There was another long silence, during which I scribbled away at my latest work, *Piggledy-Poppet the Forgetful Piglet*. McKuen doodled idly on his blotter the while.

“Fazackerley?”

I looked up. “You still here?”

“Pay attention. How would you like to earn ten guineas?”

“I am salaried, thank you.”

McKuen snorted. “Four pounds ten-and-six a month? It’s an insult to pittances everywhere.”

“We can’t all have fathers who own the right-hand side of Scotland,” I said stiffly.

“Ah, yes, well, there’s the thing,” McKuen said. “I sense that friend Pegg is cooling towards me. If I’m to keep my place here, I must produce one of these appalling, sickly, sentimental tranches of infantile garbage.” He nodded at my writing pad. “So I wondered if I might buy one of yours.”

I have never thought of myself as a particularly adept strategist. There have been only two moments in my life at which I have seen, with sudden and immediate clarity, how I might

gain a negotiable advantage. On both occasions the *dramatis personae* have been me, McKuen Cray and Piggledy-Poppet the Forgetful Piglet.

“I don’t want your money,” I said. “I’ll give you a story if you will renounce any and all interest in Miss Pegg.”

Again, I take it as a measure of McKuen’s much-vaunted depth of feeling that he required barely a heartbeat to come to his decision.

“Done. When can you finish the story?”

I handed him the first page. “Write this out in your hand. I’ll pass more to you as I go along.”

And so we worked, heads down, in near silence. I conjured the story of Piggledy-Poppet, knowing that I had never created so lovable, so memorable a character nor placed him in so compelling, so perfect a tale. I had reached the apex of my ability and I was effortlessly on song. Piggledy-Poppet was my Iliad, my Sistine Chapel, my Eroica. Nevertheless, for the love of Hepzibah, I gave my masterpiece away to a man who, as he copied it in his elegant, Eton-trained cursive, guffawed and poured scorn.

“Good Lord, this is truly emetic! The depths of crassness are unplumbable. I despair for the lumpen masses who know no better than to suck this stuff up.”

He claimed it as his own though. Both Mr Pegg and Hepzibah were bowled over by Piggledy-Poppet.

“Look to your laurels, eh, Edmund?” the proprietor advised. “McKuen’s found his stride and he’s hot on your heels.”

I said nothing. I had plans to approach Hepzibah. Soon.

But not soon enough. Before I could declare my love, Mr Chamberlain declared war. My cherished plan, like the plans of so many ordinary folk, was an early casualty of conflict. Another was Piggledy-Poppet, who seemed an irrelevance the moment he reached the shelves. Barely a copy was sold. Not that I cared. I was in uniform by then, and I had forgotten the Forgetful Piglet.

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In December 1939, on my first reconnaissance mission over Hamburg, I was brought down and captured. After an uncomfortable few weeks shooting the breeze with the Gestapo, I was moved east to Stalag 453. Built in the mid-thirteenth century to keep out uninvited Mongol hordes, Castle Slovitze served almost perfectly as a means for keeping in unwelcome Royal Air Force officers.

The word ‘almost’ is significant, because on a moonless night in December 1943, fifty-two men escaped from Stalag 453, of whom forty made it back to England. I, who had spent eighteen months digging tunnels with my bare hands in conditions of the most terrifying confinement, was not amongst those chosen to go under the wire. McKuen Cray, who had

arrived at the camp in August, and who had written poems whilst sitting in the quadrangle, but who spoke perfect German, French and passable Dutch, was.

He took with him a letter I had written to Hepzibah. After years of incarceration, I put the entire contents of my heart and soul into the fifteen closely-inscribed pages I entrusted to McKuen Cray. All he had to do when he reached Blighty was put a stamp on the envelope and slip it into the first letterbox he saw.

He didn't do that. He decided to deliver it personally. He took tea with Hepzibah, intending – so he later claimed – to hand her my letter somewhere between the Battenburg and the third top-up. He didn't do that either.

All I can say in his favour is that, in early 1947, he returned my unopened letter as part of a package that included his acclaimed collection *Under The Wire: Poems from Castle Slovit* and a cutting from the Times showing photographs of the Cray-Pegg nuptials.

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On my thirty-fourth birthday – August 20th, 1947 – I stepped off a bus in Hollywood without any idea of what I intended to do there. Six industrious years later, I was creative director of Katz-Fazakerley-Stein Animations. My knack for conjuring likeable little characters had found the perfect market. Anyone who went to the movies – and everyone went to the movies – saw a KFS toon before the supporting program, another preceding the main feature, and maybe even a couple more at the end.

I was busy, and I was far enough away from London that for the most part I could remain oblivious of the existence of McKuen Cray. But once in a while he would appear before me like Marley's ghost, though – regrettably – less dead.

“It is the duty of every artist,” McKuen declared in the Times Literary Supplement, June 1953, “to aspire to the highest sensibilities, to produce the most rarefied forms of Art. The current trend towards proletarian creativity is a misguided perversion of democracy.” He had just been awarded a prize for his collection of literary criticism, *The Clarity of Essence*. I had resisted ordering a copy. “If, as I humbly hope, I am remembered by posterity, I would wish to be upheld as one who soared like Icarus, daring the sun, despite the footling sneers of the mob.”

That chance encounter ruined my week – and the following week was no better. I took a call from a solicitor in London, who told me that old Mr Pegg had passed away. “He has left a bequest in your name, and a letter.”

Days after, my youth was returned to me by Air Mail.

Edmund, my dear boy,

It would appear that I have forgotten to wake up. I knew that absentmindedness would be the death of me.

Did you hear that Hepzibah married that awful McKuen character? I imagine you did – hence your running away to the colonies. Still, they tell me you’re doing well. Not bad for a chap devoid of ambition, eh?

The thing is, old man, I can’t bring myself to leave Cutie Pie to Hep, because then McKuen will get his hands on it and he always despised our little tales of mice and spotty dogs. So I’m leaving it to you, Edmund. It’s not a moneyspinner like your current outfit, but it trades on nostalgia and what value it has is mostly due to your efforts. In the worst case, I know, at least, that you will have it put to sleep humanely.

I had the books crated up and sent to me in Hollywood. Suddenly – after all that time – it was very important to me that I see them again. Each day, as I took breakfast overlooking the Pacific, I read one of the Cutie Pie books that I had written so long ago. I found in those pages the naïve, lovestruck young man I had been. A young man cheated of the life he planned by war, by separation and most of all by McKuen Cray. The words became a litany to me – I had been cheated and betrayed by McKuen Cray who had gained everything he wanted: Hepzibah, money, position, respect and, most importantly to him, distance from the philistine, uncultured proletariat. The injustice of it welled up in me for the first time since VE-Day. It bubbled in my throat. It drifted behind my eyes. It made my ears itch.

And then, as I was driving along Ventura Boulevard one morning, I saw a giant billboard announcing an imminent movie:

Coming Fall ‘53 – Herman Melville’s *Moby Dick*

I swerved dangerously across two lanes as inspiration struck me like one of my cartoon frying pans. This was the second time in my life that I had conceived, instantaneously, a strategy that might reap rewards.

“Yep,” I murmured as I straightened the wheel, “*Moby Dick* is Herman’s. Everyone knows that.”

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It took three years, and it cost all KFS Toons’ working capital, and then some. But as I stood in the lobby of the theatre after the premiere, surveying the sobbing, happy mothers, the snivelling, glowing children, the gulping, smiling dads, I knew that *McKuen Cray’s Piggledy-Poppet* was the most calculatedly populist, unabashedly sentimental, four-Kleenex, feel-good chucklefest feature of all time. It grossed more on the day of its general US release than any other animated movie had made in a month. The spin-off toys were that season’s hair-pulling, eye-scratching must-have playthings.

“Fazackerley? What the blazes do you think you’re playing at?”

“Ah – McKuen. How nice to hear from you after all these years.”

“I shall sue! I shall bring your company to its scabby knees.”

“For what? Cutie Pie owns the copyright to Piggledy-Poppet and I own Cutie Pie. I have checked the relevant page of the original book and you are most definitely the author. Do you deny it?”

“Of course I deny it! It’s trash!”

“Then you’ll be telling all your literary friends – and your wife, of course – that, unable to write a simple children’s story and desperate not to lose your allowance, you bartered your romance for a tale I knocked out in an hour?”

“I... How... You...”

“Not that it would make any difference. Apparently sales of *McKuen Cray’s Piggledy-Poppet* lunchpails have just topped one million in the US. And *McKuen Cray’s Piggledy-Poppet* pillow slips are all the rage in the infant bedrooms of Northern Europe. The book – with your name prominent on the cover – is a global bestseller.”

“You...I shall...It’s....”

There was more in a similar vein, very little of which, once he managed to string sentences together, would have made it into my children’s stories or his slim volumes of refined verse. I hung up the phone while he was in mid-splutter and I never spoke to McKuen Cray again.

But I did see him. I was in London on vacation and I learned that McKuen was reading from his *Collected Poems* at a bookshop in Queensway. I slipped in near the back just before he was due to appear.

A bespectacled lady in cashmere and pearls addressed the audience, as McKuen sat on a chair behind, checking his bookmarks.

“We are most honoured today to have with us a writer of many talents. McKuen Cray is a poet, of course, with numerous prizes to his name.” She glanced over her shoulder at McKuen who shrugged modestly, as if he were barely listening. “And then there is the literary criticism – sometimes controversial but always thought-provoking.” The controversial critic mimed a dismissive pshaw. “Recently, the inexhaustible Mr Cray has produced a series of prose studies of seventeenth-century Florentine fresco.” McKuen’s smiling frown made it plain that these were scarcely worth mentioning. “But most of all – the crowning glory, and the one creation for which he will always be remembered – McKuen Cray gave us the adorable and much-loved Piggledy-Poppet.”

I watched McKuen throughout the last sentence of the bespectacled lady’s speech. He looked as if he were having a heart attack. If so, it wasn’t immediately fatal. Delicate, poetic soul though he was, the adulation of Piggledy-Poppet’s admirers has taken, I’m delighted say, a good thirty years to kill him.

He’s gone now – but his memory, of course, lives on, immortalised in the hearts of generations of children who will always revere the name of the man who created the unforgettable Forgetful Piglet.