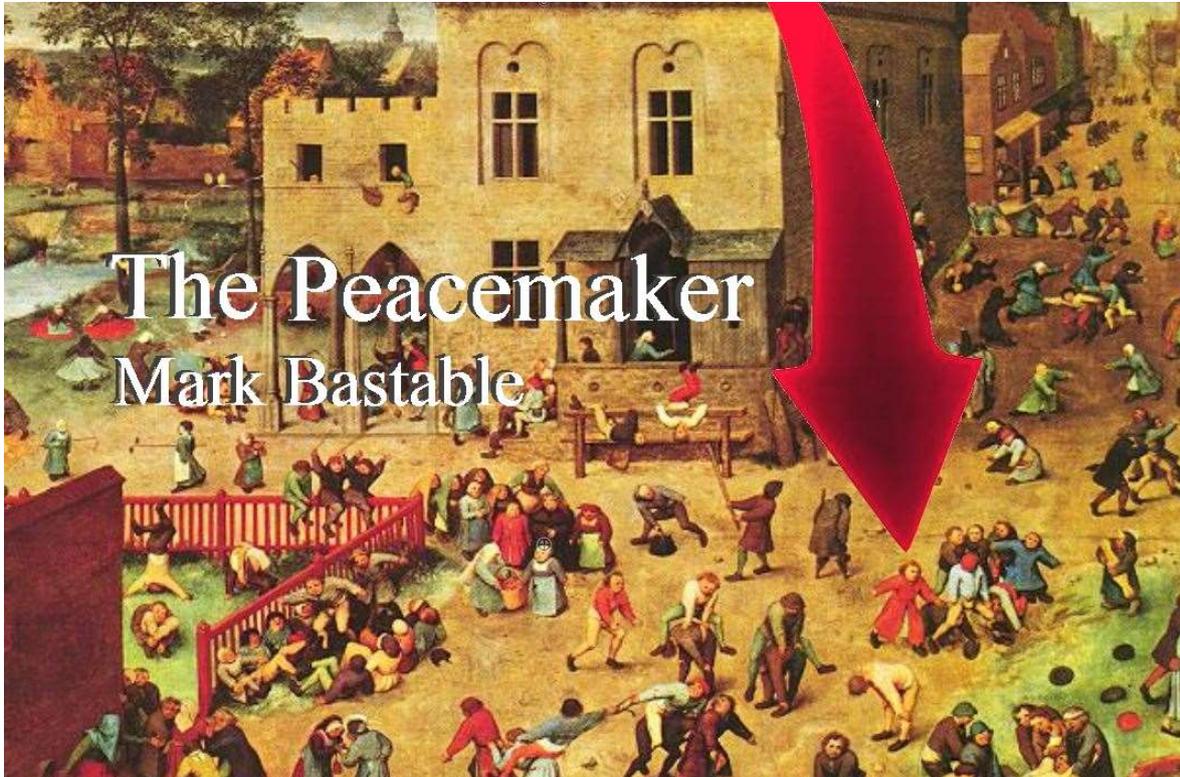


# THE TWISTED THREAD

*Short stories by Mark Bastable*



## The Peacemaker Mark Bastable

It was the hour between the eagle and the owl – so about seven-thirty – and the first flurries of late autumn snow dappled the haunches of the old, tired horse that plodded up the hill from the village.

“The hovel on the left by the crossroads, apparently,” murmured the rider.

“I know,” the horse said. “I got us this far, didn’t I?”

“Just making conversation.”

At the gate the rider dismounted, slowly. The horse crouched slightly to make things easier. Neither of them was getting any younger.

“Ropey old place,” the horse observed, looking at the cottage. “Don’t be long. It’s bloody cold out here.”

The horseman walked up the path to the door. He knocked firmly.

After a few moments, the door opened.

“Yes?” said the householder, lifting an oil-lamp. He peered at the visitor, and then he groaned. “Oh, for fu...”

“It is time,” said the horseman, calmly. “It is your time, Peacemaker.”

“No, no, no,” said the man in the doorway. “Sorry, but you can blow it out your a...”

His words were drowned by a resounding clap of thunder that echoed around the valley, from the peaks of the darkling mountains to the rattled windows of the herbalist shop that adjoined the hovel.

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Forty years earlier, to the day, Pertin Finder had fulfilled his destiny, mostly. Only a very picky person would suggest that he fell short of the whole fulfilment shebang destinywise.

It was the hour between the sherry and the pinot – so about eight-fifteen – and the Headmaster was in his study flicking through application forms, when a feeling of depthless sadness washed over him. He dropped his pen and sat there, trembling, fighting back tears.

“At last,” he murmured, aloud.

“Pertin!”

The Headmaster looked into the crystal on the desk. His father’s face was there, ballooned out of shape by the curve of the globe.

“Pertin – I have to tell you that the Peacemaker is dead.”

“Yes. I felt it.”

“The feeling will pass, believe me. Soon you’ll feel the new Peacemaker.”

The Headmaster nodded. “I know.”

“He’s in that school somewhere.”

“Or she is.”

“Yes, all right – very modern. Let me know when you find him. Or her.”

The face in the crystal dissolved, and Pertin sighed. He stood up and went to the cabinet. He poured himself a drink. This was the moment he’d been born for. He was a Finder – the eldest son of a revered Finder, the father of an infant Finder. But he, Pertin, was the Finder to whom had fallen the task of discovering the new Peacemaker. Not for the first time, he wondered whether he had what it took.

“Headmaster?”

Pertin turned and saw the Deputy Head peering round the door.

“Come in, Mangle. Drink?”

“Headmaster, I think we have a blank in Year Eleven.”

Pertin made the effort to engage. “Year Eleven? Well, yes, that is leaving it a bit late to develop a power.”

“Exactly. If they haven’t got one by then, they’re not going to get one.”

“Who is it?”

“Oh, you won’t know him. An anonymous scruff from the valleys – Zanzik Rub.”

Pertin knocked back his drink. “All right – I’ll see the fellow tomorrow after lessons. Perhaps we’ll have to send him home.”

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In assembly the following morning the Headmaster delivered the Tale of the Peacemaker, as a mark of respect to the departed. He opened the Legends at the appropriate page, and looked out at the faces of the eight hundred youngsters gathered in the hall. He didn’t need to read the words – he knew the story by heart.

*We are the Children of the Core. We are the Touched. We are the Masters of the Gift, and we are the Servants of the Giftless.*

*In the days of fire, our people forgot their purpose. As their powers came to them, they grew proud and ambitious. They turned their gifts on each other - there was strife in the mountains and hatred in the valleys. Battles raged across the eagle-hours and torches burned throughout the owl-dark.*

*And God sent one whose power was humble and unknown. He commanded the people to regain their purpose or he would make them do so, but they laughed at him, saying “Yeah, right – you and whose army?”*

*And the humble one moved his hand above them, and his power was made real upon them, and they knew his power. And the people ceased from fighting forthwith, saying, “Oh, man, no. Not that.” And in fear and shame they returned to their purpose as Masters of the Gift and Servants of the Giftless.*

*And God said, “Hear me, Children of the Core. From this time forth there will be one among you to guard against your pride and your ambition. And he shall be called the Peacemaker, for his power will be to make peace when conflict rises between you.”*

Pertin ran his eye around the ranks of kids in the hall. One of them was the new Peacemaker, and it was down to him to sense which. He didn’t have a clue how to do it, but his father had said he’d know when it happened. That was the gift that Finders had. He’d just know.

“Sir!” A girl in the front row had raised her hand. “Sir, what was actually the Peacemaker’s power?”

“Good question, Limi. No one can say. And as there has been no conflict amongst the people since that legendary time, perhaps we will never find out.”

“I think it was a paralysis power,” a senior pupil said.

“Or a blinding power,” suggested a junior.

Pertin shook his head. “We’ll never know.” He waited for the kids to pipe down. And at the same time he waited for some instinctive pull towards a certain section of the hall; or some perceived glow, like dawn, around the head of one child; or – what he’d really like – a bloody great arrow pointing down from the vaulted ceiling, with a flashing red sign saying, “It’s this one here!”

But he was getting nothing.

“Today,” he said, “I shall be coming round to every class. Don’t worry about it. I just want to...er...check the radiators.”

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“How goes it?” asked Pertin’s father when he appeared in the crystal that afternoon.

“Well, all the radiators are in terrific working order,” Pertin said, rolling a cigarette.

“Have you scoped each child in the school?”

“Yep. Looked over every single one. No dice.” There was a knock on the door of the study. “Dad, I’ve got a meeting. I’ll talk to you tomorrow.”

“Don’t worry, Pert. You’ll find him. Or her.”

Pertin finished rolling the cigarette, dropped it in the top of drawer of his desk and put on his Headmaster face.

“Come in,” he intoned.

A dishevelled and chubby boy of fifteen shambled into the study. He looked directly at Pertin, simultaneously defiant and wary.

“Ah – you must be Zanzik Rub,” Pertin said. “Take a seat.”

It was the Headmaster’s duty to weed out blanks – those very few of the Touched who never developed a power – and he hated it. The unfortunate youngsters would protest that they were late developers, that they could feel themselves on the verge of telekinesis or fire-throwing, that their power, though present, was too astonishing to divulge. And Pertin would have to call them liars, and explain that they would do better to go back to their hometowns and get an education with the offspring of the Giftless. Not that there was anything wrong with that.

“How are your studies progressing, Zanzik?” the Headmaster asked.

“Not bad,” the boy said, still narrow-eyed. “I’m top in chemistry.”

“So I’ve been told. You work hard at that.”

“Yeah.”

“Any areas in which you feel you’re not making such impressive progress?”

Zanzik slouched in the seat and tipped his head back, still looking at Pertin. “I know why I was sent here. You want to know what my power is.”

Pertin nodded. “Yes. I do.” He prepared himself for the lie, the protestations, the tears. The paperwork. “So what is your power?”

The boy shrugged. “Haven’t got one,” he said flatly.

And, at that moment, Pertin knew. There was no flash of light or screeching internal alarm, but Pertin knew for certain – just as he knew that it was daytime – that Zanzik was the Peacemaker. And as he was the Peacemaker, he must have a power.

“I don’t believe you,” Pertin said, as calmly as he could manage.

The boy frowned, evidently taken aback. “I’m telling you I haven’t got a power, and you don’t *believe me*? Why would I lie about that?”

“I don’t know,” Pertin said. “But I am completely sure you’re lying – because I’m a Finder, and you are the Peacemaker.”

“Me? The Peacemaker? Are you out of your fu..”

“Cigarette?”

The boy took the offered roll-up, and leaned forward for a light. “I’m not the Peacemaker,” he said, blowing smoke out over his juttied lower lip. “Honestly, sir.” The ‘sir’, Pertin noted, was utterly devoid of sincerity. “What’s the point of the Peacemaker, anyway? No one can remember the last time one of them had to make any peace.”

“Perhaps they do it just by existing,” Pertin suggested. “Anyway - you tell me. You know in your heart just as I know in mine, that you are the Peacemaker now.”

Zanzik turned to gaze out of the window, thinking. Then he looked back at the Headmaster. “If you announce me as the Peacemaker, I’ll let everyone know that I have no power. And what good will the Peacemaker be then? What is a Peacemaker with no power?”

Pertin lit his own cigarette, perplexed but impressed. “As a professional educator, I’m seriously disappointed that a child as bright as you has gone unnoticed in this school for so long.” He took a drag. “Zanzik - there has to be a Peacemaker, otherwise the people will fight amongst themselves and forget their purpose.”

“Maybe, maybe not. Who knows? But here’s the deal. If you drop this Peacemaker thing, and you tell everyone that I have no power, and you let me go home to the valleys, I promise that if ever the Peacemaker is needed, I’ll do whatever the hell it is I’m supposed to do.”

“I have to announce *someone* as the Peacemaker,” Pertin said.

Zanzik stubbed his cigarette out on the top of the crystal globe. “Not my problem,” he said.

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“Not my problem,” he said again, forty years later – and slammed the door of the cottage in Pertin Finder’s face.

“Reasonable guy,” the horse remarked as he backed up the garden path. With one kick of his hind hooves, he flattened the front door and Pertin stepped over it into the cottage. He strode across the room to Zanzik who was gazing fixedly into the fire.

“You *promised*,” he said, jaw clenched. “For forty years I have protected you, withstanding enormous pressure to reveal the identity of the Peacemaker. I have stalled, I have prevaricated, I have lied. My father died disappointed that I had forsaken tradition. My very power as a Finder has been questioned. I did all this to prevent you undermining the reputation and the influence of the Peacemaker.”

“About which I give not a toss,” Zanzik muttered, still staring into the flames.

“But I’ve failed,” Pertin continued. “Without a visible and identifiable Peacemaker, the people have become factionalised and aggressive. They’ve taken sides, and now we are close to civil war.” He pointed towards the mountains, visible in the falling darkness, lit up by flashes of green and purple, the plain beneath dotted with campfires.

“Tomorrow there will be a battle, in which all the powers of our people will be deployed. Imagine that – a pitched battle between the firestarters, the shapeshifters, the animal commanders, the mind warpers, the invisibles, the blinders, the storm-callers, the myth-summoners. It will be the end of us – and if we go, then the Giftless will go too. The fabric of both our worlds will fall apart within years. Zanzik – this is the time for the Peacemaker.”

Zanzik picked up a stick and prodded the fire, but he said nothing.

“Perhaps,” said the horse, poking his head through the door, “he’s afraid he can’t do it.”

“Oh, I can do it,” Zanzik said sharply, still turning over the coals. “I have a gift that will prevent war, will end all battles, will suppress revolutions and will bring peace instantly to any field of conflict. I can *do* it - don’t you worry about that.”

“Then *do* it!” Pertin said. “Why not just *do* it?”

Zanzik looked up at the old man, pointing the glowing stick at him, angry now. “It’s all right for you, Headmaster. You have a family gift – since you were a small child you’ve known what your power would be. Most of us don’t. We have to wait, fantasising, hoping. Will I be an elemental, controlling fire or water or air? Will I be a psychist, conjuring fantasies in the minds of others, or reading their thoughts? Will I be a gaiaist, commanding the creatures, or the weather, or the waves? We don’t know what we’ll develop, but we all want some fabulous, astonishing, enviable power.”

“And you have such a power!” Pertin said. “You have the greatest power of all! You *make peace!*”

“No,” Zanzik said, slumping again. “That’s the effect. It’s not the power itself.”

“Then, what is?”

Zanzik got to his feet. He lifted his jerkin from a hook beside the fireplace, and turned to the horse. “Don’t worry about the door,” he said. “We never lock up in the valleys anyway.”

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As the sun rose, the two factions of the Touched lined up facing each other on the plain beneath the mountains. Eyes were hard. Jaws were set. Sinews were, on the whole, stiffened. Gifts had been summoned and the air was alive with the energy of all those powers.

Bugles were lifted to the lips of the bugle boys. Horses jittered, alive to the tension. Swords were unsheathed. Fingers were flexed. Minds were spun.

“Okay, go home, the lot of you.”

On a grassy knoll at the eastern side of the plain, where the terrain fell away towards the valleys, there stood an old, tired horse. And on the horse sat a rather fat, balding, scruffy man of middle years, with the green stains of herbs on his britches and the dark purple of dried berry juice on his jerkin. He was addressing the opposing armies through a large bone horn.

“Just stop being so silly, and go home for breakfast.”

The horse shook its mane and plodded forward, moving between the battle lines as Zanzik Rub addressed the hordes on either side.

“Really, you’re wasting your time here. And you all look absolutely ridiculous.”

“Who the hell are you?” shouted a general on the left side.

“Yeah – get out of the road,” came the call from the right. “We’re trying to have a battle here.”

Zanzik let the heckling die down. And then he said, “I am the Peacemaker.”

“Wait..wait... Is that Zanzik? Zanzik Rub?”

“Good God, it is! It’s funny old Zanzik Rub!”

“But wasn’t he a blank? How can he be the Peacemaker if he’s a blank?”

Zanzik held up his hand and again silence fell. He dropped the horn to the ground and he spoke, clearly and firmly. He could be heard along both battle lines, from end to end, and far behind, all the way to the back of the ranks.

“This is your only warning. Go home, Children of the Core, and regain your purpose as Masters of the Gift and Servants of the Giftless. I repeat, I am the Peacemaker, and I command you to go home.”

There was a few moments’ pause. And then the general who had first spoken yelled, “For crying out loud – it’s bloody Zanzik! Give me a break.” He raised his sword and kicked his heels into the ribs of his horse. “Chaaaaarrge!”

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A mile away, on a hill overlooking the plain, Pertin Finder groaned with frustration and remorse as the two throngs of troops rushed towards each other, trumpets blaring, foot soldiers whooping. And in between, on the Headmaster’s own tired horse, sat Zanzik, quite motionless.

“Motionless, sullen and insignificant,” thought Pertin. “He’s no Peacekeeper. And I’m quite obviously no Finder.”

Back on the plain, as the armies bore down from each side at a flat-out run, the horse looked over his shoulder at Zanzik. “If you’re going to pull one out of the bag here, Ace, you’re cutting it a bit freaking fine.”

“Believe me, I have the power,” Zanzik said, sighing. “But I really don’t want to use it.”

“Use it,” said the horse, “before we’re minced like garlic in a press.”

Zanzik nodded. “My apologies to you, horse.” He extended his arm and, twisting in the saddle, he swept his open palm across the army to the left, from east to west, and then, turning, across the army to the right, from west to east. And as his palm passed over them, the armies faltered, stumbled, hesitated, their faces screwed up in shock and horror. They staggered, as if stunned, stiff-legged and anguished.

“Oh, no. Oh, please God, no. Not that, not that! No, no, no – oh, God...”

The battles lines dissolved, wailing and howling. Weapons were dropped on the ground, and the soldiers turned, each towards his own village. They were no longer the components of armies, no longer aggressors. They were the people again - Children of the Core - making their broken way home.

“Now that,” said the horse, as he started back up the hill with Zanzik on his back, “is what I call a devastating power.”

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From the hilltop, Pertin watched the charging armies pause and then disperse, like handfuls of grain thrown into a millpond. But there were no bodies left behind, no wounded or maimed, no apparent physical harm inflicted.

“What the hell did he do?” Pertin wondered aloud. In his teens he’d been friends with a girl whose power was to induce overwhelming homesickness. Maybe that was what Zanzik had. But, on the other hand, broadcast homesickness wouldn’t explain the cries of appalled distress that had carried even to the hilltop on which the Finder stood.

“It’s a psych power though,” Pertin muttered. “Has to be.”

Now the horse and Zanzik were a hundred yards away, followed by a ragged procession of soldiers traipsing disconsolately towards their villages in the valleys to the south.

Pertin raised his hand in a wave. “Well done, Peacemaker!” he called.

The Peacemaker didn’t wave back. Pertin could see that Zanzik’s face was pained, grimacing – he was wearing the same distressed expression as the soldiers following behind.

“So it’s a wide-field power,” Pertin thought. “It affects anyone in the vicinity – even the master of the gift.”

The horse plodded to the brow of the hill, and Pertin held a hand up to Zanzik.

“Let me help you down.”

The Peacemaker shook his head. “I think I’d rather stay here.”

“As you wish. Now – you must tell me, what is the power that you wield? I’ve never seen...”

And at that moment, as the trudging line of soldiers drew level and surrounded him on their slow march home, Pertin Finder was hit by the smell.

“Oh, dear God,” he gasped, clamping a hand over his nose and mouth. “Oh, my word – that’s foul.”

The ex-combatants continued to file past, and suddenly Pertin understood the reason for their bow-legged, splay-footed gait and their expressions of embarrassed self-disgust.

“The effects will last for three or four days,” Zanzik said. “It’s not pleasant, but it’s effective. You can’t conduct a civil war with constantly crapped pants.”

“Holy Mother,” Pertin said, between reflexive gulps.

The horse lifted his head. “Like I said – that’s one devastating power. Oh – wait...” There was a short explosive retort, followed by renewed cries of anguish from the troops just reaching the brow of the hill.

“You might want to walk ahead of me on the way home,” said the horse.