



Classics in Short No.50: The Box of Delights

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Classics in Short

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Brian Alderson on John Masefield's **The Box of Delights**.

Wolves are running; snows descend. How then shall the story end? <!--break-->

Which story? Why? **The Box of Delights**, of course.

Naomi came stomping in?

She had just closed up **The Box** and, after all its enchantment, was disenchanted. 'It's a cheat,' she wailed, 'it's a cop-out.' (Nor, it seems, is she alone in passing such strictures on our eminent novelist. Graham Greene remarked of Masefield's adult novel, **Sard Harker**, that it 'would have been the greatest adventure story in the language' but for its 'absurd ending'.)

But what of all that precedes those final fatal lines?

Once more we are with Kay Harker whose adventures with 'the Midnight Folk' were the subject of the last of these effusions* (**BfK** No. 150). He is some years older now and is on his way home to Seekings House after his first term away at school, the train rambling through the idyllic winter landscape of a pre-Beeching Little Red Engine branch line: Gabbett's Cross, Lower Turrington, Stoke Dever and Radsoe. It is Christmas and festivity is in the air, not least because the Jones children are coming to stay (including little Maria 'somewhat talked of in school circles' who likes to take pot-shots at electric light bulbs dangling from washing-lines). Also, the witchy governess, Sylvia Daisy Pouncer, has gone and Seekings is in the benign care of the beautiful Caroline Louisa.

Sinister events begin to occur though. 

Kay is diddled out of his pocket-money by two seeming clergymen, doing the three-card trick. An old Punch and Judy man asks him to take a mysterious message 'The wolves are running?' to a confederate in the town. And alongside the preparations for Christmas: the present-buying (no state-of-the-art mobiles or DVDs in those benighted times), the indoor games, the parties and the carolling, evil forces are at work.

It is Cole Hawlings, the Punch and Judy man,

whom the wolves are after? wolves of all kinds: four-footed ones, two-legged theological persons from the Rev. Father Boddledale's Missionary College in the Chester Hills above Condicote, and, later on, some tiny, snub, predatory, silent-flying aircraft. What they want of him is an old, worn, shagreen-covered box, the Box of Delights, through whose agency the possessor may at will go small or go swift through space and time. And as the wolves close in he gives the Box to Kay to preserve against all dangers.

And dangers do come thick and fast along with the Christmas snow.

For Father Boddledale is none other than the wizard Abner Brown, villain of **The Midnight Folk**, now exhaustingly married to the Pouncer, and assisted by sundry buccaneers, among whom may be found another old friend, the Rat cellarman from Seekings. With escalating daring they terrorize the district and, in the belief that the Box has been passed to the authorities of Tatchester Cathedral they set about sabotaging the Christmas celebrations by kidnapping and imprisoning all the personnel from the Bishop down to the littlest wailing choirboy.

That stubby thumbnail abridgment

does no justice to the virtuoso direction of this motley troupe nor of the magical effects that encompass them. For unlike **The Midnight Folk**, where an ancient mystery was untangled, **The Box of Delights** is an elaborate whodunnit with supernatural powers broadcast liberally among the cast in the manner of a Christmas pantomime. Going small and going swift may help in the detection (rather better than The Law, which is subject to some delicious satire) but Masefield is never happier than when he is introducing magic for the sheer pleasure of the exercise. Conjuring tricks, transformations, historic or mythic phantasmagoria jostle against each other with casual ease and two great dramatic crises are resolved by the old dodge of bringing pictures to life.

There is more to it all than tricks though.

Much as one may admire and enjoy Kay Harker's initiative and resilience the hero of the story is really old Cole, the Punch and Judy man, a last representative of The Old Magic. Such are the gyrations of the plot that the reader can lose sight of the axle on which it turns which is the rivalry between Cole ? none other than the thirteenth-century Spanish mage Ramon Lull, creator of an Elixir of Life ? and his Italian contemporary, Arnold of Todi, creator of the Box, which he had left behind him when he got lost in the past. (He is to be found at one point in the story roasting bananas over a wood fire and extolling the genius of Alexander the Great.)

As the book moves towards a triumphant conclusion

the two are united at the West Door of the Cathedral and we await the resolution of their ancient feud. Well ? it does happen, after a fashion ? before being overtaken first by the Christmas bells and the midnight cannon, and second by those final seven lines that so offended Naomi.

What then is to be done about it?

The author believed that his ending was ?of the essence? ? but if there are child readers of **BfK** who would dispute the point then we offer them the opportunity to do so. The Bishop of Tatchester has kindly agreed to arrange and supervise a competition for all readers under the age of 15 to write another ending for the book in not more ? but could be many less ? than 500 words. See page 2 of this issue of **BfK** for details.

*The book was published in 1935, eight years after its predecessor. Its strangely child-like illustrations by Masefield's thirty-year-old daughter Judith have continued in use in all the standard editions.

The cover by Liz Pyle and the illustrations by Judith Masefield are from the 2000 Egmont Classics edition (1 4052 1011 7, £5.99 pbk).



Brian Alderson is founder of the Children's Books History Society and children's book consultant for **The Times**.

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