

## The Square Peg – *Jilly Cooper*

Clutching her parcels, Penny charged through the office door. Miss Piggott, the Managing Director's senior secretary, looked at her watch in disapproval.

'It's nane minutes past three,' she said in her ultra-refined voice. 'And he's back, he's been ringing for you since two o'clock.'

Penny went pale.

'Oh dear,' she sighed. 'I do wish darling Mr Fraser was still here. Everything was so much nicer then.'

Mr Fraser had run the London office of Joshua McInnes Inc. bumbling but good-natured incompetence; and immediately he had retired last autumn, old Joshua McInnes, who had been viewing the situation from across the Atlantic with increasing dismay, had sent for his younger son, Jake, to sort out the muddle.

At first the London office hadn't known what had hit them. Young Jake McInnes went through every department with a tooth-comb, and for six months everyone had shivered in their shoes. Then gradually they began to realize things were running far more smoothly. Orders poured in and the factory had enough work in hand for three years. Everyone settled down – everyone except Penny, that is, for she was catastrophically inefficient and everyone was laying bets on how much longer Penny could possibly last.

'Hello, Mr McInnes,' she said nervously, as she went into his office.

'Sit down,' he said icily.

Jake McInnes was a powerfully built man in his late twenties, with thick, dark hair, and deep-set eyes the colour of mahogany, and a very square jaw. With that nasty smile playing round his mouth, he looks more like a Sicilian bandit than an American businessman, thought Penny.

They glared at each other across the vast desk.

'It's twenty minutes after three. I thought your lunch break ran from twelve-thirty to one-thirty,' he said.

'I'm sorry,' mumbled Penny, 'but I say this perfectly marvellous dress, and then..'

'I don't want any excuses,' he snapped. 'I've told Miss Payne to dock two hours' pay from your salary this week.' He picked up her folder. 'You must have been busy while I was away, these letters are beautifully typed.'

'Oh good,' said Penny, beaming at him.

'It's a pity,' he continued softly, 'that they bear absolutely no relation to what I dictated.'

Penny flinched as though he had struck her.

'Don't you do shorthand?' he asked.

'Not a lot,' admitted Penny, 'but my longhand's terribly fast, so I can get the gist of things.'

For the next half-hour, Jake McInnes went through each letter like an examination paper, until every shred of Penny's self-confidence was ripped to pieces. Then he tore the letters up and dropped them into the wastepaper basket.

Scarlet in the face, Penny got to her feet.

‘And another thing,’ he added, ‘next time you make reservations at a hotel, book single rooms. I don’t like arriving in the middle of the night to find I’m expected to share a double bed with Mr Atwater.’

Penny went off into a peal of laughter, which she quickly stifled when she saw the expression of disapproval on his face.

‘And one last thing,’ he added, as she went out of the door. ‘Put your shoes on when you come in here.’

During the next fortnight Penny tried very hard to be more effective, but she dropped enough bricks to build her own office block. She booked tables at the wrong restaurants, arranged meetings for the wrong days, and spilled a cup of tea over Miss Piggott’s electric typewriter. She also got more and more depressed because Francis, her boyfriend, hadn’t rung her, her only comfort being that he promised to take her to the theatre the following Thursday.

Thursday dawned. Having washed her hair that morning, Penny arrived later than usual at the office. Jake McInnes sent for her immediately. ‘Penny,’ he said wearily.

‘Oh golly, what have I done now?’

‘Remember last week I wrote two letters, one to my father saying Atkinsons’ were playing hard to get, but I thought we’d clinch the deal with them by the end of the month; and the other letter to Atkinsons’ playing it very, very cool?’

‘Yes,’ said Penny. ‘You signed them both.’

‘And you put them into the wrong envelopes. Now get out, just get out.’

‘I think I’d better look for another job,’ said Penny to Miss Piggott.

‘It might be advisable; have a look in the newspaper,’ Miss Piggott replied.

Penny started poring over the Situations Vacant column. Nothing really took her fancy, until suddenly she read:

*‘Managing Director requires highly intelligent, hard-working secretary-personal assistant. Meticulous, shorthand and typing essential. Salary £8000 upwards for the right person. Apply Box 9873.’*

The salary was almost twice what she was getting at the moment, and Penny thought of all the clothes she could buy. Her two cats could have liver every day.

The letter of application took her only a few minutes. She told all about her troubles with Jake McInnes, and gave a much-embellished version of her own career. Very pleased with herself, she sealed the letter and delivered it to the newspaper office by hand during her lunch hour.

Late that afternoon, Jake McInnes faced one of the toughest battles of his career. He lounged, outwardly relaxed, at the end of the long Board Room table. On either side of him sat the Board, all distinguished Englishmen, many years his senior. He was outlining the reforms he intended to make.

Gradually as the meeting progressed, he felt he was winning the battle when through the thickened cigar smoke, from the direction of the door, loped a rabbit.

Pandemonium broke out.

‘Good God, it’s a rabbit.’

‘Tally ho, after it, boys.’

‘Perhaps it wants a seat on the Board.’

‘How did it get in here?’ said Mr Atwater.

‘I think I know,’ said Jake McInnes, picking up the panic-stricken animal. ‘If you’ll excuse me a minute, gentlemen.’

He found Penny on her knees by the filing cabinet.

She looked up, cheeks red, a large smudge on her nose.

‘Oh,’ she said, a happy smile breaking over her face, ‘you’ve found him. I was terrified he might have escaped into the street.’

Words failed Jake McInnes, as Penny took the rabbit from him, crooning, ‘There, there, poor little love, were you frightened then?’

‘Penny,’ he said, ‘where did you get it from?’

Penny’s eyes filled with tears. ‘From the market. He was the last one. The man said he’d go in the pot if no one bought him.’

A faint smile flickered across Jake McInnes’ face. ‘Well, you’d better go and buy him a hutch, hadn’t you?’

‘It’s Thursday,’ said Penny. ‘I haven’t got any money left.’

Jake McInnes took out his wallet and handed her twenty pounds. ‘Go round to the pet shop now. And I want all those letters finished by the time I come out of the meeting,’ he added.

Half an hour later, the rabbit was happily installed in a smart, blue hutch, nibbling some lettuce, and Penny was busily typing when the telephone rang. It was Francis.

‘I can’t make it after all,’ he said.

‘Oh, why not?’ wailed Penny.

Francis explained that he had this picket duty....

‘Well, I’ll come too,’ said Penny.

‘No, no,’ said Francis much too quickly. ‘It’s only small picket.’

Penny panicked. ‘I don’t believe you. You’ve found someone else. It’s that horrible blonde,’ she choked. ‘Oh Francis. I can’t bear it.’

‘Well, you’ll just have to lump it,’ said Francis. ‘I’ll give you a ring sometime.’ The receiver clicked.

Penny’s world seemed to be crumbling around her. ‘No one loves me,’ she said. ‘No one wants me, and I’ve got a bed-sitter, two cats and now a rabbit to support. Oh Francis!’

She ripped the letter she was typing out of the machine and put in a fresh sheet.

‘*Darling, darling,*’ she typed frenziedly. ‘*I’m so frightfully sorry.*’

A shadow fell across the page. Penny leant quickly forward to hide what she was typing.

‘What the hell are you doing?’ Jake McInnes’ voice was heard like a rifle shot. Penny burst into tears. She laid her head among the papers on her desk and sobbed. Jake McInnes did nothing, he just sat on the edge of Miss Piggott’s desk, drawing on his cigar, waiting for her to stop.

‘I’m so sorry,’ she said eventually.

‘What’s the matter?’ he said. ‘Is it the boyfriend?’

Penny nodded dolefully.

Jake McInnes examined his fingernails.

‘Well, as we’ve both got nothing better to do, I suggest we sort out this mess.’ He pointed to the chaos which spread in a ten-foot radius round Penny’s desk. ‘Now which is your in-tray?’

‘Well, those two tables over there,’ said Penny, wondering what terrible skeletons were going to come tumbling out of the cupboard.

In the end, she rather enjoyed herself. Jake McInnes had obviously decided to be nice, and she found lots of things she thought she’d lost: her passport, several cleaning tickets and a bar of chocolate.

Two hours later, the tables, desks and surrounding filing cabinets were cleared and Penny was shoving paper into a sack.

‘Miss Piggott will have a shock in the morning,’ she said happily.

‘Just try to keep it like this,’ said Jake McInnes. ‘Now I think we both deserve some dinner.’

He took her to a very smart restaurant. The waiter arrived with avocado pear for Penny and oysters for Jake. For a few minutes they ate in silence, then Penny noticed that a beautiful woman at the next table was staring at Jake. How odd, she thought, and had a good look at Jake herself, taking in the breadth of the shoulders, the strong, well-shaped hands, the thick black hair. Suddenly he glanced up and caught her staring at him.

‘Well?’ he demanded, just like he did in the office.

Penny blushed. ‘I was just thinking that you’re very attractive.’

‘You shouldn’t say so in such a surprised tone, it isn’t very flattering.’

‘Well – I mean – all the typing pool are besotted with you, but, of course, I’m immune because I’m in love with Francis. And I’m never attracted to people who bully me,’ she added.

‘That’s blackmail,’ said Jake McInnes. ‘From now on, have I got to put up with your crumby typing, just so you’ll like me?’

‘Oh no,’ said Penny, ‘I’ve decided to like you anyway, after this evening – in fact I like you very much.’

He looked at her for a long time, his eyes moving over her face. ‘That makes me feel as though I’ve just won the Nobel Peace Prize,’ he said slowly.

Penny stared back at him, unable to tear her eyes away, the colour mounting in her cheeks. The waiter arriving with their second course brought them both back to earth.

‘Goodness, it looks delicious,’ said Penny picking up her fork.

‘Mr McInnes,’ she said in a small voice five minutes later, looking down at her untouched plate. ‘I’m terribly sorry, but I don’t think I can eat this. I can’t think what happened.....I was so hungry, and now I’m not, and it was so expensive...’

‘It’s all right,’ he said gently. ‘It doesn’t matter.’

He didn’t attempt to kiss her, as he delivered her to the door. ‘Go to bed early,’ he said. ‘It might get you in on time in the morning.’

But she didn’t go to bed. She wandered round her room, chattering to the rabbit and

the two cats. She didn't attempt to localize the vague happiness which was stealing over her.

'Hello, Miss Piggott,' Penny said.

'Mr McInnes wants to see you.' Miss Piggott said.

'I thought he might,' said Penny drenching herself with Miss Dior.

'Ay should watch your step if Ay were you. He seems a bit taight-lipped,' warned Miss Piggott.

Jake McInnes face was quite expressionless when Penny went into the room. She beamed at him. 'The rabbit's very well,' she said. 'He ate lots of –'

'Sit down,' snapped Jake McInnes. 'You'd better explain this letter.'

'Oh goodness, have I put my foot in something else?' sighed Penny.

'I think I'll read it to you,' he said silkily.

*'Dear Sir, it begins. In answer to your advertisement for a secretary/personal assistant, I feel I have the ideal qualifications for the job. I relish hard work and my aim in life is to find a job that I can really get my teeth into!'*

'I should hire her,' said Penny. 'She sounds jolly keen.'

'You would? Well, listen to this then. *I am meticulously accurate in every way and used to acting on my own initiative.*'

Horror crept over Penny's face. 'Oh no,' she whispered, 'it can't be.'

'Now it really begins to get interesting,' he said softly. *'My reason for leaving my present job is that the Managing Director (a wonderful man) was recently replaced by one of the most tyrannical individuals you could care to meet. He bullies me unmercifully and makes my life a misery.'*

Penny buried her face in her hands.

He looked at her sternly. 'You could be prosecuted for writing that letter,' he said. 'It's completely libel from start to finish. A good thing I got in early, and no one else saw it.'

'I'm sorry,' muttered Penny. 'Truly I am.'

'So you should be.' Then to her amazement he threw back his head and roared with laughter.

Tears of mortification welled up in Penny's eyes. 'How was I to know it was you lurking behind a box number? And then being so sweet to me last night, when all the time you were looking for someone else to fill my job. Of all the mean, cruel...'

'Tyrannical things to do,' said Jake McInnes, still laughing.

'I'm going,' sobbed Penny. 'I'm walking out of your hateful firm right now.'

She leapt to her feet, but before she reached the door, he caught her by the arm. 'Easy now, before you go charging out of my life, just read this memo. It came from Public Relations this morning.'

Penny looked at it suspiciously.

*'Dear Jake,'* she read. *'Thanks for your letter. Just to confirm that we can fit your leggy red-head any time you choose to release her. Best wishes, Jim Stokely.'*

Penny put the memo down on the desk. 'You arranged to have me transferred,' she said slowly.

He nodded. 'So I can get some work done during the day, and some sleep at night. I

thought you might do rather well in Public Relations with that fertile imagination.'

Penny was still staring at him in bewilderment. 'You're not just trying to get rid of me?'

He shook his head ruefully. 'I spent most of last night thinking about you; seeing you cuddling that rabbit, I realized you were wasted as a secretary. You ought to be living in the country looking after a house and animals and babies and one very lucky man.'

'I only wrote that letter because I was mad at you,' said Penny. 'I thought you loathed me.'

'Loathed you! I've been hooked ever since I walked into the office.'

He was coming towards her, and the expression on his face made Penny back away from him until she was trapped against his desk. He took her in his arms.

'Oh, we can't,' she said in confusion. 'Not here.'

'Why not?' said Jake McInnes. 'I'm the boss around here.' And he kissed her very hard.

'Oh my goodness,' said Penny, very pink and glowing. 'I don't think I do want to marry Francis after all.'

Still with his arm around her, he leant across and pressed the intercom switch. 'Miss Piggott, I'm going to lunch, and I won't be back this afternoon.'

'But, Mr McInnes,' Miss Piggott's anguished voice echoed over the room. 'You've got a meetin'.'

'Cancel it, I've got a meeting of my own lined up.'

He released the switch and turned his attention to Penny.

'But Mr McInnes,' said Miss Piggott, charging into the room like a herd of buffaloes, 'Ay don't think Ay can contact all the people comin' to the meetin' in taim.'

She broke off suddenly as she saw Penny in Jake McInnes's arms.

'Craikey,' she said.