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## PETER HEBDON: AN APPRECIATION

H. E. Bates

It must be almost a quarter of a century since I found myself, one winter day, with a spare ticket for an international football match at Wembley, to which I was going with my publisher, Michael Joseph. Like me, Michael Joseph was an ardent follower of soccer and had himself been a player of some distinction. When I told him of the spare ticket and asked if he would care to suggest someone to whom to give it he at once said, 'Offer it to young Peter Hebdon. He would be both honoured and thrilled.'

'Young Peter Hebdon' duly went with us to Wembley. I have now forgotten the country England played on that day, though I remember well that we won handsomely, as was England's habit in those days, but what I do remember even more vividly was the almost schoolboyish delight with which 'young Peter Hebdon' shared our plea-

sure in an English victory. But this was not all: the afternoon was the beginning of a friendship that lasted, in spite of many vicissitudes and some not altogether happy trials on Peter's side, through all the years until he tragically died in Copenhagen Airport.

The young man I met at Wembley all those years ago was at once immensely likeable and modest—not to say self-effacing. He had virtually begun his career at Michael Joseph as an office boy, gradually learning the complex and exacting business of publishing in the hard way, his teacher being MJ himself. It seemed clear to me from that first winter afternoon that he had not been invited to Wembley merely to watch a football match, but also because his senior and teacher had more than ordinary faith in him. It was a faith well justified.

As Peter's position increased in influence at Mi-



Michael Joseph Ltd, so he and I saw more and more of each other, until we became the firmest and most affectionate of friends. That first impression of mine—namely of an intensely likeable modesty in him—never had any reason to be modified or changed. In these increasingly exacting days publishing tends to grow less and less like the intimately personal business it used to be when I began writing forty-five years ago, but it remains a remarkable fact that Peter, gifted with his matchless personal integrity, never allowed the running of the business side of publishing to obtrude on or disturb in any way our personal relationship. In all these years I cannot recall our ever having a single cross word, or a shadow of dispute, about anything.

With the exception, I should add, of Yorkshire cricket. His devotion to that particular sporting sphere was partly fanatical and partly, I think, deliberately done with his tongue in his cheek: a fact that gave me immense and frequent opportunity to exercise a particular characteristic of mine, namely that of leg-pulling. This, done unmercifully, mainly served to illustrate two other characteristics dominant in his character: a great sense of humour and perhaps an even greater degree of tolerance. To these must be added an even greater one: there was never a hint of malice or even unkindliness in him. He was, as I shall for ever affectionately remember him, an honourable man.

Peter Hebdon had a small operation at a local hospital during 1953 and received this cartoon from Ronald Searle on his departure. (*Souls in Torment* by Ronald Searle was published in the same year)



In 1959 the two joined Joseph, Charles Picciotti and Robert Leigh, forming an independent publishing house. Peter Hebdon was gaged in heavy partnership with BP who owned the copyright in the massively successful *Pears Cyclopaedia*. The latter was a reference book which was sought after by publishers as it established an enormous reputation under the editorship of Mary B. as an up-to-date multi-volume encyclopaedia. It was first published in 1897. There was tremendous excitement in the firm and outside when it was announced that Michael Joseph