

DESMOND PACEY

THE MIRROR

Desmond Pacey (1917-1975) was born in Dunedin, New Zealand. In 1924 his family moved to England, and in 1931 they settled on a farm in Glanford Station, Ontario. He earned a bachelor's degree from the University of Toronto in 1938 and a doctorate from Cambridge University in 1941. In 1940 he became a professor at Brandon College (now Brandon University), and in 1944 he became a professor of English at the University of New Brunswick, where he remained for the rest of his career. He published a series of books that established his reputation as one of Canada's leading critics, including *Frederick Philip Grove* (1945) and *Creative Writing in Canada* (1952), and he was also an accomplished fiction writer. The following story was published in the summer 1954 issue and included in the collections *The Picnic and Other Stories* (1958) and *Waken, Lords and Ladies Gay: Selected Stories of Desmond Pacey* (1974). Frank M. Tierney, editor of the latter collection, noted that this story—like all of his work—reflects “a deep understanding of people, a rich, positive charity, a sincere tolerance for humanity in our fallen, vulnerable condition, and—in spite of our weaknesses and failures—strong optimism for our future.”

IT WAS A RUSH TO GET EVERYTHING READY for the party, but by eighty-three the baby was quiet and the living-room tidy. While Elizabeth was putting the finishing touches to her make-up in the bedroom, Bill straightened his hair and tie at the long mirror in the downstairs hall. It was not a bad-looking face, he decided, at least not in this light.

The bell rang. It was Kate Hall. She bounced in, and danced a little circular pirouette which unwound her fur jacket into his waiting hands.

She flopped into the big green easy chair by the fireplace, clasped her black taffeta skirt about her smooth knees, and looked up at him expectantly. As usual, there was something about her look which baffled him. Some-

how her upthrust chin, her parted lips, and her bright, bold eyes conveyed a mixture of friendliness and detachment, of appreciation and mockery. He didn't know whether she was expecting him to say something clever, or daring him to say anything which she wouldn't regard as dull.

He always felt like this in her company. He was socially insecure anyway, always a trifle ill at ease with people other than his wife, but with Kate he was especially wary. There was no real basis for it, he thought as he lit her cigarette and ventured another look into her eyes, for she had never been anything but kind to him and Elizabeth. She was, in fact, much their best friend here, the person who more than anyone else had welcomed them and made them feel at home in this small, raw Western Canadian town.

Perhaps that was partly the trouble—that they owed her so much, were so dependent on her. If it hadn't been for Kate Hall, this first winter would have been intolerable. It was she who had been the first to call on them, and to invite them into her home. And when she found that Bill tried to write, and Elizabeth to draw, and that they were both interested in the theatre, she had treated them as enthusiastically as if they were already artists of acknowledged genius.

Being thus adopted by Kate had meant being automatically adopted by her circle of friends—and a good circle it was, by any standards, and superlatively good by standards one had a right to apply in a town of this size and location. Her friends were all young professional people like themselves—other teachers on the High School staff, a young doctor and his wife, a couple of lawyers, a music teacher, the two social workers. They met regularly each week, in one another's homes, usually to read plays, sometimes simply to chat or play games.

But it was Kate who held the circle together: you knew that if she left town the group would disintegrate. She dominated it, and yet you couldn't call her domineering. She usually cast the plays, but she cast them tactfully, varying the leads from evening to evening and never seeking to steal the limelight herself.

And yet Bill felt uneasy, suspicious. It was as if her tremendous enthusiasm, her overflowing vitality, concealed a cold, sharp, steel centre, as if at any moment her energy, creative and spontaneous as it seemed, might become deliberately destructive.

But how absurd of him, he thought, as she said innocently, "Any bright ideas for tonight, Bill?"

“Plays, you mean?”

“No. Let’s not read a play this week. That last Ibsen left a bad taste in my mouth.”

“What then?”

“Let’s have fun. Games.”

“The Game?”

“If you like. I thought of a beauty on the way over. Nobody would ever get it.”

“Can you tell me?”

“No. Too good to give away—even to you. But I don’t feel like The Game tonight. Too much work. Any other ideas?”

“Guggenheim?”

“That’s even more work.”

“We needn’t play it pure. Then it’s easy. Say—I have an idea.”

Her face brightened and she looked at him with an almost adoring expression. What a fool he was to doubt her! But adoring—now he was going to the other extreme. It was time he got over these ridiculous alterations of his ego from exaltation to abasement. Why couldn’t he accept himself as he was, as a fairly bright young man of slightly more than average talent, instead of either trying to puff himself up into a genius or whittle himself down to a fool? Why couldn’t he suggest a game as casually as anyone else would, instead of imagining that whatever he said would stamp him either as a hero or a goat?

Forcing himself to sound casual, he said, “It’s a game we played last summer in Winnipeg.”

“How does it go?”

“It’s really just a special version of Personalities. Instead of picking anyone from anywhere, you pick someone local, someone everybody knows. You begin with faint clues, and go on making them stronger until somebody guesses. Then it’s their turn.”

“Sounds easy enough. Just the kind of game I feel like.” She looked thoughtful for a moment. He wondered if, after all, he had displeased her, if the brilliant Idea he had led her to expect had proved disappointingly dull. But no—her face was eager again. “Yes,” she said. “I like it. I can see all sorts of possibilities.”

Elizabeth came down then, and while she was apologizing to Kate for being late the doorbell rang again. It rang almost continuously for the next

five minutes as the rest of the gang trooped in, threw their coats on the couch in the study, and took their places in a rough semi-circle around the fire.

When they were all settled comfortably, Kate suggested that they skip the play-reading for once and try Bill's game. Everyone was agreeable—they usually were, to Kate's suggestions—and they began.

Marion Macdonald, the French teacher at the High School, was given the first turn, and did an amusing sketch of the bishop of the local diocese. Pat McArdle, wife of the doctor, drew a lively satirical portrait of her husband.

Now it was Kate's turn. She was at her most vivacious, sitting on the edge of her chair, her hands moving in rapid, jerky gestures, her eyes flashing with excitement. Everyone's interest perked up: Kate could be depended upon to be devastatingly funny at somebody's expense.

Bill, however, felt a momentary revulsion as he looked at her. She's like some rapacious bird, he thought, her fingernails sharp claws ready to tear the flesh from some innocent victim. He saw the lamb quiver, seek the ewe's side, as the eagle poised and swooped. He wished he hadn't suggested the game. It was really just a slightly refined form of malicious gossip.

But it was too late now. Kate had already started. He had missed her first clues, but now he forced himself to listen. "He's clever, but he's not half as clever as he thinks he is. He's a small frog in a small puddle, but he acts like a toad in a hole. Deep down he knows he hasn't a shred of talent, but he scarcely even admits it to himself and never to anyone else. He thinks he can write, but he couldn't even write a letter that wasn't full of clichés and platitudes. He's the type who never answers the door without first going to the mirror and congratulating himself on his good looks."

Bill winced. How could she have known that about him? The whole atmosphere of the room seemed to have changed from easy, bantering informality to a strained and baffled embarrassment. Bill could feel the tension in every muscle of his body, and especially in his face and neck. He gripped his hands into tight knots and tried to look calm. He kept his eyes focused on Kate's face, which seemed to have lost all its warm vitality and to have become a mask of settled ferocity. He dared not look at the others, but he felt that all their eyes were on him.

The words continued to come from Kate's mouth like the sharp strokes of a whip—"the epitome of vanity and self-importance . . . a gift of the gab

which he confounds with eloquence . . . an ambition that makes Macbeth seem humble.”

The tension mounted, wave upon wave that flowed up and down the nerves of his skin. What could he do? He had known that sometime the cold steel behind that warm exterior would break out into violence, had suspected that someday it would be turned against himself, but never in his worst imaginings had he foreseen this. To be attacked—that he had feared, even in a sense expected, but not to be attacked so publicly, so bitterly, and so long.

What could he say or do that would break the tension? Whatever he did, it would mean the end of the gang. No group could survive a strain of this sort. Should he admit that and walk out now, walk into the cold brilliance of the February night and come back only when the rest had made their apologies and left?

She was still going on, piling on the insults until the weight of them seemed physically to oppress him. The others did nothing but giggle now and then with embarrassment. Why for God’s sake didn’t somebody say something, stop her, give him some peace? Were they going to let her torture him all night? If somebody didn’t name him soon he’d shout it out himself, say “All right. You’ve seen through me. You’ve pinned me to the wall. I’m everything you say and more. But did you have to tell me at my own party, in my own house, before all the friends I have?”

The words were struggling somewhere in the choked muscles of his throat when he heard a voice almost scream the name “George Bellamy!”

He felt nothing for a moment, then a vast deflation as if he were a balloon suddenly punctured.

Everybody else was saying “Bellamy! Of course! The one person Kate really despises. Why didn’t we think of him? How stupid! I couldn’t think of a soul.”

At last Bill dared to glance around at the faces of his friends. Everybody else looked relaxed and happy. They had been baffled, the solution had come, and they were pleased. Nothing more than that. Kate looked especially happy—she had purged herself of malice, and had stumped her friends. No one had even thought of him, and he’d been so sure. They hadn’t even noticed his tension, apparently, for there was Elizabeth, who would have been sure to notice first, grinning at him as she said, “Well, Bill and I had a good excuse, for we’ve never met this Bellamy. Who is he?”

“Oh,” said the doctor, “Don’t you know him? Manager of the radio station. Kate hates him because he’ll never give the Little Theatre any radio time. And he is a conceited ass.”

The game went on, while Bill felt the air flow ever so gently back into the pricked balloon of his ego.

By the time the guests were leaving, Bill felt sufficiently recovered to ask “What’s the programme for next week, Kate?”

She smiled at him, friendly as ever, and without even a hint of mockery in her expression. “We’ve had our fun—now it’s back to business. *Pillars of Society*, my lad—and there’s a perfect part in it for you.”

The guests trooped out together, chorusing goodnights. “We haven’t had such fun in years.” “What a party!”

Elizabeth hurried into the living room and started to clear up the cups. Bill lingered in the hall, started to look in the long mirror but turned away in disgust. No, that would never do. He turned back to the mirror and had a good long hard look at himself.