The Backstairs of the Mind

By Rosamond Langbridge

Patrick Deasey described himself as a “philosopher, psychologist, and humorist.” It was partly because Patrick delighted in long words, and partly to excuse himself for being full of the sour cream of an inhuman curiosity. His curiosity, however, did not extend itself to science and *belles lettres;* it concerned itself wholly with the affairs of other people. At first, when Deasey retired from the police force with a pension and an heiress with three hundred pounds, and time hung heavy on his hands, he would try to satisfy this craving through the medium of a host of small flirtations with everybody’s maid. In this way he could inform himself exactly how many loaves were taken by the Sweeneys for a week’s consumption, as compared with those which were devoured by all the Cassidys; for whom the bottles at the Presbytery went in by the back door; and what was the real cause of the quarrel between the twin Miss McInerneys.

But these were but blackbird-scratchings, as it were, upon the deep soil of the human heart. What Deasey cared about was what he called “the secrets of the soul.”

“Never met a man,” he was wont to say, “with no backstairs to his mind! And the quieter, decenter, respectabler, innocenter a man looked—like enough!—the darker those backstairs!”

It was up these stairs he craved to go. To ring at the front door of ordinary intercourse was not enough for him.

When Deasey invested his wife’s money in a public-house he developed a better plan. It was the plan which made him ultimately describe himself as a humorist. He would wait until the bar was deserted by all but the one lingering victim whom his trained eye had picked out. Then, rolling that same eye about him, as though to make quite sure no other living creature was in sight, he would gently close the door of the bar-parlour, pick up a tumbler, breathe on it, polish the breath, lean one elbow on the bar, look round him once again, and, setting the whisky-bottle betwixt his customer and himself, with a nod which said “Help yourself,” he would lean forward, with the soft indulgent grin of the human man-of-the-world, and begin:

“Now, don’t distress yourself, me dear man, but as between frien’s, certain delicate little—facts—in your past life have come inadvertently to me hearing.”

Sometimes he would allude to a “certain document,” or “incriminating facts,” or “certain letters”—he would ring the changes on these three, according to the sex and temperament with which he had to deal. But always, whatever the words, whatever the nature or sex, the shot would tell. First came the little start, the straightened figure, the pallor or flush, the shamed and suddenly-lit eyes, and then—

“Who told you, Mr. Deasey, sir?” Or “Where did you get the letter?”

“Ah, now, that would be telling!” Deasey would make reply. “But ’twas from a *certain person* whom, perhaps, we need not name!” Then the whiskey-bottle would move forward, like a pawn in chess, and the next soothing words would be, “Help yourself now—don’t be shy, me dear man! And—your secret is safe with me!”

Forthwith the little skeleton in that man's cupboard would lean forward and press upon the door, until at last the door flew open and a bone or two, and sometimes the whole skeleton, would rattle out upon the floor.

He had played this game so often, that, almost at first sight he could classify his dupes under the three heads into which he had divided them: Those who demanded with violent threats—(which melted like snow before the sunshine of John Jamieson) the letter, or the name of the informant; those who asked, after a gentle sip or two how the letter had come into his hands, and those who asked immediately if the letter hadn't been destroyed. As a rule, from the type that demanded the letter back, he only caught sight of the tip of the secret's ears. From those— they were nearly always the women—who swiftly asked if he hadn't destroyed the letters, he caught shame-faced gleams of the truth.

But those who asked between pensive sips, how the facts or the letter had come his way, these were the ones who yielded Deasey the richest harvest of rattling skeleton bones.

Indeed, it was curiously instructive how John Jamieson laid down a causeway of gleaming stepping-stones, so that Deasey might cross lightly over the turgid waters of his victims' souls. At the words, accompanied by John Jamieson—"A certain dark page of your past history—help yourself, me boy!—has been inadvertently revealed to me, but is for ever sacred in me breast!" —it was strange to see how, from the underworld of the man's mind, there would trip out the company of misshapen hobgoblins and gnomes which had been locked away in darkness, maybe, this many a year.

"Well—how would I get the time to dane the childer and to wash their heads, and I working all the day at curing stinkin' hides! 'Twas Herself should have got it, and Herself alone!" .

Or—

"No, I never done it, for all me own mother sworn I did. I only give the man a little push—that way I—and he fell over on the side, and busted all his veins!"

Or—

"Well, an' wouldn't you draw two pinsions yourself, Mr. Deasey, if you'd a wife with two han's like a sieve for yellow gold!"

But there were some confessions, haltingly patchy and inadequate, but hauntingly suggestive, which Deasey could neither piece out on the spot, nor yet unravel in the small hours of the night. There was one of this nature which troubled his rest long:

"Well, the way of it was, you see, he put it up the chimbley, but when the chimbley-sweepers come he transferred it in his weskit to my place, and I dropped it down the well. They found it when they let the bucket down, but I wasn't his accomplice at all, 'twas only connivance with me!"

When he had spoken of the chimney and the well Deasey concluded at once it was a foully murdered corpse. But then, again, you could not well conceal a corpse in some-one's waistcoast; and gold coins would melt or be mislaid amongst the loose bricks of a sooty chimney. Deasey had craved for corpses, but nothing so grim as that had risen to his whisky-bait until he tried the same old game on Mrs. Geraghty. What subtle instinct was it that had prompted him to add to the first unvarying words: "But all that is now past and over, and safe beneath the mouldering clay!"

At these last words, the Widow Geraghty knew well, the barrier was down that fences off one human soul from another; all the same, she shook her trembling head when

Deasey drew the cork. At her refusal Deasey was struck with the most respectful compassion; until that hour he had never known one single lacerated soul decline this consolation.

"And to look at me!" she wept forthwith, "would you think I could shed a drop of ruddy gore?"

"No, ma'am," returned Deasey. "To look at you, ye'd think ma'am ye could never kill a fly!"

And respectfully be passed the peppermints.

"Sometimes," the widow muttered, "I hears it, and it bawling in me dreams o' night. And the two bright eyes of it, and the little clay cold feet!" Deasey knew what was coming now, and he twitched in every vein. And she so white-haired and so regular at church: and the black bonnet on the head of her, an' all! "It was the only little one she had," went on the widow, bowed almost to the bar by shame, "and it always perched up on her knee, and taking food from her mouth, and she nursing it agin her face. But I had bad teeth in me head, and I couldn't get my rest, with the jaws aching, and all the whiles it screeching with the croup. 'Twould madden you!"

"All the same," Deasey whispered, "maybe it wasn't your fault: 'twas maybe your man egged you on to do the shameful deed—"

"It was so," said the widow. " 'Let you get up and cut its throat,' says he, 'and then we will be shut of the domned screechin' thing.' " "Then you got the knife, ma'am," prompted Deasey. "It was the bread-knife," she answered, "with the ugly notches in the blade,—and I stole in the back way to her place in the dead hours of the night— and I had me apron handy for to quench the cries; and when I c'ot it be the throat didn't it look up at me with the two bright, innocent eyes!"

"And what'd you do with the body?" he asked.

"I dug a grave in the shine of the moon," she answered. "And I put it in by the two little cold grey feet—"

This touch of the grey feet laid a spell on Deasey's hankering morbidity.

"*What turned the feet grey?"* he whispered.

"Nature, I s'pose!" replied the white-haired widow. She drew her shawl about her shrinking form before she turned away.

"'Twas never found out, from that hour to this, who done it!" muttered the Widow Geraghty, "but, may the Divvle skelp me if I touch one drop of chucken-tea again!"