

THE GIRL IN THE PINK DRESS

"Now, it may surprise ye that I should come from a long line of bachelors. But that's the way 'round these parts. If your relatives decide not to emigrate, bachelorhood awaits 'em, whether they want it or not.

"Not that we're like the beasts o' the jungle, mind ye, where only the strong mate. 'Tis just the way. Take me, for example. I like women. But, who'd marry me with no place to turn to 'cept the Squire's lands when there's work to be done. The cottage just can't make it. Bad enough I gotta live away from the conveniences, havin' to be careful when I carry the hot water upstairs. And now that my nephews and nieces ha' been born, I just ha' to be extra careful not to be noticed when I take me weekly bath. 'Twould be immoral bein' seen by them in a state of undress - even if a body's careful not to be seen.

"Which leads me to the time I moved to Liverpool, where I knew there'd be work, even if it meant livin' with the bloody English and their bloody weather..."

"It's just as cold and rainy around these parts," the stranger interrupted.

"'Cept that over there the rain and cold are English. They just don't feel the same. I know, 'cause I lived there, as I was about to tell."

Pat Malloy stopped as he readied for the rest of his story. He reached for the half-full pint glass, where some stout foam rimmed the slowly-consumed drink. He was wearing a heavy brown woolen coat that covered a faded white shirt partly ornamented by a red and brown tie knotted unevenly and firmly held down by a vest whose front showed through the open coat. His pants were of a slightly lighter shade than the coat. His boots were black and soiled with an accumulation of mud from the nearby fields and dirt roads. His hat, which he wore slightly leaning to the left side of his head, matched neither his coat nor his pants. Malloy had owned it for a long time, having worn it in all kinds of weather. His complexion was fair and his greenish eyes emitted a sort of nostalgic expression as they gazed at the listener who had come off Seamus' bus and stuck around Callaghan's without explaining why he was there.

"...And 'tis like I said," Malloy started once again. "'Tis cold in Liverpool. Colder than a stepmother's kiss, I tell ye. But one don't ha' to go far to find a job, bless the English. Within a day o' arrivin' I was workin'. A fine gent, my boss was. And that's when the trouble started.

"'Pat,' he says one day. 'Saturday night I need to have ye drive me ov'r to the lodge. I could drive meself, but 'twouldn't be natural a man o' me station doin' so, when I've got someone as trustworthy and

capable as ye'. I was real proud o' meself. Only three months in Liverpool and already drivin' the boss to his Saturday Night dance. And so when the time came I put on me best outfit - even wore me knickers, since the bottom o' other pants had been stained by the soil and sod. 'Pat!' says the boss as he sees me. 'Why, you look so good, you shouldn't stay out in the car after you park it. Come on in, identify yourself and have a drink or two on me. They'll tab me for it. No problem.' I was so happy I could've cried. If only me mother, bless her, could ha' heard 'im.

"And so I parks the car nice and safe, where I knew no one would steal the wheels to sell around the docks, from where they'd soon find their way to Dublin. That done, I moved on to the lodge, where the music was already playin'. Now, I tell you, besides comin' from a long line of spinsters and bachelors, I'm Irish and proud o' it. Gi' me a lil' music and my soul stirs. First I listen until the force o' tears moves to me feet and they start movin', slow like, and then in rhythm. I knew, o' course, the boss had not invited me to dance, but, then, if a gent such as 'im would invite me for a drink, he'd 'ave no trouble if I stole a dance, as long as I was not dancin' with 'im. And so, I looked into the main hall, where every one is happy and smilin'.

"And that's when I seen her on the other side of the dance floor.

Beautiful, she was - almost as pretty as some o' the girls I'd seen in Dublin. My heart stopped, skipped, and started again as I walked round the dancers to where she sat. 'Would ye have this dance with me,' I asked polite like. She looked at me. Now, I tell you, I had no hat on. Left it on a chair outside, where someone could've stole it. I know me place. But she still looks at me - up and down, from head to toe point. Now me shoes weren't the best, but they were clean now that I lived in the city.

Suddenly, in an almost contemptous way, she says 'I wouldn't dance with an Irish servant if ye was the last man on earth'. She then turned her head as if I'd said somethin' nasty, or not polite.

"I'd 'ave thrown me drink at her, if I'd only 'ad a drink."

Malloy paused once again, as if to recover from his hurt. He looked at the stranger who had just signaled for a refill.

"So she wouldn't dance with an Irish servant," Malloy started anew after having made a somewhat lame attempt at reaching for his own drink. His extended hand never reached the glass, but remained in mid air held possibly by a thought that its owner did not reveal. "I looked at the back of her head. Her hair was beautiful and shiny clean. I could've kissed it before walkin' away to hide me hurt. I didn't even pause for the drink on me gentleman's tab. For the next three hours I sat in the car, me rage at the bloody English swellin' within. So she wouldn't dance with an Irish servant, I'd repeat to meself. Well, someday I'll show her. Someday, when I've saved me money, which is hard on what the miserable bloody English pay, even if me boss was a good person - almost a Catholic.

"And so I did save me money, so much so that I could have bought any suit I wanted in the best shops, the ones that trade only with gentlemen. I still remember when I walked in and the clerk looked at me. He passed me by the first time, as if he were goin' to get another measurin' tape to replace the one hangin' 'round his neck. Then he passed me by again, still bearin' the same tape. As he's passin' the third time, I tripped 'im gently so he'd stumble without fallin' and asked: 'Who do I speak to for service?' He recovered 'imself. 'Deliveries in the rear of the establishment. Can't you read?'

"'Yes, I can read,' I says. But I 'ave no deliveries. I want to buy a suit.' He looked at me, amazed.

'Here?', he asks. 'Are ye sure?' 'Course I'm sure,' I says. 'What ye think I'm here for?'

"'Twas only then he dared to approach me. 'Right this way,' he says extendin' his arm towards the finest cloth me eyes had ever seen. 'Or would ye care to have one ready made, which we could then adjust for ye?'

"Since I could already see the ones made and could tell what they looked like I pointed to where they hung. 'Twas then that he reached for his tape and started measurin' me. He went through his routine, even stickin' the tape between me legs in parts that no normal man would touch without permission o' the owner. 'Ye'r lucky,' he says. For a moment I felt embarrassed thinkin' he was talkin' about the good gifts the Lord 'ad given me and which he had touched with his measure and finger tips. But then he says:

'We've got just the right apparel for ye.' First time I'd heard that word, apparel. 'Right here,' he says holdin' up a beautiful dark blue suit. 'Coat and pants will fit you just right.' He then took me to a back room, where I put everything on in privacy after takin' off me old outfit, of course. When I came outside I felt like a new man, ready to conquer the world - and to extract me vengeance on that English wench, should I ever see her again."

For a moment, neither the stranger nor Malloy said anything else, as if Malloy had reached into his inner soul and could go no further, and the stranger had heard so much that he wanted to pause and reflect on his new knowledge. Furthermore, although their conversation had been private, the pub seemed as if everyone inside had been listening to the story and was now waiting for its outcome.

Actually, except for the stranger, no one else was paying attention. Given Malloy's regularity at the pub, they'd heard the story several times, and their interest had already ebbed. Even Callaghan was leaning at the opposite end from where Malloy and the stranger were, listening to someone else whose voice did not seem to go beyond them.

Malloy took a long gulp, emptying his pint. He laid down the glass and looked at it wistfully. Only a few weak vestiges of foam seemed to remain, all of which soon evaporated leaving slight smudges and some

wetness. "Yes," he continued as he wiped his lips on his coatsleeve. "I couldn't wait for me revenge and, as luck would ha' it, it came sooner than expected.

"The boss asked me to drive 'im again. He'd rather ha'me do it than drive back drunk, he said. Somethin' 'bout the lights from other cars affectin' his vision. I couldn't wait to put on me new suit, and me best shirt. This time I didn't even ha' to be invited in for a drink, though I did stop at the bar and bought one on the boss' account - not a beer, mind you, but one of those gents' drinks with gin and fizzy water, a twist of lemon from Spain, and two small ice pieces. All gents like. And like any of the gents would ha' done, I took a small sip before walkin' into the main hall where Archie Silversmith's Orchestra was playin' a waltz and the crowd danced round and round as if motored by wheels that moved only in the same direction. Beautiful, although the waltz is not much to me liking. I prefer to move around, to dance when ye pay attention to your partner and feel her body 'gainst your own. Somethin' like a fox trot, for example. And that's exactly what Archie played next, after a brief pause to give the dancers a chance to return to their seats for their eatin' and drinkin'. It was then that I saw her, beautiful as ever, her brownish red hair fallin' gently to her well-formed shoulders. She was wearin' a pink dress designed so that her breasts stood out under the upper fringes. A real beauty.

"I looked at her from a distance. Then, as the music started, I passed me hand by me hair, which was slicked back as if held by seven pence's worth o' spit, and headed towards her table. 'May I ha' this dance, Miss?' I asked, bendin' slightly down at the waist.

"She rose without sayin' anything and reached for me hand. I put down the drink I held in the other and, followin' her lead, moved to the middle o' the floor. I then put me arm 'round her. Pure ecstasy. She could really dance. The floor meanwhile started crowdin', forcin' us to get closer and closer together. Suddenly, as if bolted by lightning, I pulled back. 'Damn it!' I shouted.

'Don't you know it's not polite to fart when you're dancin'? Shame on you!' I stepped back from her to watch her complexion change from English pink into a pale white of absolute fear.

'Yes,' I repeated. 'Tis bad enough to come here after eatin' garlic as if you were Italian. Bad, really! But to fart as well!...' She didn't know what to say. By that time everyone near had stopped dancin' to look at us. She suddenly seemed to have come to and, her colour returnin', ran from the floor tryin' to avoid as many people as possible. She headed towards the main door and that was the last I seen o' her.

"The orchestra, naturally, knowing that somethin' was wrong, started playin' louder. The dancers returned to their steps, while I continued me angry actin' as I walked out the hall.

Suddenly, as I smelled the fresh air, I started to laugh, so much so that I couldn't contain meself. So much that I ended up peein' me pants. Almost ruined me new suit. Haven't worn it since for fear that someday I may see her again.

Manuel L. Ponte

St. Louis, Missouri.