

And excerpt from. . .

Soiled Doves

by
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Sitting back in her seat and suddenly feeling a great loss, Felicity listened as Elspeth, taking the opportunity of getting back to the subject of Christmas, asked, “Oh Gilbert, do tell us how you celebrate the season, in Ireland.”

As Felicity sat and listened to Gilbert reminisce how his family had celebrated the season, her mind began to whirl. Never had she dreamt that Gilbert would take the children from her.

Suddenly feeling very protective and maternal toward them, she looked up at Benjamin. *How could you keep something like this from me, Benjamin?* Blocking out such thoughts of betrayal, she leaned further into her chair, still rocking the baby softly as she tried to block out the anger she felt growing inside of her. As her heart continued to race, she barely heard Gilbert speak of the Irish traditions of placing holly on the mantel, doorways, and pictures.

“Holly? Not evergreen?” Felicity heard Elise ask.

“Aye, holly. Folklore has it that the fairy folk would come in out of the cold to find shelter in the holly branches. But me Da said the leaves were like the shining life of Christ, which lives on long after his death; and the berries, his blood.”

Hearing blood, his words grew fainter, and Felicity closed her eyes to fight back the stinging tears in her eyes. The stress of the day, knowing she would have to see James, toppled by hearing Gilbert was intending to take the children from her, and knowing Benjamin had kept it from her became too much for her to bear. Without warning, Felicity found herself on the verge of hysteria, desperately needing air. Feeling as if she were about to faint, she opened her eyes, barely hearing Elspeth ask, “A red candle is placed in the window you say? Whatever for?”

“Aye, for Joseph and Mary to find shelter. Then the night of Christmas, a bowl of milk and bread is left on the stoop and the doors are left unlatched....”

As Gilbert continued to speak, Felicity found it more difficult to comprehend and she felt the room began to spin around her. Leaning slightly forward, her eyes focused momentarily on Gilbert, who seemed distorted to her. From his vantage point, Gilbert noticed that Felicity’s head was beginning to bob. Not wanting to draw attention to her, he looked at Elspeth as he discreetly inched in front of Felicity to block her from the vision of others. Having her full attention he boisterously asked, “I bet ya ain’t never heard of the ‘starvin’ wren have ya?”

Certain he had her and the rest of the guest’s attention, Gilbert leaned closer to Benjamin, yanked his handkerchief from his lapel pocket while discreetly whispering in his friend’s ear, “Get yer Missus outside!”

As if he were a magician, Gilbert stepped back to where he had stood, pulled the fire poker from its stand and while tying the hanky round the tip of the poker, he called on James to assist him. “Sterling, you remember how them young Irish lads straight off the boat go around cupping their hands and follow their mums about as they dance. Why don’t you help me demonstrate what they might expect to see in New York at the docks, fer yer friends.”

Looking out to the crowd of friends gathered around Anne's parlor, as if needing them to help convince James to partake, and getting applause and cheers as expected, Gilbert snidely smiled at his unreceptive partner. "Be a good lad, and follow my lead and you'll be doin' the jig in no time at all."

Turning back to the crowd, he waved Benjamin's handkerchief in the air. Wringing it between his hands, Gilbert then tied it securely over the tip of the poker stick. "All right, now this 'ere sad pitiful creature is a wren." Looking at it and shaking his head disapprovingly, he said, "Hold on, a few minor adjustments...ye never seen a white wren, have you?" Turning, he rubbed Benjamin's handkerchief in the ash beneath the hearth. Obviously pleased by the soot smeared over the pretend wren, he nodded his head. "That's better."

Dramatically lifting his leg, Gilbert strutted merrily around the circle of friends gathered, turning back and encouraging James to partake. "Step lively, Sterling, or starve as a beggar."

Reluctantly, James followed, clapping his hands while Gilbert raised the fake wren higher in the air, marching and singing merrily around the parlor. Pausing in front of Elspeth who was obviously enjoying the show, Gilbert said, "Won't you be helpin' the poor starvin' wren, m'lady?"

Clapping her hands, Elspeth shook her head and looked pleadingly over at Jacque Paul who casually tossed a coin to James. "Why thank'ee kind sir for helpin' the starvin' wren," spouted Gilbert, as James retrieved it from the carpet. Teasingly, Gilbert shook his head disapprovingly then cupped his hand round his mouth and said to the crowd as if sharing a secret, "Forgive me mate, ee's in need of a wee bit of practice."

Turning to the Hixes, keeping his eye on Benjamin who was now assisting Felicity from the room with Elise at her side, Gilbert merrily said, "Surely the good doctor 'ere, wouldn't want the wren to starve, now would 'ee?"

Getting another donation from Stephen Hix, he worked the room as cheers erupted as James again missed the coins that had been tossed. Then reaching Anne at the far end of the circle, Gilbert bowed dramatically before her. "Thank'ee kindly, fair maiden, for the use of yer parlor to assist me wren and me beggar 'ere. As ya can see we are set fer the winter."

Bowing, Anne smiled politely. "Glad to be of service, Mr. O'Flaherty."

Raising the wren, Gilbert pointed at James, who smiled cordially at the crowd while flipping a coin with his thumb and catching it in his hand. As the two of them took their final bows, Elspeth, clapping her hands, asked, "Oh do tell, why is this done again?"

"Why, for the starvin' wren of course, dear lady, and the lad's empty pockets after the season."

The crowd erupted with laughter and James discreetly whispered to Gilbert, "Think you were clever, don't you O'Flaherty? Well all you proved was, once a beggar always a beggar."

Turning and handing him the pretend wren, Gilbert sarcastically replied, "Is that right, Sterling? Well, in case you hadn't noticed, I wasn't the beggar, you were. And a damn piss poor one at that. Oh by the way, for future reference, I don't give a damn what you think."

Not waiting for a response, Gilbert walked over to Joshua who stood in front of the doorway to the terrace, leaving James standing alone, foolishly holding the wren in one hand and coins in the other.

Jacque Paul, walking over to James as he turned to replace the poker back in the rack, said, "James old boy, I think you and Anne were out-foxed, tonight. Let it go."

Untying the handkerchief from the poker and shaking it off before placing it in his pocket, he glared up at him. "Unlike you Jacque, I'll be damned if I will be denied my son."

Not responding, seeing Anne approach, Jacque directed his attention to his hostess, who said, "Why James, how unlike you to partake in such merriment. I must say, if I had known you and Gilbert were going to put on such a foolish sideshow, I wouldn't have bothered hiring a quartet to play in the gardens following dinner."

“Dear Anne, by now I would have thought you had come to realize that I would do anything to worm my way back into your heart, even making a spectacle of myself for the sake of your cousin.”

Confused by his comment, she leaned closer to him, and hissed, “My cousin? What does Felicity have to do with you making a complete and utter fool of yourself before the elite of society? Honestly James, I don’t know why I’ve bothered trying to reintroduce you to my friends when you insist on parading about like some commoner. Surely you know the difference between what is appropriate and what is not, or has living amongst the likes of that Irishman clouded your good judgment?”

Jacque Paul interrupted the two of them. “In case you hadn’t noticed, Felicity was on the verge of swooning and your industrious guest, despite his lack of rearing, had the foresight to put on his little dog and pony show, so she could be rescued.”

Anne quickly scanned the room and seeing no Felicity, only Elise and Joshua returning from the gardens, turned back toward him. “Ah let me guess, she and Benjamin are in the garden.”

“Precisely. I’m surprised you didn’t realize something was amiss, especially when that Irish hooligan went over to Benjamin and whispered something to him as he took his handkerchief, rather than using his own,” spouted James.

“Oh, you can’t be serious, James. Surely you aren’t insinuating that both of her lap dogs who’ve been hovering over her since she arrived, didn’t notice our dear Felicity needed tending to, but that ruffian did?”

There was no denying the bitterness in Anne’s voice as she spoke, and Jacque, seemingly disgusted, said, “Rather than gloat that your cousin has taken ill Anne, why not find out if she requires assistance? After all, there is a doctor in attendance.”

“Oh Jacque Paul, please don’t be annoyed with me, darling. Felicity isn’t ill, she’s just trying to get a little more attention, and be saved by yet another admirer. It would appear having Benjamin and James here isn’t enough, she’s now after capturing that pagan Irishman, too.”

“Or perhaps she has reached her breaking point, especially having one of her own turn on her,” Jacque snarled, not hiding his disgust.

Before Anne had time to respond, she noticed Felicity had returned on Benjamin’s arm, smiling sweetly to those she passed, just as she had seen her cousin do countless times before. “See, just as I said, Felicity is fine; a true Phelps through and through.” Looking up at him lovingly, Anne added, “Don’t look so cross Jacque, we’re just having a little tiff and in time we’ll kiss and make up. We always do.”

Patting Anne’s hand, Jacque said hesitantly, “I hope you’re right, my dear. For both our sakes.”