

# In which Contessa Barbara digresses on dirty feathers

"Now. You wish to know of my own experience with the feather-laundering operation? I am afraid I must begin with some explanation. When I was a child, my father was a proud and noble man, but not a wealthy man. My died when I was very young and my father could not afford a noble governess, nor suffer me to be under the hand of a commoner, so I was left a good deal of the time on my own. You will understand that - as a child - I found this no great hardship. I spent my time very much as I pleased and found my own lessons when I wanted them. I taught myself to read by deciphering the glyphs in the Tomb of Bulgretan, which I discovered in my adventures. I taught myself to dance, listening to the buskers in the market square. I took my histories (and certain other lessons of note) from a kindly old woman who I visited in her gingerbread home in the woods. She rather took me under her wing. I learnt to fence at the indulgence of the Count's men, who thought me cute until at the age of eight, I began to best them. All in all, I had a grand time and learnt as well as any child who had a governess.

"Still, when I reached a certain age, my father took it into his head that besting soldiers and hunting crocodiles was somehow unladylike. He decided that he had been remiss in my education and wrote to every finishing school in Spain, asking them their terms. The fees they quoted were ruinous, and my father had begun to despair when he saw a small article in the corner of the newspaper on the activities of a certain Lady Brigette. She was, the article said, establishing a finishing school for young ladies, but flying in the face of conventional wisdom, the establishment was at the top of a high, windy mountain so that any student arriving at the school would first have to trek for three days up a narrow and rocky path to arrive. Though obviously bemused, and wondering where she would find students, the paper lauded her for her public spirit in setting up the finishing school as a non-profit venture. My father leapt upon this opportunity and sent me at once to the school, with a trunk in one hand and a letter of introduction in the other.

"Now as it happened, my journey to Lady Brigette of Brigedegoon's Finishing School for Young Ladies was not uneventful and constituted in the end, my first real adventure. But I will not go into that now. Suffice it to say that it was a little over two months later - and in the depths of winter - that I finally arrived at her door, at the top of the mountain. I took up the great brass knocker and knocked upon the door.

"It was answered by a small man with a long moustache who looked started indeed to see anyone at the door - much less a young girl proffering a letter of introduction. Still, he showed me in, introduced himself as Colonel Sutton, the English instructor, and took me down a dusty corridor to the dormitory, where he lit the fire before disappearing back down the hall. I soon learnt that I was in fact the only student in the whole school, though it seemed well staffed and prosperous.

"Lessons were a curious affair. The English instructor seemed nervous in my company. The Latin teacher had no Latin, and referred constantly to a little dictionary. Mrs Flutton, the embroidery teacher, seemed to know her craft, but Mr Sihgn, the elocution teacher, had an accent so thick that I could scarcely understand his instructions. And the Lady Brigette of Bridegedoon, I rarely saw at all. I spent my free hours wandering about the mountain-top, admiring the views and enjoying the company of the golden Pudong birds, so tame and trusting, which are so rare in the world at large, having been hunted to near-extinction for their beautiful feathers. Once or twice, I ventured further down the mountain, to the caves where I saw the Yug Behemoth and other rare and fearsome creatures, but always I came back to my lessons, since my father wished it so.

"We had few visitors, but every Thursday morning, a man would arrive with a mule, its bags packed with provisions for the school and every Thursday evening, he would head back down the mountain, his packs considerably lighter but seemingly no less full.

"And so my days passed until one night, unable to sleep, I arose from my bed to explore the school by candle-light. Hearing the sound of talking in the great hall, I headed that way. When I got there, I saw a strange sight indeed. All my teachers, gathered around a table, with golden feathers in the middle, pots of black paint in their hands, and a dozen carcasses of Pudong birds lying on the floor.

"As you may know, golden feathers are always in high demand in the fashion industry. There are in the world only two known natural sources of golden feathers of sufficient fineness and quality for a lady's hat. The first is the Pudong bird, which so gentle easily caught that it is now illegal to hunt it, but which pines to death if held in captivity. The second is the Hiskedar Turkey, a raucus, smelly and troublesome bird, which can be farmed legally, but which tends to produce an inferior feather unless loved sincerely by its carer, despite its unpleasant character. Quality feathers of the Hiskedar Turkey are almost indistinguishable from the feathers of the Pudong bird, except that the central spine of the former is black, which that of Pudong feathers is silver.

"So you can well imagine what was going on here! I gasped in shock to see such perfidy. Hearing it, the felons looked up from their work, some looking guilty, others enraged. Lady Brigitte was the first to react. Clearly, now that I had seen this place for what it was, I was a danger to her reputation and her comfortable livelihood. She grabbed a poker from the fireplace, and ran towards me.

"Well, I ran all the way back down the hall to my dormitory, extracted my sword from my trunk, and led her in a merry duel through the corridors of the school. By and by, I had her on his knees, pleading for her life, so of course, I escorted her down the mountain and turned her in at the nearest police-station. The others, by the time I returned, had already fled, though I was able to capture Colonel Sutton, he had destroyed much of the evidence and the charges were never fully proved in court, although the circumstantial evidence was still substantial. Altogether an unsatisfactory ending, but I was young and inexperienced then.

"I returned home to my father and he never spoke again of my education. So that was that."

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