

The famed Grey Pearls of Pung Qing

In particular, how Contessa Barbara of Tango was instrumental in recovering the Grey Pearls of Pung Qing for his Excellency Qian Long, Emperor of China.

In which Lady Kathryn asks a story of the Countess

Turning to her neighbour, Lady Kathryn asks. "Countess Barbara, I know you have travelled to all 5 corners of the globe and I have always been most interested to learn more of your adventures in the Far East. In particular, I have heard rumours that you were instrumental in recovering the Grey Pearls of Pung Qing for his Excellency Qian Long, Emperor of China. Is it true that you found them in a forgotten room of the Imperial Palace?"

Contessa Barbara travels to China

Contessa Barbara smiled at the memories that Lady Kathryn's question brought to mind. "Ah, yes," she mused, "The famed Grey Pearls of Pung Qing."

"Of course, the pearls were not always famous," the Contessa continued. "Indeed, when I first arrived in China, very few had heard of them at all. Such matters of history were in any case not at the forefront of the minds of its people, for the word on every tongue was that the Emperor, His Excellency Qian Long, beloved of heaven and five times winner of the Kan Xi children's book prize, was unwell and might die without an heir.

"This was of course a matter of grave concern, and the Emperor had called in the finest medical men - and not a few charlatans and soothsayers, I might add - to find a cure. There was a promise of high office for anyone who could return the Emperor to health. But I was in the country for another reason entirely - to research the habits of dragons so that I might find some means to aid to poor people of Yugoslavia, who were suffering a plague of such creatures."

The Duke makes a wager

His duel scarred hand forcefully pushing forth one of his silver coins, the Duke looks steadily at the Contessa. "I'd wager that one of the consulted charlatans was the blackguard and villain who is cousin to our host. I will not incur your wrath again, good Doctor, by mentioning his name. I will, however refer you to the German notes on stealing a certain day from the English calender, in which his name is mentioned several times. The notes themselves are not on my person at present, but I can assure that they are conclusive proof that the good Doctor's cousin was in fact present at the Emperor's court seeking the whereabouts of a certain time keeping device, whilst in the disguise of no less than.... THE DOCTOR HIMSELF!" The Duke nostrils flare alarmingly as he almost accuses Doctor Barrow of nefarious misdeeds as commoners are want to partake in...

The Contessa seeks entry to the Imperial Palace

"Indeed," says the Contessa, taking the coin and slipping it discreetly into her bodice, "it is interesting that you should mention that, since the blackguard's presence was instrumental in my recovery of the grey pearls for His Eminent Excellency, Qian Long, Emperor of China, Conqueror of Nations, and former Regional Under-15's Paperweight Wrestling Champion of Lower Nanjing.

"As is well known, the Chinese Dragon is now extinct. My researches therefore focussed on China's dragon-related history. I had found evidence that the very last dragon reported to have been slain in China was the famous golden dragon Nyi Pung, who had terrorised the palace itself. I felt my studies would not be complete without seeing the site of the final battle.

"As I approached the Imperial Palace, I noted a long queue of practitioners (some quite bizarrely garbed) outside the door of the main adjunct. Amongst them, I saw (as I then thought), our good friend Dr Barrow himself. I gave a friendly wave with my red spider-silk handkerchief (then so fashionable in Peking), but was surprised and disappointed to arouse no sign of recognition. I naturally expected that after the incident with the Eye of Ali, Dr Barrow would remember me well."

The Doctor wagers on handkerchiefs

The Doctor sputters, sending a mouthful of wine across the table. "Great heavens, my dear, the Women of Peking do not wear red spider silk handkerchiefs because they are fashionable! They are worn to signify..." The Doctor's words stop abruptly, but his jaw keeps working furiously. "That is, they signify... er, that a woman is... that she is making herself... which is to say... well, it's a highly honoured profession in Peking... A woman waving a red spider silk handkerchief is significant in Peking, and we shall leave it at that. I'll wager that waving one around in the great square would have had you hauled before a magistrate forthwith, and to secure your release, and indeed, to prevent a scandal, you would have had to make an insalubrious deal with the opportunistic Baron, who would have no scruples in manipulating your most unfortunate and undeserved predicament to his own ends, doubtless involving you in a plot between himself and the wicked dowager to overthrow His Majestic Radiance Qian Long, Glory of the World, Favoured by the Phoenix of the North Winds, and Blessed by Qing T'uk of the Overflowing Bounty in All Things and Accoutrements, himself."

He glances to his right. "If one of the Duke's more embarrassing relatives was involved, so much the better. How is poor Ali, by the way?"

Our heroine is brought before the magistrate

"Ali is much as he always was," says Contessa Barbara, "still playing the fiddle for the baker's cat." She gives Doctor Barrow a puzzled look. "I'm not sure I understand what you are saying about the significance of the scarves, but I am astounded by the accuracy of your prediction of the outcome. I waved the Scarlet Widow silk scarf to the 'Dr Barrow' in the queue and, arousing no sign of recognition, move towards him as I waved the scarf high over my head to attract attention. And attract attention it did. No sooner had I reached 'Barrow' and reminded him of who I was, than I was accosted by a young brute in the uniform of an Imperial Guard. The fellow actually had the impudence to lay his hands upon my arm!

"Normally, of course, I would not have hesitated to take his head off, however upon this occasion - with a valuable scarf in one hand and the Gilded Dragon Scrolls of Tse Hung Lok in the other, I found I could not draw my sabre in time. The fellow gibbered at me in some debased rural dialect of Cantonese which I found myself completely unable to follow, and dragged me away to the magistrate's house. The villain von Barrow, seeing his opportunity, followed a little way behind.

"The magistrate, when I arrived, was dealing with another case; the defendant a strange little fellow with enormous feet. As we entered the room, the judge waved his hand and the poor chap was decapitated before us. Which meant, at least, that we were not kept waiting for long. The guardsman jabbered something incomprehensible, but ended with a call for me to be publicly flogged! I loudly protested, but by this point, my sabre had been confiscated so there was little that I could do as the magistrate began waving his confirmation of the sentence. It was at this point that von Barrow spoke up (and hearing his voice, I recognised the man as an impostor). 'Sir,' he said, 'This woman is my wife's sister, and of good family, though easily led by poor company. If you will release her into my custody, I will make sure that she atones for her behaviour.' What was he playing at? I was no more his sister-in-law than a tadpole - still, a public flogging is always an embarrassment, so I said nothing to deny it."

We meet the dowager Kan See and hear of a villainous plan

"Now, it is a peculiarity of the Chinese Imperial Constitution that, if the Emperor dies unmarried and without an heir, his crown will be passed to his nearest male relative, however if he is married, his wife may rule in his place for one year to see if she bears a child. I did not know this at the time, however it seems that von Barrow did, and for he had approached the Emperor's stepmother with a proposal.

"The dowager Kan See was a woman of extremely expensive tastes. She added three teaspoons of gold dust to her tea every morning (saying that it improved the taste), had her hallway carpeted in mink for only three days before deciding that she didn't like the colour and having it ripped up and replaced with diamond tiles, and had entire gowns sewn from ladybird wings. The Emperor - Glorious Ruler of All He Surveys, Founder of the Long Dynasty and 2nd Zaitang Scout Troop - tolerated her eccentricities to a point, but his brother Da Win - a famous scholar in his own right - was a more severe and disapproving man. Only by seeing Quian Long married - and once married, dead - could Kan See hope to influence the succession in her favour.

"His Excellency was an emperor with many strengths, however if he had any weakness, it was a weakness for redheads. Redheads are hard to come by in China, but the villain von Barrow, as it happened, has a red-headed niece. He had summoned this young lass to China and had his connections introduce her to the court as a fine Lady. The Emperor was enchanted by her beauty and asked to meet her, but things went no further than that, since the "lady" (really no more than a postmaster's daughter) had no nobility at all, and this was immediately obvious. Miss Amelia von Barrow had an admirable build and a delicate complexion, but also a fondness for beans, a propensity to fart loudly, and an unfortunate habit of giggling loudly whenever she did so. It is rumour that in her audience with the Emperor, she had even offered to demonstrate the flammability of the gases. So von Barrow's plan was in disarray and the dowager's fortunes seemed destined to take a turn for the worst. But then I appeared at the palace. I - my hair a brilliant red at that time, so soon after I had tasted the fruit of the Tree at Delphi - must have appeared a godsend to the scheming pair."

"Moving back to *von* Barrow, it was clear that, for his scheme to succeed, he now required my complicity. When he explained his plot to me, I of course at first refused to have anything at all to do

with it. But, as he pointed out at once, I was to some degree in his power: he could at any moment return to the magistrate and declare me an impostor, since I was not his sister-in-law at all, and it would then be open to the magistrate to order my beheading as a fraud.

"'But you are in the same position exactly!', I retaliated. 'For you are plainly not the doctor you pretend to be'. 'What evidence can you offer but your word?', the Baron asked in reply. 'You are hardly in a position of credibility right now.' I was forced to concede that the blackguard had a point.

"So fell to me the task of seducing the Emperor and gaining his hand. The Baron called once again on his contacts in court, and they grudgingly saw to my introduction to their society. In fact, I was not averse to this, because it saved me the many months of form-filling and bureaucracy that would otherwise have been required to gain access to the Imperial Palace. The people of Yugoslavia - those who hadn't been eaten - were, of course, awaiting my return most anxiously. Still, I was now forced to conduct my researches inconspicuously, while under the watchful eyes of the Baron and the dowager."

The Duke questions the Contessa

The Duke frowns as if recalling a memory at the doctor's mention of seduction. "Ah, that's right. That would be about the right time too!" Seeking a pause in to which he may interject, he turns towards the Contessa. "If I recall correctly, wasn't the Emperor at that time also an impostor?" He places forth his second silver coin. "I remember that the Empress of Russia, Catherine the Great had disappeared from her court. Evidently there was some scheme afoot which necessitated that Baron Munchausen hide her from her relatives. So in fear for her life, and with the Baron's help she disguised herself as the Emperor of China. Or so the Baron told me, later." Duke Peter raises an eyebrow, "Surely your seduction attempts were much hampered by the fact that the Emperor was in fact, a woman in disguise? And indeed, no lesser woman than Catherine the Great, Empress of all the known Russias?"

Miss T corrects the Duke

Miss Thimblebelly is overcome by a great fit of coughing at the Duke's words, which ease only after a minute and some medicinal consumption of her neighbour's ale. Eventually she leans past the Doctor to remark, in a loud stage whisper, "As a matter of fact, and apologies for contradicting your Grace, but if the Emperor was actually Catherine the Great, Empress of all the Known and not a few of the Unknown Russias, in an ingenious disguise, as you say, and of course I wouldn't dream of questioning your Grace's speculation, then any seduction attempts on the part of Countess Barbara would not have been hampered in the slightest, if you gather my drift, but may rather have had every chance of success."

She shakes two silver coins out of a sleeve onto the table, and continues, "With apologies to Lady Alyssa, and naturally sparing any details of any debauchery, Countess, please enlighten us as to the outcome"

Catherine the Great: Candy is Dandy

Colouring slightly, the Countess accepts Miss Thimblebelly's two silver coins. "I must admit that I had

intended to gloss over that part of the story, out of concern for Queen Catherine's privacy, but it seems the tale is at least partly out. Qian Long - Emperor of Glorious Sunsets and seven times elected King of the annual Nan Xing BDSM fundraising ball - had in fact died a quiet death in his bed of asphyxiation only days before his coronation. His brother, Da Win, was most upset by this turn of events, not least because Da Win had no desire to be Emperor, preferring to continue his groundbreaking studies in natural philosophy. So when Catherine the Great arrived that same night at his door, disguised as chinaman and seeking his assistance in hiding from her relatives, they formed between them a preposterous plan, but a plan which -in action - worked very well. How better to hide a royal person than in plain view? How better for Da Win to avoid the call of royal duty than to have his brother live on in the public eye?

"But I knew nothing of this at the time. I made my entrance to the court quietly. Having convinced Baron von Barrow that an air of mystery would be more appealing to the Emperor than a direct approach, I was largely free to seek the tomb of the dragon. But "the Emperor" had noted my presence and within a week, had summoned me to share a dinner which turned out to be a tete-a-tete (servants aside). It seemed proper to bring a gift, so I brought with me a selection of sweet Honeybird, Syrup Finch and Jam Robin eggs, carefully preserved since my trip to antipodes. "Quian Long" seemed understandably delighted by this rare confectionary, but even more pleased by my company. As the evening wore on, the topic of conversation ranging from the literary works of the Greater Griddled Clam to the relative merits of different steel alloys in sword-making, "the Emperor" had "his" servants refill my glass so often and with such insistence that in spite of my strong tolerance for alcohol - I once drank sixty guards under the table to facilitate the rescue of a Duke's eldest son from the consequences of his own folly - in spite of my tolerance, I fell rather under the influence.

"The flutter of the Emperor's eyelashes, the flicking of his hair and the gradual drift of his chair towards mine had struck me as odd, but I thought these behaviours - along with the high colour in his cheeks - were perhaps a symptom of his illness. But when he put his hand on my leg, loosened his - er - *her* bodice and whispered an anatomically surprising suggestion in my ear, I at last understood what was afoot. Startled and somewhat unsteady from alcohol, I leapt to me feet and ran from the room. Catherine - whether out of misplaced ardour or for fear that her disguise would be uncovered - called her guards to retrieve me. And so began the chase."

The Doctor, somewhat reluctantly, pushes forward a gold coin.

"A chase through the Imperial Palace? How exciting! And how daunting! Allow me to explain, for those of the company who have not had the pleasure of the Emperor's hospitality, as it was explained to me by my master.

"It is a well known fact that the Chinese Imperial Palace was built by Kublai Khan himself to be the grandest edifice ever to have existed. When built, the palace itself was the size of a city. Since the days of the Khan, successive Emperors have each added their own constructions to the Palace, a suite of rooms here, an atrium there, here a roof-garden, there a wine cellar, such that the Palace now consists of over 170,000 rooms, not counting the Emperor's personal chambers, and is roughly the size of a county. There are rumours of tribes of Mandarins in the farthest reaches who, living near the French Ambassadorial Quarters as they do, have never seen the light of day! In fact, and it must have been several years before your arrival, the late Emperor had dispatched a team of explorers to find the long lost Emergency Ballroom, in the hopes that this magnificent chamber might form a base of operations, as it were, for the thorough mapping of the palace.

"It was an expedition from which no one was ever to return. And yet, I'll wager that the fabled Grey Pearls of Pung Qing were to be found in no other place than the Emergency Ballroom. How did you escape from this dread, though opulent, place, without a map to guide you, nor a ball of string to lead you, Theseus style, from the labyrinthine palace?"

First Blood in the Endless Palace

The Contessa takes the Doctor's coin and tests the gold with her teeth before expressing her enthusiastic agreement. "Yes, yes! You have it exactly! I ran from the dining room, only to be confronted in the hallway by guards coming from the opposite direction. Not wishing to hurt them, I took a side-door. I found myself surrounded by children, who barely had time to look up from their play before I left through another door. Next; a room full of young girls led on to a room of young concubines. Turning left, I came to a room of middle aged women; turning right, I passed a dormitory full of elderly ladies. They seemed unperturbed by my presence, in spite of the sword at my belt and skirts lifted to my stockinged knees so that I could run, but shrieked with alarm when the guardsmen followed. Ducking past gauze curtains and cutting through silk partitions, I ran on.

"The chase wore on for a night and a day, through libraries and kitchens, store-rooms full of candle-wax and store-rooms full of gold. I met strange tribes who had never seen the sun, rescued in passing a ballerina from a wild boar, and ran up two-thousand, six-hundred and forty-three stairs (and down another fifteen hundred and fifty-two). One by one, most of the guardsmen following became lost, gave up the chase, or fell to unfortunate accidents. Two stubborn and clever guards, however, remained on my tail. At last, I ran down a long hallway and found nothing at the end but a small rest-room. I turned and stood my guard. The men, seeing this, brought up their own swords. 'Come now, gentlemen,' said I, 'surely you have better things to do tonight than bind your wounds? Put down your weapons and I will let you leave unharmed.' Instead, failing to recognise their better, the foolish pair attacked.

"A feint! A parry! A counterattack! No time for details, but it was a glorious fight. These Imperial Guards of China were very well trained. The first man took a full twelve minutes to fall to my sword, but I had the other disarmed within ten seconds more. He offered his surrender and I was happy to accept. I bowed, and turned - and the blackguard took up his sword once more! Leaping away from the surprise attack, I found myself in the restroom. I reached for a Ming Dynasty porcelain vase to throw. But the vase could not be lifted! Instead, it pulled back, revealing itself as a lever, and as the room tilted, we both tumbled through into an enormous open hall - the Emergency Ballroom!

"I recognised the room at once, for it had been alluded to in the famous Dragon Scrolls. It was in this very room that the dragon Nyi Pung had eaten the princess Pung Qing and been slain by her lover Man Tung, who then died on the spot from his wounds and a broken heart. The golden body of the dragon was still smouldering on an enormous treasure-pile, though the bodies of the lovers had long since rotted away. I saw at once how Man Tung had defeated the dragon, but made my way up the mountain of jewels for a closer look. Around the bleached neck of Pung Qing's skeleton hung a string of pearls, their ivory lustre changed to a deep milky grey by the dragon's blood which had dripped onto them, long ago.

"It is well known that a dragon's blood has formidable healing properties, but the effects of dragon blood on pearls is less widely understood. The ancient scholar Drambuie, however, had conducted a study on just this question and discovered that blooded pearls - so very rare - can impart upon their wearer the deep and peaceful rest of a dragon slumbering in death. So when the guard overcame his

awe and followed me up the jewel-mound, I paused to retrieve the grey pearls of Pung Qing (and to secrete a few gems upon my person) before scaling the west wall of the forgotten Emergency Ballroom and making good my escape through the ceiling and over the Palace rooftop (from where the way was quite clear).

"It is a matter of historical record that the Emperor Long (Protector of Catfish, Lord of the Great Wall, and Collector of Stamps) is said to have died of his illness only just before Catherine the Great reappeared triumphantly in her home country. I, of course, sent my condolences, and sent with them the pearls, so that the ghost of the Emperor, with a proper burial, might at last know true peace."

Draining her glass, the Contessa turned to Sally. "My dear, is there any chance of some pudding?"

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