

# In Finery



**Sofronia Anne Strong**

A "Young Adult TV" Novel

## **Reluctant Press TV/TS Publishers**

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# In Finery

**By Sofronia Anne Strong**

"It's sort of a bloom on a woman. If you have it, you don't need to have anything else; and if you don't have it, it doesn't much matter what else you have." - J.M. Barrie: *What Every Woman Knows*

## **CHAPTER ONE: AUNT MARJORIE'S LITTLE GIRL**

There is an irony in the fact that the males of the Irish branch of my family breed "true to the bone", as it is said. Without exception, each seems to have mocked his sex by growing up slight and delicate in stature, fair complexioned and blond, with long lash adorned, wide blue eyes set in a perfectly oval face. These beautiful men, for such is the simple fact of my heritage, have historically tended to seek out large-boned, strong-willed women to wife. Perhaps these

choices were based on the hope that the apparent strength of such women might alter or somehow enhance the bloodline; but this “improvement” never came to pass. If anything, these strong women only dominated the lives of my male progenitors, in both physical strength and in will-power.

There was another peculiarity in my family: Beautiful men usually begin as beautiful boys. And it was not uncommon for these strong-willed women to amuse themselves by putting their pretty sons in petticoats. I have been unable to determine if crossdressing the sons in our family predates the Civil War but I wouldn’t be surprised to learn that some of my male forbearers were raised as proper Colonial misses.

In actual fact, I know that my great-grandmother kept her sons, my grandfather, who we called Dad-Frank and his older brother, Willard, out of the army in the last years of the Civil War, by disguising them as her daughters and moving from Boston to Chicago. Two years after the war, when Willard was twenty-one and Dad-Frank nearing twenty, she moved the family to the state of Iowa, where the youths resumed their normal male lives. There is no evidence to support my suspicion that five years in petticoats left them both addicted to feminine finery, but I firmly believe such to be the case. In support of this, I refer you to several tintype photographs in our family albums taken some four years after the war: in

one, you will see my formidable great-grandmother posed on a straight-backed chair, her slender and delicate featured little husband standing at her left and her lovely “daughters,” dressed in their most festive finery, at her right. Clearly the efforts of the photographer in reversing the normal manner of posing failed to compensate for the topsy-turvy stature of the husband and wife. It is clear the matriarch in this family is far and away the most physically imposing of the group. The young “women” and their father all appear to be very much the same stature and the three might almost be taken for sisters, if one could somehow imagine the father in what his wife termed “finery” as well.

Like her mother-in-law, Gram (Dad-Frank’s wife and my father’s mother) also referred to the habiliments of a lady as finery. By this, of course, she meant the elegant, feminine attire which distinguished a lady of that time from a mere woman. In grandmother’s time, such distinctions were not yet thought pejorative. Naturally, her views were shaped before the age of feminism, a viewpoint Gram would have found absurd. In her view a lady was distinguishable by her finery and finery was something which a lady understood by nature of being a lady.

Gram believed that an appreciation of finery was inherent, arising from good breeding. She made no distinction between a person’s genetic make-up and their enculturation. To her, good

breeding always showed and one could not be brought to, or trained for, an appreciation of finery. One was either well-bred or one was not and only if one was well-bred, would one understand and appreciate finery. Refinement of behavior, appearance and deportment were the hallmarks of good breeding and one measure of these qualities was a person's finery.

The only problem with Gram's philosophy on these points was that she didn't acknowledge a difference between "appropriate" finery for boys and girls prior to puberty. Until the distinguishing marks of sex emerged in adolescence, children were all one gender to her.

She kept my father in finery, feminine finery that is, until he was thirteen. At that age, he was subjected to a routine physical examination by school officials who were astounded to discover that he was male!

Thereafter, Gram distinguished between feminine finery and haberdashery, at least insofar as school attendance was concerned. Judging by the photographs in our family album, I suspect that my father would have preferred skirts, to the awful Little Lord Fauntleroy outfits in which he was sent off to school in the name of finery. At home he continued to be his mother's little lady much of the time until he left home for college. He never admitted it to me, but I eventually discovered that he remained a transvestite all of his life.

Gram was a suffragette, a leader of the Women's Christian Temperance Union in the state of Iowa and worked as a legal secretary for Grandfather. She had earned a bachelor's degree from Grinnell College (one of the first women to do so), and had taught school prior to her marriage. By today's standards, I suppose she would be considered at best, emancipated, a feminist; at worst, a pervert or a child abuser. But I am certain Gram didn't see herself that way. She was simply a strong-willed woman who didn't let mores or conventions get in her way and who didn't perceive gender distinctions as being important.

Gram, you see, was merely carrying on a family tradition when she kept my father in feminine finery until he was nearly grown. I am not certain whether she took the idea from her mother-in-law or hit upon it herself, but the question is probably moot. What matters is that I am of, at least, the third generation of men in my family to go about in finery. Gram was right, breeding tells and runs true to form, as any eugenicist will tell you.

\* \* \* \* \*

I am told, although I don't remember it, that I spent my preschool years in delicate finery, thanks to my Aunt Marjorie. She was wonderfully good to me and I owe her a great deal. It was she who convinced her husband Carl to allow her to take father and me in after my mother died in childbirth. It was she who was my "mother" from



my infancy until Doris entered my life. Most importantly, it was she who raised me as her little girl.

In her defense, I admit I did cooperate and the evidence of that is also in our family album where there are lovely pictures of a darling child with long, white-blond, corkscrew curls. In the earliest photos the child is dressed in lacy baby gowns, followed by photos of the same child in adorable toddler skirts and preschool dresses. In each photograph, the child is held in Aunt Marjorie's lap, or is playing with a favorite dolly, tea set or other preschool girl's delight.

I do remember my snow-white curls weighing on my shoulders and the great trauma brought on by my first haircut. Aunt Marjorie wept bitter tears as the locks fell to the barber shop floor. I am convinced my lifelong aversion to the ministrations of the barber stems from the memory of how miserable and saddened she seemed to see my tresses shorn.

And what about Gram? I don't think she ever reconciled to Marjorie leaving home, though she herself had selected Marjorie's husband: the compliant, passive, Carl, who became my father's business partner. I now believe that she so missed Marjorie, that she tried to re-create, through me, the happier days of Marjorie's childhood. Even after Marjorie's wedding, she main-

tained her bedroom as it had been when she was a girl.

Gram would take me into that room and tell me what a beautiful girl Marjorie was. Then she would lay out one of Marjorie's lovely dresses and make a game of dressing me up. When, at last, she had me in an ensemble of Marjorie's lace and linen finery, she would hold me on her lap, smother me with kisses and tell me tales of Marjorie's girlhood and of how many beaus she had as a young woman.

When I was fully arrayed in finery, she would lead me to the glider on the front porch and there we would swing gently, glasses of lemonade in hand, and listen to the romantic music of Victor Herbert on the Victrola.

I had mixed feelings about those halcyon days. Gram was at her softest and most affectionate on these dress-up occasions. It was clear that she missed Marjorie very much and it seemed harmless enough to play at her masquerade because it pleased her so. I can't say I enjoyed being arrayed in petticoats and long dresses of white lawn and wearing a huge, beribboned picture hat, but I did enjoy Gram fussing over me and praising my good looks.

"Gentility can't be imitated," she would say. "Good breeding shines through. You are descended from the Stout and the Strong. Your fine

features, fair complexion and refined demeanor all show it. You make a lovely girl, just as your father did. I hope you don't mind indulging your sentimental old Gram in this." I didn't really mind all that much. In fact, it made me happy to please her so.

When I was almost six, after I returned from a summer of spending those lazy days in my aunt's cast-off finery, Marjorie caught me wearing her slip. I thought she was busy in the kitchen and I had slipped it over my head just to feel the cool, silky texture of the satin and lace. I was rubbing my tummy with it and squirming with pleasure when Marjorie came into the bedroom. I was terribly embarrassed, quite ashamed of myself, and I expected to feel the hair brush on my backside very shortly. Marjorie, however, merely sat on the bed and smiled at me tenderly. She hoisted me onto her lap and hugged me close to her bosom, engulfing me in the glistening lacy fabric of the slip.

"Doesn't that feel good?" she cooed. I nodded, still certain I was in great trouble. "Gram says you look so nice in finery, that you were quite precious and darling in ruffles and lace this summer. Did you like wearing my finery, dear?"

I snuggled against her and sheepishly nodded my assent. It was not strictly true that I had liked wearing her old dresses, but I didn't want to say anything that might displease her.

“My slip is too big for you and you’re fairly awash in it. I think we had better find one your own size, don’t you?” Saying this, she pulled her slip off over my head and hugged me again.

“You really have been naughty, you know; wearing my lingerie without permission. Now you must make it up to me. The Wisters are having a birthday party for Jack this afternoon. You will attend as a girl and you will wear your very own slip and dress. We’ll call you Cynthia and tell everyone you are my niece.

“Now, I am sure that Jack will not recognize you, since he has not seen you since last spring when the two of you had that terrible scuffle in the street, but you will have to be on your most girlish behavior, or he might expose you. As to his parents; well, they haven’t seen you for almost a year, so I’m certain they will not realize who you are. So you see, it will be our secret. Won’t that be fun? Do you think you’ll like that?”

I was certain that the answer to both questions was NO, but Marjorie seemed so delighted with the idea that I hadn’t the heart to refuse. Besides, I was concerned that she would tell Father I had worn her slip and ought to be punished for it. Appearing as a girl at the birthday party of the bully I had managed to thrash in what I regarded as the battle of the century, while unappealing, seemed likely to be the lesser punishment.

She made a great ritual of my bath; washing me all over with the sponge and laughing and giggling over me. Her good mood persisted as she arrayed me in a dainty slip of silky satin and a chiffon party dress with an underskirt of yellow taffeta. The overdress of yellow chiffon had puff sleeves and embroidered butterflies on the skirt. I particularly recall the chiffon bodice of the dress because I felt such embarrassment at the realization that the lacy top of the slip showed clearly through the fabric. She finished the ensemble with a pair of knee-high, white silk hose and white, patent leather Mary Janes. Another aspect of that experience that may have helped to brand it on my memory is that for the first time, Marjorie used makeup on my childish features. The faintest touch of blue eyeshadow and mascara were applied, a touch of blusher on my cheeks and a carefully blotted application of pink lipstick brought out the girlishness of my familial heritage. To complete the illusion, a voluminous wig of cascading blonde curls topped with a yellow bow was firmly pinned into my hair. She fussed with the skirts and the tresses and displayed her approval of the new girl effusively.

“When you are my pretty girl,” she said, “I expect you to behave as a perfect little lady and not as a ruffian.” But such was not difficult; It’s hard to be a renegade while immersed in petticoats, lace and ribbons. Clearly, I found it easier to be demure than aggressive, hidden beneath all those curls.