

“Lady Luminary”

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I remember St. Louis as a city awakened by change. Usually, 19th Street was a noisy thoroughfare, but when the suffragists marched silently, the collective clack of their heels quieted the urban streets. At the northwest corner of 19th and Lucas stood the City Art Museum, a handsome broad building filled with modern works. The other buildings on the street, being part of the Gilded Age, faced one another with their handsome, impenetrable limestone façades.

I had arrived in St. Louis from the country to finish my education. Auntie gave me the parlor to use as my writing studio. A spacious and beautiful oak desk sat near the window. It must have been built in the room for I saw no way to get the desk in or out. In the wide top drawer, I found a copy of the “Minor v. Happersett” Supreme Court documents, a newspaper clipping of the criminal trial of Susan B. Anthony, pamphlets on the “New Departure,” and a handwritten essay called “Rise Up Women! Shine!” This title electrified my bones between the layers of my skin. My enthusiasm for historical documents was recently intensified by my induction into the St. Louis-Jefferson Chapter of the Daughters of the American Revolution.

The former owner of my aunt’s house was a wife and an activist. I found a picture of her standing behind Missouri Governor Fredrick Gardner as he signed a resolution ratifying the 19th amendment. The picture was folded inside a draft of the tenant’s Last Will and Testament. She left her money to Constitutional Hall in Washington; her furniture she left to “the Society.”

During the shortened days of fall, we noticed on our after-dinner-walks along the streets that the buildings grew dreary. But, the canvas of sky above was kinetic –swirling violet hues. Our steps brought us past Mary Institute and Campbell House, through the shadowed splendors

of Lucas Place. On these walks, I could for a moment leave the interior of my own mind and wander through the minds of others. When neighbors came to their windows, feeling the presence of someone looking in, we abandoned our shadows and continued walking toward home. Our black wrought iron fence made a striped façade in the light from our living room windows. A figure in the parlor window appeared. Startled, I grabbed hold of my aunt's arm. Auntie said it must have been a "trick of the eye."

She was waiting for me in the parlor, the trick of the eye, her spectral figure revealed in the light of the lamp on my desk. Her face was as long and thin as her nose. Her brows were lifted, highly impassioned. Suddenly, her poised hand extended a pen to me which I could not grab. Then, she was gone.

Every evening, I stood just beyond the parlor door waiting for her to appear, this Lady Luminary. When she came out from behind the desk wielding her ready pen, my heart leapt. I moved beyond her, grabbed my diary, and tried to keep her figure ahead of me. This happened night after night for weeks. I never spoke to her, but her lore occupied my every thought.

Her image accompanied me to the most unusual places. On weekday afternoons, I read the financials to Uncle Jim; Auntie and I walked through flower markets infested with hagglers; and, we visited the neighbor woman with five unruly children. I attended monthly DAR meetings in the Assembly Hall at Jefferson Memorial. She was there, too.

One evening, I went to the parlor to wait for Lady Luminary. There was no other sound save the clinking of the rain on the windowpane. Through the reflection in the glass, she appeared beside me. After the startle diminished, all my senses wanted to reveal themselves, and feeling that her image was about to slip from me, I pressed my pen to paper and gently asked, "What should I write?"

She addressed the first words enthusiastically. She used ideas unfamiliar to me like “the previous condition of servitude” and “equality with men.” I feverishly wrote down every word, but when I dabbed my brow with my forearm, I accidentally wiped her from view. The light from the lamp opposite the door caught the last vapor of her.

Countless ideas busied my mind in the waking and sleeping hours of that restless night. I rose at times, scribbled down half-thoughts and more questions. The following weeks when she didn’t visit seemed useless. I waged war against tedious gossip sessions and predictions of national financial ruin. Night and day, I tried to conjure her myself, to hear her voice. The fragmented thoughts I had transcribed before offered no comfort.

Exhausted from several sleepless nights, I asked Auntie if I might stay home from my daily outings. She was suspicious and hoped it was not for some silly teenage melancholy. She asked a few questions, I answered, and watched her face pass from suspicion to resignation. My mind was frantic, desperate to see Lady Luminary again. I had no patience for being kept waiting, nor for writer’s block.

One Wednesday morning, I told Auntie that I wanted to watch the suffragists march. She milled about the house, looking for her hat pin and dismissed me: “I don’t have time for you now, girl!” She searched in the window seat, and when she stood and turned, we bumped into one another. She let out a sigh. I turned flat against the wall feeling betrayed, eager to see the march.

That afternoon, I stared at the clock so long it felt as though several days and nights had passed. The click of the clock irritated my mood. No word from Lady Luminary. No word from Auntie. I paced between the parlor and my bedroom trying to divert anxiety. The height of the house felt cold even in the afternoon sunlight, and the narrow halls constricted my rapidly

beating heart. Finally, Lady Luminary's voice reached me mid-declaration. "...The basic and fundamental right of being able to participate in the choices for your future" I looked over at the desk lamp whose light concealed her figure but whose glow made her words rise and fill the gloomy room with light.

When Auntie returned from her outing, I hurried downstairs. "I'm afraid the streets are flooded with people," she said, "a sea of white and gold, and parasols! Lucile called it a 'walkless, talkless parade.' No niece of mine will be among such commotion."

Then, I heard her talking to Uncle Jim about the price of roast. Exasperation tightened my chest. The missed opportunity was injurious to me.

August of 1920 was the most triumphant month for women. Over the months, I watched most of the excitement in the streets from the parlor window. The exhibitions of silent demonstration serendipitously incited the voice of women. Lady Luminary was intentional with her visits at night and I penned what I could of her impassioned declarations. The great desk continued to unearth photographs, letters, and documents, remnants of the work Daughters and suffragists undertook to assert that *women were full citizens and deserved full equal citizenship*.

Midway through dinner, I asked Auntie if tomorrow I could go to the Old Post Office to see the women register to vote.

"I don't think there will be time," she said. "We have to deliver flowers to Mrs. Jameson. Another mouth to feed. So many mouths."

A lump rose from my chest into my throat, nearly making me cough. Brimming tears came to my eyes instead.

“Silly girl,” she continued. “The work of suffrage has been done for you. Be grateful you’re not out there trudging through the ignorance. Besides, you own no property and you’re too young to vote.” I was eighteen, old enough to vote in DAR matters but not as an American citizen. Pangs of disappointment pulsed through me.

Turning to Uncle Jim, Auntie continued, “I hear Edna Gellhorn is going to be there.” An image of that name flashed before me. I had seen it somewhere in the desk.

I held the cluster of flowers for Mrs. Jameson loosely in my hand as we strode down Lucas Place. A white dress hastened past, setting my skirt in motion. The woman in white looked back at me before turning the corner towards the Old Post Office, a face as long and thin as her nose, brows highly impassioned. Tightness poured into my chest, swelled toward my muscles. A heat of adrenaline tried to turn my body toward Eighth Street.

I put my hand on my stomach. “I must go back!” I winced slightly, indicating to Auntie that something unexpected was coming on. Once I couldn’t see Auntie anymore, I quickened my pace home. I retrieved my diary and pen from the desk. In the drawer was the envelope with the now ascribed “E.G.”. I tucked the note between the pages of my diary, fled the house, and rushed toward Locust Street.

At the Old Post Office, a crowd of people overwhelmed the broad sidewalks. After a few minutes, the crowd settled and turned together toward the grand steps. Lines of women, row upon row, were ahead and behind me.

“Ladies!” yelled a striking woman dressed in suffragist white and a gold sash. “Thank you all for being here on this momentous day. Today, we will register any age eligible woman

who wants to take part in the democratic process of this country. This would not have been possible without the tireless work and dedication of our fearless leader..."

A ripple of excitement stirred the crowd.

"Ladies," she continued, "please welcome, Edna Gellhorn!"

Observing me, the woman in white beside me said in such a familiar voice, "thank you for helping me."

I looked right into her eyes. *Lady Luminary!* The woman I came to know so intimately stepped out, the narrow nose broadened slowly, her eyes separated gradually, her brow relaxed. As she rose up the steps, Lady Luminary became one of the leading lights of women's suffrage.

"Mrs. Gellhorn!" I yelled out. I handed her the envelope from my diary. She looked at me with great satisfaction. She scribbled something on a voter registration card and handed it to me: *We're doing this for you.*

She began to speak to the crowd.

"Due to the patriotism and industry of the women that came before us, we must use our rights that have been granted to us now, the right to be citizens in our homes and in our own country. This is the jumping-off place. Rise, and register to vote today! Rise and Shine for America!"

And with those words, the lore turned into our history.