

Chronicles of Brunonia

Miss Edna Krouner at Vassar in 1908

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Miss Edna Krouner, of Wakefield, Rhode Island, embarks on her first year at Vassar College and learns about everything from crushes to Marxism and the Vote for Women.

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On September 17th, 1908, at the brisk hour of 6:30 a.m., Miss Edna Krouner of Wakefield Rhode Island boarded a train for Poughkeepsie, New York. About to begin her sophomore year at Vassar college, Edna flirted with two central questions: How quickly could she fall back asleep, and would anyone notice the snag she had just made in her new grey skirt? The confident thunk of heavy luggage settles Edna into the train compartment. A small, exasperated groan issues from her round mouth. Edna was the type of girl who thought women should groan in public if they wished, only maybe in a more polite and refined fashion than those Yale boys she had to dance with on football weekends. Coat and baggage successfully arranged in the seat, Edna waits for the sharp, familiar shock of the whistle, the loud lurching of the wheel's first revolutions, and then, the steady calm of motion through the hazy New England morning.

Stretching into her train compartment, Edna wonders if maybe Muriel would arrive this morning, and then the two of them could walk downtown to "purchase furnishings and sundries" for their rooms, returning to a party of picture hanging and new gossip. "If only we didn't have to go to that wretched chapel all the time!", Edna writes in her journal. A journal, mind you, not a diary. Diaries might do for flighty girls, but as a young lady off to college, Edna was determined to write in a journal. Thinking of chapel, Edna groans again. She knew that as soon as a cozy crowd had assembled in her room, they would all be called to procession. Besides, chapel only served to "keep us quiet and bored for a set period each day". As Edna writes many times, the simple fact persists that "chapel is stupid" annoyance spurs her eyes to wander, and Edna glances out the window to realize that the Hudson forms a smaller ribbon now, a fainter, delicate

version of itself as the train clacks and clings away, soothing her into the curl of almost sleeping.

Edna had stayed last night with her cousin Anna in Palisades Park before heading on to Poughkeepsie. They talked in Anna's room until 1 in the morning, pondering "deep and exciting issues of the day", to quote Edna's journal once again. Only now, Edna couldn't help but worry that the scant rest would ruin her complexion for the day, and then she would have to convince Muriel, her best friend at school, to help with a cucumber and lemon juice facial scrub. Edna may have sighed just then, remembering how she and Muriel had stayed up the entire night before leaving for the summer, making a "double cross" promise never never to let a crush on another girl come between them again. (They had spent much of the spring in tearful fights when Edna went to the Spring Tea with Lucy, Muriel's crush of the moment).

Social life at Vassar revolved around such dramas. To "be crushed" on another girl at the turn of the century at Vassar College meant roughly the same thing anyone might remember from high school: the rushes of blood to the face, the tingling in the toe tips upon spotting the person across the hall or in a classroom, trying to sit near a certain girl without being noticed yet desperately wishing that she would notice. Along with these crushes came an ever revolving flow of gossip. Who sat with whom at chapel (Vassar women were expected to attend Protestant chapel services each afternoon for the "health of their moral constitutions"), which freshman asked which senior to Freshman ball — these were the bits of information a skillful girl must remember and tactfully tell or not tell to exactly the right combination of other girls. Crucial details even included

which pairs of girls had "fooled" or roughhoused" or "tickled" together, and whether such antics lead to "staying all night". "Belle Davis is crushed on Grace", Edna writes in October. "Belle down to visit, awfully rude but I did tantalize her...Belle Davis bothering me. Saw Belle and Grace fooling in Parlour. Don't like her [Belle]. Mustn't tell Grace, hope Cornelia doesn't tell. Disgusted. To bed as soon as possible. Asked Grace to stay all night, but Grace in conversation with Belle. "

One may wonder, in fact, just what Edna's feelings for Grace may have been. While Edna's only declared crush is on Inez Mulholland, and while Parlour and party invitations go to a Miss Phelina Cuddleback (who receives little other mention in the journal), Grace slowly replaces Muriel as Edna's constant companion, and Edna bristles at those such as Belle who would distract Grace from her company. Edna even "wrote Betty a stinging note" and "scolded Cornelia" for "monopolizing Grace".

One night in mid October, Grace and Edna burrowed deep into the welcoming crevices of Edna's goose down comforter and flannel quilts, watching yellow and orange leaves bluster in the bright moon. They held hands, snuggling tight as their twin copies of Goethe dropped to floor next to a pile of notes from French lecture. As Grace wandered into sleep, Edna softly reached for her diary, writing, "Grace and I are the best and dearest of friends and always will be. I will never leave her"

A contemporary reader may be struck by the complete ordinariness for Edna of a world without men. Almost no where in her journal are men mentioned, except for the dead ones studied in classes, as evidenced in Edna's

numerous complaints about endless readings of Goethe. For Edna and her peers, being educated at a women's college meant a set of intimate relationships with women, as friends, intellectual partners, teachers, and seemingly, as objects of romantic affection. Without a hint of "lesbian" scandal, (in fact, the notion of a lesbian" would have been outlandishly anachronistic at the time) Edna describes as facts of life women exploring sensations and experiences with other women, with no indication of similar attention being paid to the men of Vassar's brother Ivy league schools, or to any men in general.

For example, Edna spent a large portion of the last weekend in September trying to decide whether to accept an invitation to Senior Parlour from Ruby Brown or Celise Cheyvey, both of whom had cordially requested Edna's company. On Friday of that weekend, Edna wears a new blue blouse to chapel, her curly brown hair gathered in a new style Muriel spent hours perfecting while they giggled in her room earlier. As they placed delicious, dusky grapes and chocolate squares in their mouths, the two girls may have paused, Edna's head resting on Muriel's shoulder, her hands encircling Muriel's solid waist.

Late afternoon wanders through the large bay windows of Edna's room.

Still undecided over the approaching Parlour, Edna wonders whether to sit near Celise or Ruby in the pews at chapel. Perhaps Edna's dithering stems from a feeling of flattery (after all, how many underclassman were asked by not one but two pretty and popular seniors to Parlour?) competing with a disappointing lack of interest. Edna speaks constantly of her affections for many girls. The names of Muriel, Grace, Cornelia, and others effusively populate Edna's accounts of long walks, meals, classes, and late night conversations. However, after the weekend's

initial fluster, Leslie and Ruby seem to disappear from Edna's considerations. She does mention eventually attending the party with Ruby, and having a "splendid" time. Edna and Ruby have "supper and ice cream" together once or twice after, but never "stay over for all night", as Edna regularly does with Grace, and occasionally with Muriel.

While one cannot determine exactly what the "staying all night" implied, English Literature of the late Victorian period presents a wide array of narratives concerning such "schoolgirl romances". Some literary critics argue that bourgeois women of the time melted into the domestic sphere, and that the invisibility this process created for women allowed a freedom to create intimate relationships which could be seen as "odd" or "perverse" in other contexts. However, Edna Krouner was decidedly not a Victorian housewife. Edna displays the qualities of a socially and politically aware young woman living in the academic enclave of a turn of the century college. The question then remains unanswered as to why, at Vassar College in 1908, intimacies between women were merely unremarkable rather than scandalous, as they were in Lilian Hellman's 1934 play *The Children's Hour*.

Similarly, one finds a curious absence of references to the social expectations which the affluent and respectable parents of these women presumably had: that a college education would prepare them to be ladies of society, and more specifically, properly married ladies of society. Yet while parents might have wished their daughters to prepare for roles as good wives and mothers, Vassar College wished to prepare a generation of smart women equipped for action and lives in the public world of men. Founded in 1861 by

Matthew Vassar, a rich brewer who "wanted to leave more than suds" , Vassar asserted itself against the model of the Victorian finishing school. As Matthew Vassar told the board of trustees at their first meeting in February of 1861, "It occurred to me, that woman, having received from her Creator the same intellectual constitution as man, has the same right as man to intellectual culture and development."

Only one place in her diary does Edna mention any girl having an interest, or indeed, an interaction with a man. One can imagine Edna's bitter pang as she presses her pen a bit harder to the page, causing an uncharacteristic inkblot as she writes, "Inez has a man. Bah! " Inez Mulholland, Vassar class of '09, would become a central figure in grassroots organizing for Women's Suffrage, eventually leading a Suffrage march in Washington D.C., on March 3, 1913, in which over 1000 women actively participated. Yet in 1908, the Suffrage movement had yet to fully solidify into the respected force it would be by 1915, 5 years before a constitutional amendment granted women voting rights . Like Socialism, the Suffrage movement in 1908 still felt slightly dangerous; Vassar President Dr. James Monroe Taylor had forbid Suffrage meetings on campus only last year, though unofficial and somewhat clandestine "classes" were organized by Inez and her supporters. Not until 1914 did President Taylor finally grant a "women's Suffrage club" permission to exist officially on campus, in response to overwhelming student demonstrations and petitions, mostly organized by Inez.

The New York Times article on the D.C. march describes Inez as "an imposing figure in a white broadcloth Cossack suit and long white-kid boots.

From her shoulders hung a pale-blue cloak, adorned with a golden Maltese cross. She was mounted on Gray Dawn, a white horse..." Edna Krouner first introduces Inez Mulholland as "gorgeous, in a tight fitting blue gown". Inez's wardrobe makes numerous entrances into Edna's journal, but this first one takes place on the rainy afternoon of September 22, during chapel. Inez next appears on October second. A sniffly and sneezy Edna writes, "Politics simply great!! At last, out with the Suffrage movement. Inez in front row with her badge. Home with Muriel. Talked on the eternal questions until after 11. Terrible head cold. Trying to starve it out".

Edna does not explain the context of this entry (a meeting? an informal gathering?), nor does her multiple exclamation pointed excitement over the Suffrage movement receive further immediate reflection. The entries of the next couple days describe the usual list of clothing, gossip, classes, and friends. On October fifth Edna writes, "Up early, did German and French. Took lovely walk with Grace. Went to Emma's in Main, made messy chocolate. Grace over for night. She insists on tickling my sides. Muriel over too, got into regular hand to hand match. Plague on her! She'll drive me mad yet! Nice long exciting talk with grace after Muriel to bed."

Despite the lack of political commentary in her diary, it appears to be around this time of early October that Edna first began reading *The Communist Manifesto*, perhaps at the suggestion of Inez. Edna speckled her pale green, paper bound copy of Marx's pamphlet with carefully penciled notes, all in her slanted, even script. Most are summaries, such as "wage labor" or "the state must reform in revolution", indicating Edna's grasp of the theory at hand. One notation in

particular stands out. On page 11, she has darkly underlined the first three letters of the word "manufactured" and written, with an irregular cadence suggesting haste or excitement, the words "literal meaning". One could conclude that Edna was pointing to the masculine nature of labor, that on a quite basic level, manufacture only included man, and not woman. Of course, such a conjecture as to Edna's intention might be far fetched if the notation provided the only evidence of Edna's engagement with feminist politics. However, by early fall of her sophomore year, Edna's journal exhibits sketches of "Votes for Women" flags. On one day she describes a "perfectly boring German lecture. Tired and sort of weary every way. Only good was woman in front row with Votes for Women pin. On with it all!"

Whether sparked by infatuation with Inez, a desire to remain close to Grace, the thrill of a cause, or most likely by a combination of intersecting influences, Edna describes her first Suffrage meeting, on Sunday, October 4th 1908, as "the most important of my college days". It is late, past 11p.m., and despite sleepiness, Edna's eyes dart lightly around her warmly lit room. Autumn chills creep through Poughkeepsie, promising the first frost by mid month. Edna writes, "I cannot go to sleep until I write this day in my journal." She begins with a description of the morning's activities. Like most Sundays, she woke late and took a long walk. Yet while Edna usually describes such mornings in casual, unremarkable terms, she writes of this morning, " Grace and I went to walk. It was glorious and we enjoyed it immensely. Everything was so lovely that we arrived home later than planned"

Returning, Edna may have rushed up the stairs of Main dormitory,

tripping slightly on the hem of her skirt. "Oh no", she may have thought. "Chapel is in 10 minutes and I'll never have time to change and I so wanted to look smart, as Grace will be wearing her new blouse with the lace collar. " Before taking a walk, Edna had spent hours with Grace and Muriel, doing their hair into "psyche" knots and "discussing crushes and politics". After a disappointing chapel (Hazel did not ask Emma Parlour, an event which should have provided the afternoon's excitement), a group of girls, including Edna, Grace, and Muriel, met in Ray Erwin's room. Inez Mulholland, had called the meeting in defiance of the Vassar administration to organize a Suffrage movement at Vassar. Edna first observes that " Inez had on the corn colored gown and looked wonderful Hazel took up directly to the front of her." Here, Edna's sentences shorten into crisp, confusing notes she has taken on Inez. " She told us about her work in Elizabeth, New Jersey. The colors: purple, green and white. Very fond of Christabel Pankhurst [a leading Northeast Suffrage organizer at the time]. Two parties, Suffragists and Suffragettes. Story. ' Suffragist is them what just wants the vote; Suffragettes is them what gets it.' Nearly arrested one night. Drawing room meetings. Interesting things."

After Inez's speech, Hazel, already at home at these weekly Sunday "classes", introduced Edna and her friends to Inez. "Perfectly Thrilling!!!!!" she writes of the introduction, in large, dark letters. "We are going to be regular members of the class of course. We are!! Ran home, I was so late. Talked with Rachel. think she is quite shocked at me. Put up my laundry. Bed. Shall exist till next Sunday now. "

As many a historian might have predicted, Suffragism does not constitute

Edna's sole political experience at Vassar. At the turn of the century, Socialist and Communist movements began to galvanize and spread across progressive intellectuals in the Northeast. Just as Edna's Suffragism inflected her reading of *The Communist Manifesto*, so did the burgeoning energy of Marxist Socialism help galvanize the Suffrage movement. Curiously though, Edna did not find the two so logical a match.

In mid October, Edna begins writing of a series of encounters with Socialism on campus, most likely occasioned by the upcoming student government election, in which candidates ran as members of larger political parties, including the Socialists. On October sixteenth, Edna awoke later than planned to find an unusually warm sun "shining splendidly" over the mature reds and oranges which softly enveloped the campus. Edna briefly tells of "Rushing to lecture, but stopped in Main to get sweater. Stopped on the way back and looked over the Socialist platform. Decided not to join. Found Muriel to go in search of Grace and food. Landed at Martha Reed's with her steady, Elsa. Ate candy and discussed politics. Highly exciting as well as amusing. Tired of socialists, Martha preaching the cause. Crawled in at 11:30."

Two days later, Edna again finds herself entangled with Socialism, this time more substantially. She writes, "Talked with Grace until 8:30 and then went to Socialist meeting in Freshman Parlour. Read and discussed the party platform. Got myself into a discussion about abolition Supreme Court and lack of a tariff plank. Talked until they put the light out, in hall till they out it out there. 'What's your name?'. Finally. Lent me a book, asked us to come and call 'socially'. Ghastly pun. She argues generalities when you try to corner her. Can understand why she

is a good bluffer. Went back and stayed all night with Grace. Socialism tiring and silly"

Edna never quite tells us why Socialism failed to offer the excitement of Suffragism. Yet even in her disdain, one can imagine Edna's strange thrill upon suddenly realizing that it is far past bedtime, the lamps have all been extinguished in the dormitory, and still you cannot abandon the thick of an argument with a girl whose name you do not even know. And then, to scamper off into your cozy room, brushing Grace's long, light hair into a heavy cornsilk braid while looking over the morning's lit notes, pursuing bits of argument, laughing over Miss Socialism's frumpy glasses as you pull a flannel nightgown over your head. Tomorrow, Inez might be holding a Suffrage meeting, this time only for a select group, and Grace says that you have both been invited! As Edna writes one perfectly uneventful evening, "How glorious, to be here, now, with all this!"