Chronicles of Brunonia

Lucy and the Chinese Bandits

Meryl Rothstein

Lucy Truman Aldrich, born in 1869 to a prominent Rhode Island family, travels to China in 1923 and is kidnapped by bandits.

http://dl.lib.brown.edu/cob

Written in partial fulfillment of requirements for E. Taylor's EL18 or 118:
"Tales of the Real World" in the Nonfiction Writing Program, Department of English, Brown University.

Lucy Truman Aldrich had traveled the world many times. She had seen the Eiffel Tower in Paris, the Senso-ji temple in Tokyo, the Golconda fort in Hyderabad. Born in 1869 to Nelson W. Aldrich, a self-made man who became a leader in the Senate and a symbol of elite wealth, Lucy lived in large homes decorated with fine art, met the women who clawed their way to the top of the social hierarchy, and wore the finest clothing money could buy.

She counted history makers among her closest confidantes: her brother-in-law was John D. Rockefeller Jr., her sister Abby Aldrich Rockefeller co-founded MOMA, her brother Winthrop Aldrich was Chairman of Chase National Bank and ambassador to Great Britain, and her Rockefeller nephews became leading political and economic figures.

She was born into a family of men who made history, but Lucy was determined to make her life significant on her own terms, taking a fashionable interest in art and travel to an extreme. In between stops at her family's mansions in Providence and Warwick Neck, Rhode Island, Lucy traveled almost constantly for more than twenty years in search of adventure and additions to her world-class art collection. She particularly coveted Asian textiles, expanding on the popularity of the East that began in the late 1800s. She embraced the beauty and quality of Asian art while patronizingly relishing the exotic Otherness of the culture.

Her family's wealth and power opened many doors, enabling Lucy to eschew marriage and instead live and travel with a female companion in an arrangement known as a "Boston Marriage." Family members begged Lucy to travel less: she was overweight (at 5'2," she weighed 170 pounds), nearly deaf and

a single woman. But she refused to shrink in deference to female demureness, instead living her life with a sense of entitlement that was sometimes spoiled and sometimes refreshingly feminist.

In 1923, Lucy traveled to warlord-dominated China on her second around-the-world tour. In a letter that Lucy wrote to her sister after the trip that was later published in the *Atlantic Monthly*, she blends endearing wit with discomfiting upper class condescension. She offers a lens into the world of elite women travelers and the perhaps lost art of letter writing. And she does so while telling the remarkable story of the adventure that would define her life: she was kidnapped.

* * *

Lucy was eight months into her trip when she boarded the Tientsin-Pukow express in Nanking in east-central China. She traveled in a luxurious modern sleeping car made of the newest reinforced steel, past grain and tobacco fields, lush green forests and mountain peaks as she moved north. American boys played dance orchestra music like Ted Weem's "Somebody Stole My Gal" on the Victrola gramophone, while Lucy enjoyed dinner in the dining car and watched a group of young British men play poker. She was tired from a long day of travel, so she retired to her car and promptly fell asleep.

A harsh jerk awoke Lucy as the train screeched to a stop. She stood up, still half-asleep, put on her silk dressing gown and slippers and stepped into the corridor. She heard a peculiar crackling noise, but seeing nothing unusual, headed back toward her room, where Mathilde Schoneberg, Lucy's French maid, still slept. Suddenly, Miss Minnie MacFadden, Lucy's longtime traveling

companion, grabbed her, dragged her into her room and slammed the door. "They are attacking the train and are just outside," she whispered. Lucy peeked through the curtain and barely made out the crowds swarming onto the train through the darkness of night. Lucy quickly placed a diamond ring and an emerald ring, both family heirlooms, in the toe of her green slipper.

Lucy and Miss MacFadden shouted to Mathilde, telling her to give up her possessions. Soon the crowds appeared at their compartment as well, smashing and breaking the window. "Shall I open the door?" Miss MacFadden asked. "Yes," Lucy said.

Lucy didn't know it at the time, but the pig-tailed men who stormed her room were ex-soldiers from the army of General Chang Chin-yao. Disbanded a year earlier, the men never received their pay from the government, leaving them unemployed and in desperate need of money.

On that night, the men removed the fishplates from the right-hand side of the train tracks, derailing the express just north of the Shantung border. They overturned the back engine, the baggage truck and a third-class carriage. The men bashed windows and fired their guns wildly — they wanted the passengers' goods. And they needed the passengers themselves — perhaps 26 foreigners and 100 Chinese travelers — for protection against the government soldiers who would soon be on their trail.

In the letter she would write two weeks later to her sister, Lucy described the fray. The room filled with "a wild crowd, slashing, threatening, and snatching." One man had a bad cut on his hand and clawed through their car dripping blood. "Growling like tigers," the men cut open the passengers' bags

with long knives.

"As a girl I used to imagine that train robbers were bold, romantic looking chaps with neatly turned up hat brims and red handkerchiefs knotted about their necks, and that their eyes which I thought must be hard and gleaming, always bored through you from behind a black mask."

Instead, the first robber she saw on the train was "just a plain, dirty, ragged, barefooted Chinese Coolie."

When one man took Miss MacFadden's jade necklace, Lucy snatched it from him, only to have another bandit bend her fingers back to release it from her clutch, causing the string to break and the beads to trickle onto the floor. Furious, Lucy told him to pick it up. And he did — until he realized it was he who was giving orders, and held a revolver to Lucy's head as she picked up beads herself.

Miss MacFadden shoved a box of candy in a bandit's hand and tried to push them out of the compartment. Mathilde joined the women, and the group assumed the worst to be over.

But the worst wasn't over. Another group of bandits barged in, forcing the women out with pistols to their backs. Outside the train, one pulled Lucy through the cold darkness down a steep embankment until she felt grass around her ankles. Miss MacFadden couldn't keep up, so the bandits brought her and Lucy donkeys to ride. Meanwhile, Mathilde walked without trouble, perhaps because she was wearing "everything but the kitchen stove." She "fairly pranced" in stockings, her dress, a dress of Lucy's and Lucy's pale blue velvet dressing gown trimmed with gray fur. "She looked like the Queen of Sheba," and Lucy made her take off the gown to avoid attracting the bandits' attention.

The group trekked for miles through a valley of rice and maize, with wooded hills and the rocky Paotu-ku Mountains in the distance. "We were never frightened for a minute, and I never once saw any foreigner who appeared to be. I kept saying over and over to myself, 'We are really captured by bandits and in great danger,' but I couldn't make it seem true."

Lucy spent most of the walk with one bandit in particular, an old Chinese man. "I bossed my bandit terribly," making him lead her pony and scolding him when he went fast. "I finally got him so licked into shape that when we went down the steep places, he tried to find the smoothest way, and when we went over stone walls, he pulled the stones down so the pony wouldn't stumble."

Her bandit wasn't the only man Lucy intimidated. One eyed her green slippers, but she scowled at him so fiercely that he merely twisted off the pink silk tassels on her dressing gown. "I cursed the day that the love of color moved me to buy bright jade-green slippers."

Lucy passed a dazed Miss MacFadden with her glasses missing, but the bandits wouldn't allow Lucy to stop, so she continued on, leaving her friends and the other foreigners behind.

The Chinese men marched in what looked like a stream of thousands, in lines four or five men wide. There were "bandits of all kinds:" short, tall, "pale yellow," intelligent-looking. Some had "coal-black straggling hair around wild faces and thick [pigtails] flapping around their knees, — the last more like animals than human beings." As they moved about her, "They made me think of a pack of wild dogs trotting back and forth, sniffing, growling, and snatching." They carried large bundles of loot-money, jewelry, toiletries, even mattresses.

As the sun rose, the group approached a sleeping mud village. The bandits ran into the town's onion patch, ripping onions out of the ground and stowing them inside their jackets. "I shall never smell onions again without thinking of bandits. They all reeked of them. A strange atmosphere for an Oriental outrage! Not at all according to fiction!"

The bandits rushed away from the village and turned into the low mountains lining either side of the valley. Lucy's legs trembled as she got off her pony, "who had lost his first fine careless rapture after carrying nearly one hundred and seventy pounds for miles." Rocks shifted and dropped as they climbed up a steep stone wall, her bandit pulling her wrist to help her up.

Lucy took repeated rests; the sun now beating down, she explained to her bandit that her heart beat "suffocatingly." "I told my captor that it was weak and that I'd probably die if I went on at that rate of speed, — a very bad thing for him if I did, — and held his dirty paw over it to show him." Her bandit gestured to explain it was a result of the altitude and that he would let her rest as frequently as possible as he clapped his hands over his heart quickly to notify the other bandits.

Just then a "villainous-looking" bandit passed Lucy, wearing two strings of Mathilde's blue beads, three wrist watches and, to Lucy's horror, Miss MacFadden's blue georgette hat, "feather waving in the breeze like the plume on the helmet of Navarre." Lucy remembered giving Miss MacFadden that very hat: "I had spent hours over that hat, sitting on a hard chair in the little French milliner's trying to decide if it was becoming, whether it was too heavy for her, and if the feather was the latest thing, and it was too killing to see it on the head

of that dirty wretch."

One boy drank out of Lucy's silver powder-box, then delicately replaced the lid, his thirst undoubtedly unquenched. Some passed with their stolen clocks swinging from their waist "like dinner-pails," and others wore stolen felt hats.

Many asked Lucy to explain the uses of their newly acquired items. One approached her with a tube of cold cream in hand, hoping it might be food, only to be disappointed when Lucy rubbed her cheeks in explanation. They also inquired about Mothersill's Seasick Remedy, phenacetine and "all kinds of drugs more or less dangerous if taken by the bottleful. I was dying to tell them it was candy, and reduce their number by a few; but a New England conscience is impossible to live down, even in a moment of danger."

Some boys from a nearby village offered Lucy flat cakes "of what looked and tasted like wrapping-paper" and what appeared to be tobacco with which to flavor the cakes. "Papa always said I would eat anything I hadn't seen before, so true to form, I tried this and found it good though the hand that offered it was pretty dirty."

On their descent into the valley, she slipped down the rocks, and the rings she had stowed in her shoes earlier made each step more painful. "I didn't care so much about keeping the rings for myself as I was absolutely determined that the bandits should not have them. I thought it was such a good joke that I was walking on the most valuable thing I had and they didn't know it."

The group came upon a quiet village, where she sat in the shade of the gate with her back against the mud wall. In front of the gate, two old men talked beneath a tree while a woman intently ground corn on a hollowed stone. Lucy

and a young boy gestured to each other; she held up five fingers — one for each of her nephews — and showed the boy how tall each was. "I saw he understood I had five sons and thought it was a great joke."

The bandits interrupted the short break — nearby shots suggested the soldiers were getting closer. Lucy trekked up another hill alongside her bandit. "He was really kind though he growled like a tiger and threatened me with his pistol when I didn't go fast enough to suit him. I knew it was all a bluff and it didn't impress me in the least. I scolded him once or twice and told him to stop, but that didn't seem to impress *him*."

The group reached the top of the hill, a flat plain dotted by patches of grass and rocks. The bandits crawled into small stone huts, probably made for sheep, to take naps. Lucy lay on the ground with her head on a stone to rest under a looted white bedspread. She didn't sleep for long because "my Chinese friends kept shaking me unceremoniously to ask me questions."

A man woke her with five fingers spread; Lucy knew he was referring to her earlier conversation with the little boy. "I started to explain that I had five nephews, not sons; but remembering the Chinese reverence for the mother of many sons, decided to adopt the boys thrust upon me and lose my reputation as well as everything else I had brought with me to Shantung."

Another man poked Lucy and handed her a pencil and a man's shirt collar, gesturing that he wanted her to spell out the item's name. "COLLAR," she wrote. She pointed at his pistol; "GUN," she wrote on the collar. Men circled around her, "like children all wanting to see." They handed her a brand new red-rubber hot-water bottle; she wrote out its name then tried to explain its use. The owner

pretended to drink out of it, but Lucy shook her head no. He held it to his mouth and blew to see if it was a cushion; again, Lucy said no. "Hot water," she said, then laughed as she groaned and grimaced in imaginary pain, holding the pouch to her stomach and ear until the men, now laughing too, understood.

Later in the afternoon, a young man joined the group, beaming an air of authority. Lucy would later learn this was Sun Mei-yao, the bandit chieftain. He gave Lucy a coat and held her cape up like a screen to shield her when she put it on over her nightgown. He also offered her Chinese shoes to replace her slippers, which he told her — in perfect English — were too thin to walk in. Fearing he would discover her rings, she told him Chinese feet were smaller than hers, then drew her cape over her feet and a nearby stone. She took off her slippers and buried the ring in a crack through the middle of the rock. A diamond shaped stone lay across the crack, and Lucy was sure it would be a good marker if she were able to look for her heirlooms later.

The chieftain left at around 5 o'clock, and Lucy told him "he was much too good and bright for such work." She told him to come to America to "start over … but the thought of how impossible that was made me dumb." Half way down the hill he turned around and waved at her. The next time Lucy would see him would be in the newspapers.

The group retreated down the steep hill quickly — too quickly for Lucy. Despite her protests her bandit hoisted her onto his back, then quickly dropped to the ground under her weight, wiggling out from under her body. Dragging her by the wrist would have to do.

The Chinese captive in front of Lucy suddenly collapsed from exhaustion.

As the man struggled to his feet, one of the bandits beat him fiercely with a stick. His face drained white as he lost the strength — and will — to stand. The bandits "went wild," shooting the body until it no longer moved.

"That incident brought us face to face with a new conception of our predicament, and revealed to us that we were in the hands of men who were desperate. We trudged along after that, no one hardly daring to speak, and each wondering if he was destined for a similar fate."

Behind the group, soldiers marched towards the bandits. In front, copper-colored clouds punctuated by bolts of lightning filled the sky, frightening the bandits. They grabbed Lucy's wrist harder and dragged her for almost a mile. She tried to keep up, panting, her parched lips covered in cotton-like film as sweat dripped down her face.

Seeing a small town in the distance, her bandit let her go. He pushed her away, sending her on her own through paddy fields until she reached the gated village. Rain pelted her full-force, and Lucy peeked through the closed wooden gates, making out only a donkey through the darkness. Lucy slipped in a sea of mud as she banged on the door, shouting for someone to let her in, to no avail.

When the rain turned to hail the size of marbles, Lucy became desperate for shelter and settled on a tent-like hut thatched with straw — what she assumed was a dog kennel — crawling on the floor on her hands and knees. It was too small for her to sit up in, so Lucy curled on her side, doing her best to ignore the rain blowing in to get some sleep.

"When I was awake I couldn't help chuckling to think that here was I, who am never allowed by my family to sleep without someone in the room next to me

with the door open, — because of my deafness, — alone in hostile China, sleeping on the ground and 'getting away with it.'"

In the morning, Lucy walked feebly to the still-closed gates and peered again through the crack. On the other side of the wall stood at least fifty Chinese men, still and silent, "waiting for the strange something that had been battering at their gates in the night to materialize." She begged them to let her in, which they did after several minutes and a weapon search.

An elderly lady led Lucy across a courtyard to a hard mud chair. The woman smoothed the hair off of Lucy's face, holding her hand as she picked out straw. Women and children huddled around as boys struggled to get to the front and the women poked inside her mouth to examine her gold-banded tooth. Some gazed at her "as though I were a captured mermaid or something equally strange." "There was a chorus of Ahs and Ohs which although they were Chinese Ahs and Ohs were perfectly understandable to me as an expression of that universal sympathy which knows no barrier of race or color."

"An old hag (probably about my own age!) covered with rags, and so dirty" brought her bean broth, a flour biscuit and water. The woman sucked the spout of the teapot with her withered lips before pouring the hot water into a bowl. "I couldn't refuse to drink it — I was dying of thirst — but I had visions of coming down with all sorts of Oriental diseases if I ever got out."

A young girl took Lucy to a dark mud room, where she laid down to rest with a coat as a pillow. "I wasn't troubled at all, then or ever, though I supposed I should have ultimately been a victim if I had stayed in captivity long."

Later that afternoon, the young woman woke Lucy and told her to go with

the uniformed Chinese man at her side. Lucy hung back, hesitant to leave because she was comfortable — and because she feared the man was a bandit who had come to find her.

But "suddenly an overwhelming feeling of curiosity, a desire to 'go, look, see,' and perhaps a little spirit of adventure made me want to go on and find out what was around the next corner, figuratively speaking, and I went without a word." Before she left, Lucy tore off a piece from her dressing gown with a lace ribbon rose and gave it to the young woman out of gratitude. "My heart bled for those kind women. I can't imagine people existing with so little. They had clothes to cover them, mud walls, a little food (this is a famine district), almost no water."

"I wish I could go back to carry them — not religion or even food, but a little beauty, bright colors, pictures, something to look at. It seems absurd, but they did love my pink crepe-de-chine nightgown so, even if it was torn and stained with mud, and stroked the embroidery with admiration."

A group of men tried to carry Lucy, like the Queen of Siam, out of the village on an old carved chair attached to poles. But the men, too old to go very far, put her down just outside the village's wall. Instead, one of the men pushed her and the soldier in a wheelbarrow not quite large enough for the pair. The man lurched and staggered with the wheelbarrow, so he recruited three boys working in a nearby field. Harnessed abreast in front, the boys pulled as the man steadied the wheelbarrow from behind, moving quickly over a stone-littered road.

Smoking chimneys in the distance grew closer until finally "my coach and four" pulled up to a little railroad station. A crowd of excited soldiers and railway men looked on as Mr. Nailla, an attractive young American from the Asia

Development Company, rushed out and escorted Lucy inside. He looked as though he hadn't slept in days.

"How much did you have to pay to get me out?" she asked.

"Not one cent," he said, though he had walked around all day with $50,000 hidden in his pocket in expectation of ransom demands.

Miss MacFadden and Mathilde had been released that morning and were safe though exhausted at a hospital at Tsinan-fu, he explained.

"I didn't see any reason why the Chinese shouldn't treat them just as well as they did me, but it was pleasant to hear just the same."

Dirt covered Lucy's face, her nose peeled from sunburn, her hair in knots and laced with straw. Mud caked her dressing gown and nightgown, which hung in shreds underneath a man's coat buttoned to her chin and reaching her knees. The rings had torn and blistered her feet.

Lucy washed her face before she "started the journey back to civilization as there is in China," riding in a baggage car until she and Mr. Nailla caught a different train to Tsinan-fu. Lucy drew Mr. Nailla a map of the place she had hidden her rings, which he promised to try to find.

Lucy rested briefly in the hospital in Tsinan-fu for "nervous shock." The media descended quickly, eager to hear the tale of the train's wealthiest passenger. "Chinese Bandits Were Considerate" read one headline; "Miss Aldrich Laughs at Chinese Threats" read another. Papers wrote of the "grimy brigands" and "truculent coolies" that captured Lucy, always making sure to note that "the rich globe trotter regards her experience in the light of an interesting adventure."

"Of course, for the rest of my life, when I am 'stalled' conversationally, it

will be a wonderful thing to fall back on: 'Oh, I must tell you about the time I was captured by Chinese bandits,'" she wrote to her sister. "That remark, from a fat, domestic-looking old lady in a Worth gown, ought to wake up the dullest dinner party."

"A great many of our experiences were amusing, but I found myself quite shocked when one of my friends in Japan said she wished she had been captured too. It made me realize that I had dwelt only on the amusing side. It is far from funny to lose all one's little treasures as well as things that are valuable and difficult to replace."

Though Lucy did lose an estimated $20,120.00 worth of goods, she ultimately reunited with those most valuable to her — the family heirlooms, almost lost in a rock's crevice somewhere in the Paotu-ku Mountains. Standard Oil, the Rockefellers' company, offered a reward, and a month later a Chinese servant found the emerald and diamond rings after combing the hillside.

Her gems reached safety even before the final captives. In a castle-like retreat at the top of the Paotu-ku Mountains, the bandits held the male prisoners — some until June 12 — until demands for restoration of their former army status and for the withdrawal of government troops on their tail were met. The government reinstated the bandits and made Sun Mei-yao Brigadier-General. But this "most daring and notorious" of China's outlaws was later charged with mutiny for the kidnapping and stood in front of a firing squad, meeting a fate quite unlike that imagined by Lucy when she told him to come to America to "start over."

Friends' and relatives' pleas could not deter Lucy from her travels. She

finished her world tour, arriving in Providence on August 20, 1923. And it wasn't long before she started traveling again. In a large leather-bound travel diary from her next round of travels in 1924, Lucy wrote on the first page:

"From: Warwick Rhode Island July 17

To: The Lord knows where!"

Works Cited

Aldrich, Lucy. "A Week-End with Chinese Bandits." *Atlantic Monthly* November 1923, in the Lucy T. Aldrich Papers, MSS 938, Series 2, Box 1, Folder 20, Rhode Island Historical Society.

Aldrich, Lucy. Travel diary page, July 19, 1924, in the Lucy T. Aldrich Papers, MSS 938, Series 3, Box 1, Folder 30, Rhode Island Historical Society.

New York Tribune May 12, 1923, in the Lucy T. Aldrich Papers, MSS 938, Series 2, Box 1, Folder 24, Rhode Island Historical Society.

United Press. May 11, 1923, in the Lucy T. Aldrich Papers, MSS 938, Series 2, Box 1, Folder 24, Rhode Island Historical Society.

Universal Service. May 15, 1923, in the Lucy T. Aldrich Papers, MSS 938, Series 2 Box 1, Folder 24, Rhode Island Historical Society.

Some citations are incomplete because many of the news clippings lacked pertinent information.