

Vicki Gaia's Research Page:

Eliza's Hope

Bohemian New York

1913 Romance set in New York

What I found interesting about this time period was the underlying social changes simmering beneath the old order - preparing the way for the Roaring Twenties. Women were questioning their cultural roles and stepping out from under the Victorian umbrella of gentility, especially the younger generation. As more women began to attend college, join women clubs and political organizations, they became restless and wanted to use their skills. Women were concerned with the social movements of the times: women's rights, children and labor, education. Terrific organizers and with time on their hands, upper and middle class women left the confines of their homes and stepped out into the world to make a difference.

Eliza Lily is such a young woman, and with a past that prevents her from marrying and having a family, she begins to seek out an alternative life that suits her intelligence and her desire to 'do good works'. She finds herself at the Club in Greenwich Village, a meeting place that opens her up to new ideas. There really was such a club named The Liberal Club - a meeting place for artists, socialists, anarchists and radicals. Plenty of lively discussions happened there. Issues considered inappropriate for a gentile lady were openly debated - birth control, sexual equality, labor issues, politics...

There really was a Polly's Restaurant, as well as Mabel Dodge's famous salons. Here's an excerpt from Eliza's Hope:

Unedited excerpt from **Eliza's Hope** by Vicki Gaia, copyright 2006, Vicki Gaia:

White walls, white velvet chairs, and silk curtains, a white bearskin rug complementing the floor, the rooms dazzled in candlelight. Mabel Dodge's salon bulged with writers, artists, journalists, socialists, poets, socialites, and anarchists. Will's head swam from the rapid-fire conversations sparring across the room. Talk of self-determination, self-expression, self-fulfillment infused by slogans of upsetting the social order.

Will made his way through the crowd towards Eliza. There had to be over two hundred people attending. What astounded Will was half of the attendants were in evening dress and the other half in work clothes and sandals. One shaggy haired man came up to him, pointing a dangerous plumb finger at him, spouting how everyone here was a goddamn bourgeois capitalist.

As far as Will was concerned, it was a crazy set-up for a salon. The butler didn't open the dining room for the buffet until midnight. Then guests would be treated to ham, cold turkey, and Gorgonzola. All he could do was mingle and get drunk enough to stay out of any discussion that might cause him to make a dunce of himself.

He looked across the room for Eliza, relieved to see her. After his doctor released him from convalesce, he took Jewel's advice, and began to accompany Eliza to her meetings and social events. He enjoyed Eliza's company no matter where they went, and he snuck in more frivolous outings between her serious pursuits.

Eliza waved him over, her beauty enhanced by the chandelier's light haloing her hair. Eliza had been thrilled that he agreed to be her escort. Determined to enjoy the evening, he kept a low profile of his views, and nodded in agreement on every subject discussed.

Once Mabel Dodge greeted her guests, she left them on their own. The topic tonight was sexual antagonism, a phrase unknown to Will. Speakers would be talking about the doctrines of free love. This, he figured, would include how men used sex for social control, a popular ism among Eliza's friends.

Will lifted two glasses of Graves Superieur from the silver tray and handed a glass to Eliza. If he could down a few of these, he might be able to make it through the evening. The lecture was to be a discussion about erotic independence. This topic outraged a few of the guests but Will noticed no one left.

"Let's get a seat," Eliza said, and led him to a sofa.

"You enjoy this."

"It's fascinating. I might not agree with everything, but to be able to express your opinion freely, well, isn't that what this country's about."

Emma Goldman stood up to a standing ovation. Eliza leaned over and rested her hand on his thigh. "She's an anarchist, and editor of 'Mother Earth'," she whispered, excitedly. "She lives with that man standing by the door. Imagine." Eliza pointed to a man Will had been introduced to earlier, Alexander Berkman, known as Sasha to his closer acquaintances.

Slipping up her glasses, Goldman's enormous bulk held Will's attention – and she fired out her opinions on the unsuspecting, causing gasps in the audience along with people nodding their heads in approval. She told all, about birth control, the appalling rate of abortions among the working class, the sexual repression of women, supporting the patriarchal need for social control. When Will glanced sideways at Eliza, her eyes were bright, and she nodded her head in agreement, totally absorbed in Goldman's words.

Afterwards, Eliza slumped in her chair, fanning herself with a program. She smiled at Will. His head swam with images of Eliza living freely with a man, smoking cigarettes and passing out illicit literature on birth control. His heart beat loudly, his hands sweaty.

"Do you believe in all this?" he said, fearing her answer. Of course she did. One look at her convinced him of this.

"It's worth considering, and I do think women need an alternative to abortion when there's an unwanted pregnancy. It's not fair to keep this from us."

"Would you live with a man?"

"Are you asking me?" she said.

Stunned, it took him a minute to realize she was teasing. "I find this rather daring, to discuss these issues with you."

"Does it embarrass you to talk about sex?" she asked.

"It's usually reserved in the privacy of a man's bedroom."

"We live in a modern age but were in the Dark Ages when it comes to sex, and human dignity." She turned in her chair, wafting her perfume around his head, confusing him in a cloud of her scent. The tight silk of her dress accentuated her figure, and the décolletage revealed well-shaped breasts. To his embarrassment, all this talk of sex excited him.

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