

## CHAPTER 17

### The Indomitable Gertrude Light, M.D.

Most of our patients were Spanish but we did have a few Anglos, one of whom was Dr. Gertrude Light, an 1898 graduate of John Hopkins Medical School. She was a very interesting eccentric who lived in an old adobe in Ranchos de Taos. The home was strung out along the rim of a barranca. One spring we gave her a series of treatments for a bladder problem, so we saw her frequently. Now and then she would be a hospital patient. Occasionally, one or two of us would be invited to spend a weekend with her.

At the end of World War I, Dr. Light had been in Russia with the American Relief Army. The unit was housed in tents out on the Russian steppes and had been warned that if one of the big winds came, everyone was to lie flat on the ground. Dr. Light was in her tent but propped up on an elbow watching the storm when the tent pole blew down and broke the bone in her upper arm. The doctors on the medical team could not get the break to heal. She could not work, so they sent her home. A world-renowned orthopedic surgeon did an open reduction of the fracture and in the process cut her ulnar nerve, paralyzing her hand. A neurosurgeon repaired the nerve, and eventually the hand was back to normal and she was ready to work again.

The United States Public Health Service sent her to Colorado to do a survey on the health of the children of migrant beet field workers. She sent a voluminous report to Washington, D.C. Dr. Light always thought that it had been filed away unread. Certainly no action was ever taken on her recommendations. When she finished her survey it was Christmas time and she decided to drop down to Taos to visit her friend, Mabel Dodge Lujan. She was enchanted with Taos, the Indians, and the folk plays—Los Pastores and Las Posadas. Returning East, she babbled incessantly to her friends about the wonders of Taos. Finally, in exasperation, her friends said, “If you like it so much, why don’t you move there?” So she did.

Dr. Light never practiced medicine in Taos. However, her caring spirit caused her to become interested in children who had health problems. She did all she could for these children, including taking them to the Children’s Hospital in Denver at her own expense. Once a child’s health problems were solved, she would find another one to help.

Gertrude Light had an amazing and colorful vocabulary. She once called a government program of which she disapproved “preposterous piffle.” When a person entered her living room, she would say, “Fling yourself down.” Truly, that was the only way to get on her “couch” which was basically a double-bed. The springs and mattress were set directly on the floor. It was covered with a big black bear-skin rug from Mexico. On the wall behind the improvised couch was a large, brightly-colored, mostly red silk quilt from Russia. The entire effect was stunning.



*Dr. Light's living room*

Dr. Light knew everyone in Taos, including all of the artists—Howard Cook, the Cavitts, Frieda Lawrence (widow of D. H. Lawrence), and of course, Mabel Dodge Lujan. I once remarked, quite apologetically, that I had never read any of Mabel's books. Dr. Light drew herself up to her full height and, glaring at me, said, "And neither have I. I admire and respect Mabel, and I wish to continue to do so!"

Dr. Light's brother had a coffee finca (plantation) in Costa Rica. He kept her supplied with coffee; it was delicious, but the most potent brew I ever drank. One demitasse was equivalent to about eight cups of the kind to which I was accustomed.

When "Ma" Perkins, a friend from the East, was President Franklin D. Roosevelt's Secretary of Labor, she

came to visit her old friends Dr. Light and Mabel Dodge. Dr. Light met "Ma" in Alamosa, Colorado, and the state police escorted them all of the 85 miles from there to Taos, with sirens screaming all the way. It caused a lot of excitement!

Dr. Light was tall and lean and not a bit pretty. Her usual garb was a wool suit with a skirt longer than style dictated, white crew socks, and black huaraches (a Mexican type of sandal). In the winter, she wore a big gray felt hat. In the summer, the head covering was a cream colored linen cap similar to an operating room cap. She always carried a huge reticule.

One summer day, I had finished her treatment, and she immediately left to go home. Often she would stay and talk interminably, taking up time we did not have to spare. I had returned to my paperwork and was congratulating myself that today had not been one of those times, when I looked up to see her standing in the doorway, holding her hand with blood trickling down it.

I said, "Why, Dr. Light, what has happened?"

She drew herself up straight and tall and said in her deep voice, "I have just been bitten by a dog!"

I asked, "How could that have happened?"

She replied, "Well, I was driving along on my way to Taos and two dogs were lying in the road. As I approached, one got up and walked away as I expected him to do. The

other continued to lie down and I hit him. I felt very bad about running over a dog, so I stopped my car, got out, and went over to see about him. Just as I leaned over and reached out to touch him, the damned ungrateful cur up and bit me on the finger!"

If I had been the dog and found such an apparition leaning over me, I would have done the same thing.

Periodically, Dr. Light would feel the need to be admitted to our little hospital. Knowing that quite often we had no empty beds, she would bring along a cot and a box of medical journals and magazines to read. One time, the bed across from her was occupied by Emma Lopez, an eight-year-old Spanish girl who spoke no English. Noticing that the child was just lying there, Dr. Light said, "Here! Have something to read," and handed over a *New Yorker* magazine. Emma, looking bewildered, just stared at it, whereupon Dr. Light said, "Here! Take my glasses, too," and handed them over.

Originally, Dr. Light's house had no inside plumbing. There was a chemical toilet in a corner of the patio. One time when she was in Mexico, her friends decided to install a sink and a bathroom as a surprise for her. Unfortunately, when they were finished, they forgot to close the gate on the irrigation ditch. When the water came down that spring, it ran right through her house, into the front door, across the end of the living room, diagonally across her bedroom, and out through a wall at the other side. The floors were of mud. After the water rushed through, they required some repair. Mud floors were the norm in old adobe buildings. A

base of adobe clay mixed with straw and four to five inches thick was smoothed over the area to be floored. After this had dried, a top layer of adobe mud mixed with animal blood and one to two inches thick was smoothed on. The blood made an excellent binder. The finished floor was slick, smooth, and shiny.

When I went for an overnight, I usually drove up to Ranchos de Taos after supper. I would arrive in time to watch the sun set and the moon rise and all guests were required to get up early enough for sunrise at least one day. We sat on "Jehovah's Seat," Dr. Light's name for a cement bench near the rim of the barranca (a deep ravine), and watched to the west. As the sun rose, it lighted the tops of the mountains and the rim of the barranca to the west. Gradually the sunlight moved down the wall of the barranca across the floor, up the other side, and finally lighted the rim of the barranca where we were sitting.

Breakfast was served in bed by Lucia, the maid. I suppose she really was not very old, but she looked old to me. She always wore a black dress and a fringed black shawl over her head and shoulders, and she was always smiling. She spoke no English. Dr. Light communicated with her in sort of a pidgin Spanish and sign language.

Once, when Dr. Light was a patient at our hospital, she said to Lottie, "What do you *do* here?"

Lottie replied, "Well, we have lots of fun! We have lots of parties. We go hiking and horseback riding. We go to Espanola or Taos to the movies."

“Well, I suppose you do in your *simple way*,” remarked Dr. Light. Afterward, everything we did, we did in our *simple way*.



*Dr. Light's Lucia*