

Appendix: The [Cinder]Ella Corbin Story

Prabhavananda said “At that time we had difficulty...Amiya happened to be here...that was very interesting how Amiya came.”¹ For Prabhavananda, whose life was filled with wonder, this is a rave review, so we embark on Amiya’s tale²:

Once Upon a time...

She was known by the name Ella Corbin when she arrived at the fledgling Hollywood Vedanta Society, but ultimately her unfurled name became Amiya Ella Sully Corbin Montagu, the Countess of Sandwich. Amiya, an Englishwoman, was born into poverty, one of ten surviving children, all girls, of an English farm laborer. At least five other siblings had been still born or died in infancy. The family had to move around the county as the work availability dictated; they were often hungry, lacked indoor plumbing or even running water; and the girls had to quit school at around the age of twelve or thirteen to go to work. She found work as a domestic servant and as a shop girl and got married, briefly and unsuccessfully, becoming Ella Corbin. She proved resilient and adventurous at an early age and accompanied her older sister Joy to San Francisco, California. She was soon invited to attend a lecture at the San Francisco Vedanta Temple. It changed the trajectory of her life:

“...while I sat there in the stillness I experienced the most extraordinary conviction that I belonged there...I had come home...Already my course was being set, and I was being launched on the path of no return...every word made sense...for the duration of my stay in San Francisco I attended every lecture and every class—three times a week.”³

Amiya had been working in Joy’s seamstress business, but the crash of 1929 put an end to Joy’s business and she was no longer able to accommodate Amiya. Moreover, Amiya had no aptitude for sewing, so when she tried to extend that career on her own in Los Angeles, she wasn’t a success.

But her first order of business in Los Angeles had been to contact the Vedanta Center. She resumed her San Francisco habit of attending every lecture and class by Swami Prabhavananda, her future guru. She was introduced to Sister Lalita. She was soon invited to share meals with Swami and Lalita. The pair suggested that she give up the flailing seamstress business and move in next door with Lalita’s sister, Alice

Hansbrough (Shanti), like Lolita one of the Mead Sisters who had hosted Swami Vivekananda. Shanti would need a live-in companion, a paid position, after her daughter got married. The Mead family was prosperous and Western Vedanta aristocracy. Amiya happily accepted, gave up her apartment, and moved to the center, awaiting the opening; but Shanti's plans changed. Swami Prabhavananda invited Amiya, now at loose ends, to stay on at the center; but Amiya's pride prompted her to find a way to support herself. Through a temple connection she got work training a French actress, Annabella, who insisted on a British rather than American coach, in English elocution and grammar. Although she wasn't actually qualified, Amiya was very successful and was invited by Annabella to accompany her to an exciting life in New York theatrical circles. This was a major temptation, but Amiya chose the "grace and love"⁴ of remaining at the Center, which was her home for the next 20 years.

She managed the household, doing the housekeeping and cooking as well as contributing badly needed money. She was the Society's secretary and also contributed to the Society's literary legacy. According to John Yale, Swami had asked her to write a biography of Holy Mother from the point of view of a Western woman. From Gopal Stavig's History of the Vedanta ... Chapter IV:

Amiya's works appeared ten times in Vedanta and the West (1942-1947) and she became the Managing Editor of the magazine in 1949-1950. In addition, her literary productions appeared in Prabuddha Bharata and the Vedanta Kesari. We are indebted to Sister Amiya for preserving a portion of Southern California Vedanta Society history in "Vedanta in Southern California" which appeared in Vedanta and the West (1951).⁵

In 1946, Amiya and Sarada, were the first women in the Ramakrishna Order to be given Brahmacharya vows. Sarada writes "At that time we didn't appreciate how hard Swami had pressed the Order to include women both in India and the West...Amiya and I became Brahmacharinis on that revolutionary day."⁶

In 1951, George Montagu, the ninth Earl of Sandwich, become a widower. He had married Alberta Sturges, a member of the Leggett family whose members had also been close associates of Swami Vivekananda, likewise Western Vedanta aristocracy. As a young woman, Alberta had met Vivekananda at Ridgely Manor and accompanied him in Europe. During a trip to India with his wife and mother-in-law, George had touched the feet of holy Mother and said he would "always remember the calm and somewhat detached expression of the eyes set in that noble countenance" and had been spontaneously embraced by Swami Premananda upon first sight at Belur Math.⁷

ENTER SPOOKY ACTION AT A DISTANCE (a staple in life-changing devotee stories):

In 1952 while still mourning Alberta, he visited the Center for solace. After two days at the Center, George reboarded his cruise ship to continue on to San Francisco; but the ship caught fire and the repairs would take 4 weeks. Swami Prabhavananda invited George to continue his stay at the center until the ship was ready to resume. At the end of the four weeks, George had proposed to Amiya. She was now 50 years old. George was 76.

Amiya was not well-received by the mature Montagus but handled it with characteristic aplomb. In her new role as the Countess of Sandwich, Amiya sustained her relationship to her guru, Swami Prabhavananda, both by written correspondence, travel to Los Angeles, and hosting him in England at “The Cottage,” their rather massive very old mansion, where he visited in 1952. E. M. Forster wrote to Amiya asking to meet Prabhavananda. According to Warner, Forster wrote to Isherwood: “...the Countess Amiya and the Swami have just lunched at my room at Kings [College, Cambridge] with myself and Bob...I feel so happy about it. Earl and another man joined us after lunch and I took them all to the chapel.” [Warner continues] Forster described Prabhavananda as gentle and kind but regretted he had not managed to have much of a one-on-one conversation with the holy man...”⁸

She also kept up a correspondence with and hosted Christopher Isherwood and Don Bachardy. On one visit, Chris asked Amiya to “visit and keep an eye on” his mother and younger brother Richard, which she did from 1955 to 1960. On one such occasion “she [Kathleen] was particularly impressed by how the Countess had washed and rearranged the china at Wyberslegh [Kathleen and Richard’s home]”⁹

Isherwood wrote Amiya, thanking her for looking in on his family: “Bless you Amiya darling...I shall always respect any decision you make in an emergency. You are so exactly the person who could help him (Richard); and he just loved you and so did Mother...God bless you for what you are doing for R. That really fills me with admiration and gratitude.”¹⁰

And Richard wrote of her: “I think her insight into life and the happiness it gives her to see others happy, and her complete lack of ‘side’ are the most wonderful things about her.”¹¹

George was an art lover. He had many literary friends, but his real passion was art collecting. Apart from the century’s-old Montagu family collection, he had what was

considered the greatest collection of French Impressionist and Post-Impressionist paintings in England and was a Trustee of Tate Gallery.¹²

After ten years of what seemed to be a happy marriage, George died. He left Amiya with a London flat and financially set. That he also left her several pieces from his cherished art collection indicates his affection for her. There was some conflict between Amiya and the Montagu descendants over the art collection, but it was settled and she lived the life of the merry widow in London. The Dowager Countess of Sandwich, as she was now known, was by nature gregarious, warm, generous, and knew how to enjoy herself. She was so much a fixture of London nightlife that the musicians would play her signature song when she entered their restaurants or clubs.

She stayed in touch with Swami Prabhavananda, Christopher Isherwood, and John Yale, now her “neighbor” in France, who wrote a wonderful sketch of Amiya in the concluding chapter of his memoir, *The Making of a Devotee*, Chapter 12, The Devotee as Witness to Evidences of the Faith. Her sketch is prominently placed as the penultimate, 10 of 11. Yale didn’t meet her until 1950, and his account of some of the details of her early time at Vedanta differs from other more contemporaneous accounts. It’s a warts-and-all portrait, with a heaping, front-loaded serving of warts, but ends in beauty, offering insight into both Amiya and Yale himself and expresses a dialectic that commonly gets played out in religious communities.

Although her tale invites comparisons to Cinderella and the name “Ella” seals the deal, she was no damsel waiting patiently to be rescued. The Unsinkable Molly Brown is closer to the truth.

¹ Christopher Isherwood Interview of Swami Prabhavananda, November 1, 1972, recorded and transcribed by Swami Krishnananda, VSSC Vedanta Archives.

² There are two major sources for Amiya’s story: Gopal Stavig’s, [Ramakrishna-Vedanta in Southern California](http://www.vedantawritings.com/RKVTOC.htm) (<http://www.vedantawritings.com/RKVTOC.htm>) and *The Bizarre Life of Ella Sully* by G.M. Warner. Amiya was Warner’s great aunt which gave Warner access not only to the inside family history scoop but also the “Letter tapes,” an extensive collection of conversational tape recordings Amiya sent her sisters in lieu of writing letters. The works will be attributed when they are quoted verbatim or an information block comes from them. Because Warner’s book is a Kindle edition, page numbers aren’t available.

³ *Bizarre Life*

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ Gopal Stavig Section IV

⁶ *Bizarre Life*

⁷ Gopal Stavig Section III

⁸ *Bizarre Life.*

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² *Ibid.*