

Women's Equality Day 2020
by Lesley L. Smith

Jane dropped her giant flashlight and giggled just as we snuck inside the pitch-dark time-travel lab. "Sorry, Mary."

I turned around and illuminated her round face. She looked totally different with her hair pulled back and stuffed under that big hat. "Shh! We are breaking and entering. You know women aren't allowed in the academic buildings. I'd rather not go to jail."

She gulped and nodded before reaching down to the floor to retrieve her light. "I can't believe you got John to give you the keys to the lab, already," she whispered. "You have only been dating for three weeks."

I almost tripped over a bunch of electrical cords. What she didn't know wouldn't hurt her. John didn't give me the keys; I stole them after he fell asleep. I was still a little shocked that I had actually engaged in premarital intercourse. I was going to hell for sure if our mission wasn't successful. But it would be worth it to vote, if it worked. Definitely. Maybe I could even be a scientist.

Jane smacked into something behind me. "Eek!"

"Are you sure you're ready for this?" I asked. "A hundred years ago they had all kinds of fleas and mice and germs everywhere."

"I know that," she said. "I'm the one who told you."

"There it is," I whispered. "The control panel." Its faint lights broke the stygian gloom.

"Are you sure you know how to work it?" she asked.

"Yes. John showed me a couple days ago. All you do is turn this dial to the date and time you want to go to." I started turning. "Turn this dial to number of hours you want to be in the past, and turn this dial to the date you want to return to."

"I don't get it," Jane said. "Why do you need to give the return date? Isn't it just the present plus the number of hours you were gone?"

"Don't be such a girl," I said. "It's a time travel machine. We can come back any time. I think twenty-four hours should be plenty of time for our first attempt."

"There's no need to be rude. And besides that's not true. Even I know we can't come back in the future."

I stared at the power switch, my hand hovering over it. "You're right. I'm sorry I was rude. And you did a very nice job with our costumes." It was too dark to see them but, we had on straight skirts that ended a few inches above the ankle and belted jackets that extended below our derrieres along with the big floppy hats. My outfit was dark navy blue and Jane's was charcoal gray. "I can't believe I can wear my own regular shoes. Are you sure they'll fit in?"

"Yes, women's shoes haven't changed that much in hundred years. Oh, I almost forgot, there's one more finishing touch. Here's your flower." She held out a yellow rose.

"Aren't you getting a little carried away? It seems too fancy. Or did everyone in the 1920s have flowers?" I asked sarcastically.

"Actually, where we're going, yes. Or should I say when? Anyway, all the people opposed to the nineteenth amendment, the Antis, wore red roses and all the Suffs wore yellow roses."

I stopped dead. "Surely we couldn't be confused for Antis. There weren't any women actually against giving women the vote, were there?"

"I'm sorry to say there were."

"But that's crazy." I affixed the flower to my lapel.

"I don't know how you can say that, since women still can't vote. Obviously there are still a lot of people against it. It's against family values, blah, blah, blah."

"Yeah, I thought for sure it would pass last time. It is the twenty-first century, for goodness sake."

Jane pointed her flashlight at the control panel. "What are we waiting for?"

"Nothing." I was just nervous, never having carried out an experiment before. I forced myself to flip the switch and the equipment started humming. "Come on, we have to stand in a certain place."

We rushed over to the marked space John had showed me earlier.

As a fog enveloped us, I said, "Oh, shoot! The flashlights are anachronisms!"

"No, they're not. Flashlights were invented in 1898," Jane said. "You don't know much history, do you?"

"That's why you're here."

When the fog lifted, we were in a very dark room, and I was glad we still had the flashlights. It was hot, too. I could already tell my costume was going to be too warm.

"Where are we?" Jane asked.

"Don't you mean when are we?" I grinned in the dark.

"No, I mean where are we?"

"We should still be in the University of Tennessee Physics Building. But, if everything worked, it should be August 19, 1920."

Jane interrupted me. "A week before the Tennessee House's session to consider adopting the Tennessee Senate Joint Resolution Number 1, ratifying the proposed Nineteenth Amendment and giving women of the U.S. the right to vote!"

We successfully made our way south to Niota to the home of Febb Ensminger Burn. The vote in 1920 Tennessee was unique in that ratification only failed by one vote in the Tennessee House of Representatives. That was the closest it ever came to passing. We just had to turn one of the Antis. Jane assured me that Harry Burn was the most ambivalent of the Antis. So, we had a plan, we were going to get his mom to write him a letter urging ratification. Everyone knows men listen to their mothers.

As we went up the Burn's broad wooden front steps, I nervously wiped some of the sweat off my forehead. "Do you have all the newspaper clippings, Jane?"

"Of course." She marched right up to the front door and knocked vigorously.

The front door creaked open, and a stout older woman in an apron stood there. "Yes. Can I help you?"

Jane spoke right up. "Yes, we're Miss Wilson and Miss Jones here to see Mrs. Burn on an urgent matter."

"Please come in. I'll get Mrs. Burn right away."

When the lady of the house appeared, she had gray hair pulled back in a bun, and a long tan skirt, and a lacey white blouse.

"Mrs. Burn?" Jane stuck her hand out for a shake. "Mrs. Catt sent us to meet with you. She needs your help."

"My help?" Mrs. Burn hesitantly shook Jane's hand. "Who are you, again?"

"I'm Miss Jane Wilson, and this is Miss Mary Jones. Mrs. Catt sent us."

"Carrie Chapman Catt? I do admire Mrs. Catt for the work she does."

"Yes, ma'am." Jane nodded. "So do we."

"Oh, well, in that case, please come in."

Once we were settled in the parlour with cool beverages, she asked us, "Now, what is this about? What can I do for Mrs. Catt?"

"We understand your son, Harry Burn, is in the Tennessee House."

"Yes, he is." Mrs. Burn nodded.

"We, Mrs. Catt and us, couldn't help noticing that he has not made any statements about the ratification." Jane fanned out her newspaper clippings. "Several of the Antis have made quite bitter speeches, but not your Harry."

Could it be that he's on the fence?"

I leaned forward. "And if so, perhaps if he was to hear from his dear mother.... If you were to urge him to ratify, he might listen."

Mrs. Burn sighed. "I know many of Harry's constituents have urged him to vote against ratification."

Jane screamed. "Oh, my God! I think there's a rat there!" She pointed down the hall.

I tucked my legs up under me on the settee, and tried to remain calm. "Calm down, Miss Wilson," I said. "Surely it's not the first time you've seen a rat?"

"Uh, of course not," Jane said. "I apologize for my outburst."

A blur of orange streaked after the rodent.

"Oh, good. The cat will get it." Mrs. Burn said. "She's an excellent mouser."

Jane shuddered.

Mrs. Burn frowned at her. "The good lord put us all here for a purpose, and the purpose of the cat is to get the rat."

"Of course, ma'am." Jane nodded. "I'm just worn out from our journey."

I turned my attention away from the hallway. "So, as we were saying, ma'am, Mrs. Catt would be most obliged if you could write your son a letter urging ratification."

She nodded. "Yes. I think I could do that. The vote has been weighing on my mind. I'd hate to think I could have affected Dear Harry and didn't try."

"And I say we stay and go to Capitol Hill and watch the House vote," Jane said. We had made our way back to the U.T. Physics Building and midnight was approaching.

"In the first place, that's impossible. We only set the machine to let us stay in the past for twenty-four hours. In the second place, how would that work if we disappear into thin air in front of hundreds or thousands of witnesses? I'm no historian, but I'm guessing that wouldn't be good for history."

"Well, I'm no historian, either," Jane said.

"Yes, but if our little plot worked, maybe when we get back to 2020 you'll be allowed to be a historian."

Jane continued to frown.

"I promise if this doesn't work, we'll try again, okay?"

"Okay." She brightened. "What do you think 2020 will be like if we succeeded?"

"Women will have the right to vote. Maybe women will even run for office."

"Maybe there'll be a female president!"

"Now, that would really be something! And I'm sure the anniversary of the ratification will be a really big holiday."

"Ratification Day! Or Women's Equality Day! I bet there will be parades and fireworks."

"And cook-offs." I grinned. "Remember, we are dealing with women, here." I checked my watch. "We should be going back any time now."

The fog whisked us away.

"Did it work? Professor Jones? Professor Wilson? Are you okay?" A serious-looking young brunette with a clipboard approached Jane and me. "Did you go back into the past? What happened?"

We were surrounded by the time-travel equipment, again. We must have made it back! I barely had time to register the fact, as a lifetime of new memories plunged into my brain, and then everything went black.

I awoke in some kind of hospital. I was lying in a hospital bed at any rate, and the walls were painted a soothing lime green color. That girl was there. Now I knew her name was Staci and she was a physics grad student. I was her advisor. Me. I was on the Physics Faculty. Wow. So much for women not being allowed to do science.

"Professor Jones? Are you okay? I've been worried." She leaned over me and pushed up her glasses.

I nodded. "Yes, Staci. I guess I just got dizzy." I sat up. "What day is it? I didn't miss all the celebrations did I?" ...But even with my new memories, I couldn't remember any Ratification Day celebrations. Ever.

Staci's eyes opened wide. "What celebrations? You told us to keep the time travel experiment under wraps until it checked out."

Jane burst into my room. "Guess what? I'm a professor! In the Women's Studies Department! Women's Studies--who ever heard of such a thing!"

"Apparently there are mental problems associated with time travel," Staci said. She still had her clipboard and started looking about for her pen.

"It's just some disorientation. We're fine." I glanced around the room. "Where are my clothes?"

Staci went off to ask the nurse, while I looked around the room for them. I found them in a drawer of a cabinet and started putting them on. Unfortunately they were my 1920s costume. I would probably look like an escaped mental patient. I guess the blouse and skirt alone weren't too weird.

"I guess it actually worked," I said to Jane. I still found it hard to process. "It's 2020, isn't it? And I can remember voting. We did it."

"Yes! Hurray for us!" Jane threw her fists into the air.

"It is wonderful," I said. "But I can't believe there's no Ratification Day celebration."

She beamed at me. "I guess we'll just have to start one."