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“Salvation Nell!”

This is written solely for the entertainment of tired Doc at day’s end. Forget politics and medical politics and patients. Relax. Be happy. Here we go! (My typewriter is horrible! It was second hand when I bought it many years ago. Age has not improved it. It jumps; it jams. It just does darned funny things. And my poor skill as a typist does not improve anything.)

In January 1922 I resigned as research paleontologist from American Museum. I did not then plan to leave scientific research. But I felt the need to think about my future without my scientist. (I had sent him to Asia so that I wouldn’t be tempted and relent. Fool that I was!)

I had made elaborate plans to go on a long hike. At that time I was quite chummy with the secretary to President Henry Fairfield Osborn, world-renowned vertebrate paleontologist. (He and I collaborated on the article on paleontology in the Encyclopedia Britannica – he for vertebrates, I for invertebrates). His secretary, Florence, was most unhappy in her job. She was as homely as sin; short, a bit on the dumpy side, about 35, dying to marry, with not a chance in the world. When I told her I was resigning and had great plans, she gradually wormed out of me what I had in mind. I told her I had mapped a trip to California – down the east coast, then west. She said she’d resign, too, and would go with me. I finally agreed. Florence, however, knew nothing about hiking, while I, of course, as a geologist, knew the ropes and had hiked hundreds of miles.

I decided on our costume. Remember, that in 1922 women didn’t go hiking. They didn’t wear knickers. Well, I knew what I needed. So I went to the best sporting good shop, Abercrombie and Fitch, and purchased a beautiful knickerbocker suit, high tramping boots, woolen socks, woolen hat, sweater, and gloves, a cooking outfit, and a rucksack. I also purchased a 32 Colt. I had never touched a revolver. Had a holy horror of shooting irons. But I figured I’d need a revolver on a long hike, and so I bought one. Florence duplicated my outfit.

For the moment, I’ll skip over the first 2,000 miles. Florence, unable to hike, scared of everything – from cows to darkness – and short of funds, left me as we neared Charleston, N. Car. That was her home. I never saw her again. Beaten by life, she returned to the Museum as a secretary. Unmarried. I continued alone.

After the first 2,000 miles, I arrived in St. Louis. I swung down the Appalachians to Alabama then north to Ohio, my course determined by spring floods of the Mississippi. I had left N.Y. in early Feb. – on foot, of course, and arrived in the Mississippi valley just in time to be drowned out. (Rum runner to the rescue, later chapter). So, anyway, in St. Louis after two months on the road. Was I a picture of GLORIOUS health? Yes, indeedy! I had slept outdoors – here, there, and everywhere. In the woods, in fields, in churches, schools, haylofts, -- anywhere. And I’d cooked my meals by the side of the road, washed in streams, hiked 20 to 30 miles a day, carrying a 20-lb. rucksack. Happy, happy, happy! The happiest time of my whole life! That is, of course, after I had broken my engagement.

Arrived St. Louis, slightly broke. I looked up a Salvation Army boarding home. That is for poor, not wayward, girls. I was able to rent a room to myself and get breakfast and supper for some ridiculous price like $6 a week. Something like that. The head of the home was a wonderful woman – sincere, kind, a good Christian in the best meaning of that term. She lived the Christian life. I told her something about myself. She said the Salvation Army was just about to start its annual drive for funds in St. Louis under the leadership of a N.Y. lawyer. She wanted me to meet him. We met.

Mr. Cashman, an attorney, was a very fine fund-raiser. He offered me a job at $60 a week – more than I had ever earned – truly fabulous – to organize the industries of St. Louis. I laughed and said I couldn’t possibly. I told him I had no experience, but worse still I was scared to death at the thought of meeting people. I told him I’d pass out if I had to interview the president of a railroad or of a lumber yard. He said, “Nonsense! You are an organizer. I want the industrial firms of St. Louis organized so that we may collect from all their employees. It would be up to you to gain the consent of the president of the company, of the factory foreman, of the mine operator, etc.” I insisted I couldn’t possibly do anything like that. I said I was a paleontologist – an ivory-tower person. Mr. Cashman insist (sic). “You are an organizer.” Well, being broke and jobless, I agreed, with considerable trepidation.

But just after it was arranged that I should start to work at once for $60 a wk., all Hell broke loose on the upper Mississippi. The floods hit Illinois and the town of Beardstown was inundated. The Salvation Army was given jurisdiction for flood relief. Oh, boy! Bob, you know me! I was dying to go with the relief unit. I applied. It seemed the job didn’t pay anything. You went for the glory of God. You got your grub and a place to sleep. I saw the Salvation Captain in charge. An awfully nice chap. I explained my religious beliefs were quite different from his and I couldn’t save souls – my God! wasn’t I having a heck of enough trouble saving MY OWN? But I said I could work and organize and wanted to go. He accepted me gladly and agreed to no soul-saving. Then I saw Mr. Cashman. He was sore. He wanted me right away at $60 a week to start organizing the fund drive. We compromised. I asked him for 10 days to organize flood relief, then I’d return to St. Louis. The flood area was in Beardstown, Illinois. So-o, I took the train with the Salvationists.

I gulped when they asked me to wear a Salvationist bonnet. We settled for a sailor hat with a blue band and red letters around the crown. The hat, I thought, was most becoming. (I still have a snapshot I’ll send you one of these days. I just love it!) I wore my knickers and high hiking boots. The regular Salvationists were mostly elderly women. They wore long skirts, right down to the ground – for flood work! They also wore knitted underwear. As later developed, when we had to walk through three feet of water, the dear old ladies would raise their very respectable long blue skirts high up around their wastes (sic), revealing their most unsaintly long white drawers. A rear view exposure, I’ll swear, would give you conniption fits.

The Salvationist old ladies frowned on my attire. I had short hair, for one thing. Most unreligious! And my knickers! Oh my! Ungodly. They tried to accept me with Christian charity, but they sure got indigestion.

The railroad tracks into Beardstown were about 3 feet under water, but the train made it. We were escorted to a school building on a hill, well above the flood waters. We were assigned to class rooms and were given army cots and blankets. Came dinner. All the Salvationists got down on their knees – me too – before the meal, to thank the Lord. Well, I was used to that, because Mother, having been a Methodist, I knew how services were conducted. I tried to be respectful without being dishonest.

We went to bed. At midnight came word a woman on a sandbar was about to have a baby on a sandbar. We were ordered to set out at 4:00 a.m. to get the woman. So, we piled out in the early darkness. The wind was blowing a gale. A rowboat was supposed to be ready at a lower level of the hill on which the school stood. One elderly Salvationist woman – long skirt and bonnet – a young male lieutenant, and I were picked for the mission. The wind was so strong I couldn’t keep my sailor’s hat on, so I took it off and said I’d park it in a nearby farm-house. The Salvationist woman had religious fits. “But you shouldn’t go uncovered in the Lord’s work!” I explained I didn’t see how to keep my hat on in that stout wind and in a pouring rain, to boot. My hat went to a nearby farmer, and I walked down to the river, which was badly swollen, where a row boat stood. There was no oarsman. Neither the old lady Salvationist nor the young Lieutenant knew the first thing about a rowboat. Ah! At last I had something. I might be short on prayers, but I sure knew rowboats. I was tickled to have something on them. I said, “Well, hop in Folks and we’ll go to the sandbar.” They got in, somewhat gingerly. I took the oars. I had been rowing ever since I was six up in Long Island Sound on vacations. I loved the water and boats. It was pouring. My magnificent Abercrombie and Fitch knickerbocker suit was soaked clean through. The rain ran down my neck inside me and inside my underwear. But I rowed. The sun finally rose and we found the sandbar. The woman, precariously berthed on a cot on a bar almost under water, said she preferred to stay there. It was home. Well, you could understand that. So-o, back we went to the school house, arriving in time for breakfast. I changed to dry clothes, and by that time local people had come up with high hip boots. The poor Salvation women couldn’t get them on over their skirts, but they were slick over my boots. I have a photo of myself in those boots and the Salvationist hat. I call it Puss-in-Boots. I’ll send you a copy sometime. I looked so happy, so smiling, so healthy.

The Captain in charge thought I should organize a refugee camp and food kitchen well up from the river on the school hill. I certainly never had had any experience, but it didn’t seem at all hard. I began to believe what Mr. Cashman had said, namely, that I had organizing ability and could apply it to anything. Up went a food station. I had a bed in one corner. Then I was supposed to answer all calls from stranded families, go to them with food, blankets, etc., and see if they wanted to stay where they were or would prefer to come to the camp where food, stoves, sleeping quarters, etc., would be provided.

I worked 20 hrs. a day. All transportation was by boat. In time, local men took over the rowing job, especially because they knew the location of street addresses. Most of the time I was paired up with the 19-yr. old Lieutenant. I can’t recall his name. He had little education, but was well trained in Salvationist preachings. Right from the start he undertook to save my soul – which, of course, wasn’t in the bargain I had had with the Captain.

Late one day we received a call to go to a little house that was just about to be submerged by the flood waters. We were warned that it was an awful place. An old woman, about 70, was dying of cancer. She had rented one room in her home to an elderly widower who was sort of looking after the place, the old woman being bedridden. The townsfolk thought that it was a sinful situation. Social workers had tried to break up the illicit relationship. The last time a social worker had gone there, the old man had thrown a flatiron at her. I was duly warned. Well, we rowed up to the porch which was just afloat. The Lieutenant tied up the boat which had been rowed by a local man. I knocked on the door, saying I had come from the Salvation Army. Could I come in? There was a shuffling sound inside and presently the old man appeared. “I wouldn’t let anyone in except from the Salvation Army,” he said. My Salvationist sailor hat was right there in all its glory to assure the old man.

In I walked. O, Man! Filth! The old woman lay on a bunch of rags on a rude cot. Dirty dishes were piled high. No food in the place. The rising flood was just up to, but not over, the floor. Light came from a kerosene lamp. I told the Lieutenant to report the situation to the Captain, to get a doctor, to bring hot food, and to get my Army cot and blankets for the old woman. (The Captain had put me in charge, so I issued the orders.)

While waiting for the return of the Lieutenant, I washed dirty dishes, heated water, and bathed the old woman. She was covered with open sores. I did not then, and do not now, have enough clinical knowledge to know whether the lesions were cancer or syphilis, or both. She had cancer, I knew. Anyway, I bathed her, using salt water, which was the best I could do. She had pneumonia, too. Near the end. Her daughter lived in town, but had failed to visit her.

The old man and woman were most grateful. I gave her confiende (sic) and finally she said she wanted to show me something if I wouldn’t tell anyone. It was all she had in the world, and she didn’t want anyone to get it away from her. She was particularly afraid the social workers, whom she hated, would take away her dearest possession. I gave her every assurance that I’d keep her secret. Then, in all that filth, with the raging river just about to enter, and in that dim lamp light, the dying woman reached under her bed for her cherished possession. From underneath the dirty cot, she pulled a small cardboard box. I heard a cheerful “Cheep!” She took off the lid and there were a dozen baby chicks! They were perfectly darling. Yellow bits of fluff. “Cheep, cheep!” She said she was terribly worried for fear rats from the river would get the chicks, and buttressed their little home. The old woman was happy and the old man thought everything was just a little bit of all right. (Anyone would have been crazy to think that an illicit relation was even possible between that sick old couple. But social workers, I guess, can see sin anywhere.)

My Lieutenant returned with food, my cot, and my blankets. We fed the two old people, washed the remaining dishes, got the old woman on my cot, and made her comfortable. Then the Lieutenant and I sat down, supperless, to wait for the doctor. The Captain had said we should wait until midnight for the doctor. If he hadn’t arrived we were to return to the school house camp.

Bob, I spent one of the most eerie evenings of my life in that filthy house with the two old people, the dozen baby chicks, peeping cheerfully, the Salvationist Lieutenant, and the wild river clawing at the house. We had only the one oil lamp. He and I huddled around the table, talking for two hours or more in whispers. What about? My soul. No one then or since has ever evinced so much interest in my poor lost soul. He was determined to save me. “You have done a magnificent job for the people of Beardstown,” he said. “It’s too bad you’re going to Hell. But you can be saved if only would will accept Jesus as your Saviour.” Two hours of entreaty! He so young, and I so lost!

It would have been unkind of me to come down on the poor uneducated boy with the full force of my educated arguments. I would not have hurt him. Indeed, had I known that I could have shaken his simple faith, I would not have done so. He had just what he needed. I had what I needed. Religion is such a personal matter. He wanted to convert me to his views; I didn’t want to convert him to mine. It was a fantastic evening. (Eager beaver social workers, had they known, might have thought we were carrying on. The atmosphere could not have been more tense, more deeply religious. Who knows what two persons find to talk about?)

The doctor failed to arrive. Finally, at midnight, we left for camp. I slept on the floor, in my clothes, minus my cot. Blankets, too, were in short supply.