First letter to Barnum Brown, 17 April 1920, hand-written

“Dear Boy Blue,

Have you felt all along that I was ungracious about your efforts to get me back to the Museum? I really do appreciate what you have done and particularly the trouble you have taken just before sailing when you had so many and more important things crowding in on you. I know that money would never have been appropriated for the work nor any action taken about it if it hadn’t been for you and if you hadn’t so generously diverted your salary for the purpose. You have been a real friend in the matter and I’m ashamed that I was so disagreeable about it.

My reluctance to fall in with your plans was due to a woman’s whim, or perhaps I should call it something deeper than that. You know I will be thirty on August 15th. [Several lines, marked out, then an entire page is missing. Letter picks up in the middle of a sentence.]

. . . had in tackling problems.

When one has been so bruised and crushed as I was, it takes a long time to “come back.” Maybe I never could have come alone but with your help I’m slowly gaining. And I know that the time has arrived for me to return to my scientific work. I have nursed this mental inactivity long enough, and I must force myself back into scientific lines of thought, just as I forced myself back to physical activity.

Pal there isn’t another person in the world who could have gotten me to take even a temporary scientific position. I am willful and headstrong and obstinate, I know, and I usually go my own way quite regardless of advice or threats or warnings. But that’s only because I don’t have enough faith in most folks. I don’t trust their advice or rely on their wisdom. My feeling with regard to you is very different. You may find me a little obstreperous but if you tell me to do a thing I’ll do it. I’m like the man in the parable who was told to go and work in the vineyard and who answered “I will not,” but later repented and went. If you tell me to do something I don’t want to do I’ll reply that I won’t, but you can always count on my repenting and obeying. Perhaps that a secret I shouldn’t have given away.

There are two more reasons why I don’t want to take the position at the Museum. One is that I don’t want to take money from you for the work on the Cuban material. It’s just a quibble to have the money paid out by the Museum, for after all it’s your salary I shall be receiving. It has hurt me to have you so persistent about paying for the work; you put me in the same class as the typists, photographer, and printer, but I wanted to work up the material because we’re pals and I love to help you.

Second reason is that I think its decidedly risky to give up my present position just for something temporary. The horror of the nine months of uncertainty, worry and lack of funds that I passed through before I secured this position is too fresh in my mind for me to look forward to facing anything like it again next fall when the Mus. work is completed. Miss Farrell would be glad to keep me and on Aug. 1st the salary is to be increased to $150.00 which would mean comfort again. There will be a regular increase every year and I think it’s by far the best chance I could get outside of college teaching. The work grows more interesting as more things are turned over to me. You know what a hopeless search I had for something to do and now that I at last have a position not altogether uncongenial with a promise of more pay than I could earn elsewhere, it seems almost foolish to throw it up for four or five months at the Museum. I have a good part of life before me yet and I cannot forever be knocking from pillar to post, going through frequent starvation periods and getting into debt. If I have the strength of mind to . . . . [line blacked out], then I must endeavor to make my life as interesting as possible. The work I am in now has a human appeal to me and I’ve been told I could train into something bringing me more in contact with the children. It’s the only field of endeavor I’ve come across which has appealed to me at all and I wish you’d let me stay in it. I was surprised that you should say that the President and Curator both wanted to have me permanently. Can’t I make you understand that I wouldn’t go there for good even if they offered me a curatorship and $5,000 a year? If a large salary, a fancy title, prestige, and a career made any appeal to me I wouldn’t have had to go hungry for months and suffer the hardships I went through last winter.

My dear Pal, if, for the sake of variety in your already varied experience, you desired to become acquainted with a scientific woman why didn’t you cultivate the acquaintance of Dr. Maury when she was at the Museum or why don’t you and Miss Dickerson become pals? If these don’t suit I could provide you with letters of introduction to any number of scientific women who are devoted to their careers. I enclose a picture of the type of successful scientific careerist so often met with; she is always keen on living her own life unhampered by domestic duties and responsibilities and she’s strong on expressing her individuality. This she does by wearing bangs or bobbed hair, tortoise-shell rimmed goggles, men’s collars and four-in-hand ties, a man’s shirt or else a “distinctive” blouse, baggy at the waist line, or otherwise grotesquely draped, she frequently affects barbarous ornaments, an individuality of speech and taste, etc. etc. But really you must know by this time that I can’t fill the bill, so what the use of trying to force a career upon me. It’s dangerous business. [Several words blacked out]. . . . it and failed with disastrous results. I herewith enter my protests against your plans, if you persist I’ll run away.

Sphinxie dear, have I teased you enough? If you were here you’d ask me if I was sorry for all I’ve said and I’d tell you I am. I’ve just been making believe that I didn’t understand, and henceforth I’ll be good and not plague you anymore about the Cuban work. You know that my heart is really in it, that I want it to be a success as much as you do and you know, too, that I shall find happiness in working for and with you. We make a fortunate combination, for we supplement each other and between us can cover the whole Cuban problem as no one individual could. With you to work up the vertebrates and me for the invertebrates and with the chance to discuss the geology and stratigraphy and to profit by each other’s viewpoints we should produce a very real and important contribution. It’s been mean of me to pretend that I had any intention of withdrawing and leaving you with the entire problem on your hands and no one to tackle the fossils you so laboriously collected. Boy Blue can you possibly imagine what makes me so horrid sometimes?

[Letter continues on 24 April 1920]

It’s a whole week since you sailed and I haven’t had a chance to write a word. I’ve been so delightfully busy every minute. The pressure of work at the office has increased so much that I seldom get away before six. My evenings have been very full, for I devote one to housework – washing, ironing, cleaning, mending – and to fancy work embroidery, crocheting, etc. and the next to scientific work. My Cuban paper is being pushed right through and I can’t get things done fast enough. Dr. Hovey has been so joggled that he’s really pushing matters and actually sent the artist down to my office [ill.] to have me correct the drawings. They are nearly done and look beautiful. On the night’s when I’m not the Doctor I’m finishing a linen table cloth which I’ve been embroidering: it was a tremendous undertaking with dozens of scallops and floral groups but now it’s nearly done. And I’m also crocheting lace on a set of kitchen towels. I’ve followed out a uniform color-scheme in my kitchen of Delft blue and white so I have oil-cloth with blue and white squares, white curtains with blue draperies, white furniture, and white towels with handmade lace edging in blue. I even managed to get a while enamel dish-pan with blue handles, a white dust pan, and the cunningest white sink shovel (instead of the ugly black kind most folks have) and a white sink brush. I do love my kitchen. My dishes are blue and white, and all my saucepans and utensils are of aluminum. But I didn’t start out to describe my kitchen, only to tell you what I’m doing. To wile (sic) away the long subway ride I become the Doctor and do scientific editorial work which helps out the exchequer. This paragraph is terribly mixed up but I’m carrying on so many different careers at the same time that I have to stop and think who I should be at a given hour: Miss Farrell’s secretary, or a scientific proofreader, a Marjorie Daw, or the Doctor, or what not.

One evening this past week I took dinner with the Hoveys and staid late playing pinochle. I had a very pleasant time for Mrs. Hovey was most agreeable and cordial.

Pal, do you remember that I told you that my first impression of her was that she rather lacked character and personality? That feeling has been confirmed. She keeps house nicely and cooks well and all that, and seems most desirous of playing the part of a curator’s wife in proper style, but there’s nothing distinctive about her. One thing which seemed to me to indicate a lack of character was her being willing just to drop down in a ready-made home. It seems to me that any woman would want to create her own home, make her own linens, express her own tastes and individuality. One of the big joys in marriage is watching the home develop, in building up associations with things as they are gradually acquired, in planning and working together for different things that are wanted. But Mrs. H just had to accept a home in which she had had no part, where every stick of furniture was surrounded by memories in no way connected with her; she couldn’t create anything, add anything. The very arrangement of the pictures and furniture wasn’t of her own choice; it just seems to me as though she didn’t belong there, as though she was just filling a sort of substitute job. I wouldn’t feel married if I were in such a situation. Maybe, of course, she thinks that having a home that way is better than never having her own home. Well, I don’t envy her at all, and I thank my lucky stars that I don’t have to resort to marriage as a means of acquiring a home, for I have a much better one than many a man could provide me with. Pal, I was so surprised that the Hoveys have no library – just one book case. I’ve always felt that I had so few books I couldn’t dignify the room in which I have them by any more formal title than a “study” but I think hereafter I’ll call it a library because it contains more books than I see in most homes I go to. I couldn’t help feeling sorry all the time for Mrs. H, she seemed like the housekeeper or a paid companion. Not at all like a bride. I wonder if when I see forty approaching I’ll be willing to descend to anything like that. I don’t think so. These thoughts are just *entre nous* Pal, you know.