Monday, 18 October, 1920

Dear Pal,

Please read the enclosed letter which I received this morning and which I have already answered.

It was only last week that I heard from the Civil Service that I had passed. Dr. Vaughan must have acted at once. I had told Dr. White that I would take nothing but a full-time research position which I hardly thought that the Survey would offer me. But lo and behold they offer to make me an assistant palaeontologist and ask me to write a monograph offering the not-to-be-sneezed-at salary of $2040 a year to begin. And of course once I was in a Civil Service position nothing could oust me. There would be a regular salary increase and I’d be fixed and safe for life. No more worry, no more uncertainty, no more hungry spells. Quite a bit of honor and prestige would go with my title and as an officer of the Survey I’d have many opportunities. For a pure research position I know of nothing better in America; it is the very thing I’ve held out for and never expected to have offered to me.

I read through the letter once and by the time I had reached Dr. Vaughan’s signature my mind was made up. My decisions are nearly always instantaneous, though I often wait for several days before taking action on them. I always know what I want to do and it seems always to be just the thing other folks wouldn’t do. My mind has little by-ways of its own which lead me to my own individual conclusions. Most always I cannot tell anyone at all the real, genuine reasons for what I do. I act as my intuition tells me to; then I think up plausible excuses to give to people to explain my actions – excuses nearly always far from the truth.

I have already written to Drs. White and Vaughan refusing the position on the Survey, giving as my reasons my present appointment at the Museum. I didn’t tell them it expired in four months, for I knew that they would want me then.

Pal, I wonder if you’d mind if I told you the real reason for my refusal to go to Washington. I said in my last letter that if I could think a thing I could speak it to you. These, then, are my thoughts:

As you know, I have no close human ties. Not a single friend is really near to me. I could live for years without seeing any of my friends and not feel the need of them. I could live in Greenland or Australia without feeling the separation from my friends. It is an unfortunate condition but you understand the conditions from which it arose. There is no human tie with my parents. I have tried very hard to make the best of the situation with my mother but within the last week she has treated me with sudden aloofness – why, I do not know. She won’t come into my apartment, won’t eat with me. I prepared a delicious Sunday dinner for two yesterday but she refused to join me or even to let me send her dinner down to her. So I ate alone. I don’t know why she is acting like this, but she grows more sullen and morose every day, bitter, sarcastic and complaining. I have no relatives who are near. My father’s family I was never allowed to know. On my mother’s side there are my uncle and two cousins – but we have little in common and I see them seldom. Thus, for all my human ties mean to me I might live anywhere and find life just the same as it is now. Some lives are destined to be solitary. I have grown used to it; I am not complaining.

But there has come into my life one single human tie – a thread of purest gold. I treasure it because of its uniqueness, because it is a one and only. It has held me to life through despair and loneliness and anguish. More than that, it has held me true to my best ideals and purposes. It has led me down sunlit paths through fragrant pastures, into stately woods, and onward and upward to sublime and lofty heights where one could feel the nearness and the love of God. This thread of gold came down from Heaven one day in a sunbeam which touched us both and made us pals.

Your companionship is the one human relation which really matters to me. I needn’t tell you so, for you know it already. We have never seen much of each other, never talked together very much, yet the feeling of companionship is strong just as though we had been often together. It is a spiritual companionship, strong and compelling, which spans time and space, making you seem always near. It is far more powerful than any other influence that has entered my life, for it has controlled and guided me even when you were far away, and has been operative for good against the most active powers of evil. (p. 2)

But just as the knights who were in search of the Holy Grail felt at times the need of spiritual refreshment and revivification, and had their need satisfied by an occasional sight of the sacred goblet which held the blood of Christ – the symbol of all that is spiritually highest and noblest – so I, too, feel the need of an occasional sight of you to strengthen and cheer me. You are far away on your travels most of the time but once in a while you come home for a brief interval. It does me good to see you, it helps me to meet life more bravely and happily. So I wouldn’t want to be in Washington where I wouldn’t see you at all. That why I wrote the refusal to Dr. Vaughan.

Perhaps I am paying a high price for an occasional glimpse of you, but I think it’s worth it. I have never been afraid to pay the price for the things I have wanted. It is not often that I care very much about a thing, but when I do I care tremendously. Nor do I sit back passively and gather-up the wind-falls by the wayside; I am not afraid to go out and meet life half-way, paying whatever price is asked for the perfect, unspotted, untouched fruit upon the tree. I do not believe in taking with resignation whatever comes along, saying “Thank you, dear Lord, even for a wormy apple.” Nay, ‘tis better to say, “Dear Lord, what is the price of that perfectly beautiful rosy-cheeked apple on the topmost branch of yonder tree?” Then if I learn that the price of yon apple is the necessity of climbing the tree twice to just within reach of the apple only to fall to the ground a receive first a bump on the head and second a broken leg, but that if one has the grit to climb a third time, even hampered by the broken leg, one shall at last grasp the delicious apple – ah, how much better to pay the price, to suffer the bruises and broken bones, but to taste that luscious apple rather than in safety and meekness to eat a green, wormy one. So, if the dear Lord exacts a high price for your companionship I gladly pay it rather than be deprived of something so rare and beautiful. This is why the Survey is not to have the valuable services of the Doctor and why I am taking a long chance on the future.

Tuesday, 19 October

Dear Pal, you will not think me bereft of sense and reason because I’m turning down this latest offer just as I’ve turned down all others, will you? I am not lacking in an appreciation of the seriousness of life and the precariousness of my position, nor am I throwing away my career just for a whim. Last spring I turned down a general offer from Washington even though I was out of work, simply because of my strong convictions in the matter, and nothing has happened since to make me change my feelings.

I run my life almost wholly according to the dictates of intuition, and I find that as a rule things turn out well. When I tried to argue with myself that it was the part of wisdom to accept the Survey position, I felt very unhappy. The thought of going to Washington depressed me just as did the thought of going to Albany, Vassar, Yale, and Wellesley. As soon as I had written the letter of refusal I felt overjoyed and gay. Surely intuition must be a safe guide.

I find myself in an increasingly anomalous situation. No one seems to understand how I happened to be a scientist. Again and again I am asked “How did you ever happen to become a palaeontologist?” One woman who had been in my home and heard me talking enthusiastically about housekeeping, said, “Well, with your tastes I don’t see how you ever thought you wanted a career.” And then I have to give explanations which satisfy. They are always truthful but far from being the whole truth. The more that Marjorie Daw shows herself – and she’s coming right to the fore these days – the more difficulty does the Doctor have in explaining her own raison d’être.

[Sentence blacked out]. I was peculiarly devoid of plans for my future. I went to college with no other thought that that of rounding out my education. I knew that I would have to earn my living and that I did not want to teach. [Sentences blacked out]. I was only twenty when I finished my Junior year at college and found that I needed only five more points to complete my work for the A.B. I decided to take these in the summer and get my degree in the fall, which I did, attending my last undergraduate lecture on the day I was twenty-one (August 15, 1911). My junior year was quite the happiest of the three I spent at college; I carried an exceptionally heavy program. I did brilliantly in all my courses and, to boot, had a fine time socially – teas, plays, entertainments, and best of all, the Junior Ball. [Sentences blacked out]. . . . with an independent scientific position . . . (pp. 3 and 4 are missing; letter picks up with p. 5, dated Wednesday, 20 Oct. 1920.).

Pal, do you remember my blue velvet evening cloak with the soft fluffy fur collar? You asked me once what the fur was and I said “mouflon” but when you wanted to know what animal it came from I didn’t know. At dinner this evening I learned all about mouflon.

I told you that I was reading the reminiscences of Raphael Pumpelly. You must not think that they are dry or burdened with scientific discussions; on the contrary, they are the most entertaining reminiscences that I have ever read. It seems as though Pumpelly were sitting next to you by the fire-side spinning out a yard about his adventures, for the book is very informal, full of amusing incidents, stories, and hair-breadth escapes. Pumpelly had been around the world before he was thirty and you can imagine how eagerly I am following his travels, picturing myself living through the experiences which he had, sharing his hardships, enjoying his free life in the open. How I would love to take the trip he took, but it requires lots of money. Pumpelly’s father was rich and supplied the funds for the five years of travel and study.

On the island of Corsica, Pumpelly found the mouflon, at that time a little-known animal, rare even in zoological gardens. (This was in 1850). The mouflon is a wild sheep which lives near the snowline in America, Africa, and Asia. It has fine, long, silky hair covering the wool underneath, stands about 28 inches high and has strong, curling horns. The Corsican mountaineers used sometimes to catch a baby mouflon and bring it up with the tame sheep and if they treated it kindly it would become quite gentle and domesticated. Pumpelly stayed with some mountaineers who had raised a mouflon ram from baby-hood. The ram was fairly domesticated but he had not lost all of his inherited wildness and his big horns commanded the respect not only of his owners but of all the sheep rams. Pumpelly was much taken with the mouflon and, because he was kind to the old ram and fed him many delicacies, the latter developed a great attachment for Pumpelly, following him around like a dog. P. was at that time a student in Freiberg, having run down to Corsica for a short trip, and he thought that it would be quite an original idea to buy the mouflon and take him back to Germany there to sport him as the other students did their dogs. Need I say that Pumpelly had one swell time getting that mouflon to Germany via sailing vessels, trains and cars? The story is a scream. I read it for dinner tonight and was convulsed over it, wishing that you might have been here at the time so that I could read it aloud. Among numerous incidents, I will mention only one; P. stopped at the last hotel in Vienna and the proprietor, seeing the mouflon in one of its tame moods, suggested that it be kept in the inner court of the hotel which was build around a hollow square. The following morning the mouflon, feeling lonesome, wandered into the hotel in search of Pumpelly, went upstairs and by its sense of smell located its owner’s room into which it butted. It jumped onto a table from which vantage point it spied in the mirror on the dresser a formidable mouflon ram; drawing in its feet it took a flying leap at its supposed adversary and succeeded in demolishing the mirror at least. Pumpelly roped in his “gentle lamb” and started to lead him downstairs. But on the way down they came into sight of one of the enormous mirrors lining the grand stair-case. Poor mouflon once again saw himself confronted at close quarters by a mighty ram, and he sailed head first into the mirror. Before he finally reached the yard he had demolished in this wise three phantom mouflons. Later in the day he took a flying leap through the courtyard window into the kitchen, butted the cooks out, wrecked the place, and, when discovered by his master, was calmly enjoying himself with his head buried in a great kettle full of Brussel’s sprouts. Pumpelly never succeeded in getting his nice tame little mouflon back to Freiberg. He’d have been much more sensible to adopt a marmoset, but perhaps they don’t grow in Corsica. Whenever I see mouflon fur after this I know I shall think of Pumpelly. I do wish you could read that chapter in its book, it is so funny.

I am eating my dinners alone now, for mother is quite cool, but I’d really much rather be alone than have her with me. Her face is so sour and glum that it sort of spoils a meal, and she’s always indulging in dire prognostications about what the country is coming to or about the hat she won’t be able to afford next spring or about the (p. 6) sneak thief who, she is sure, is going to break into her apartment. I’m much happier alone with my thoughts and a good book. I always read something jolly for dinner something that will me a good laugh and never anything dry or instructive. One winter I bought a set of O. Henry and read one story each night. It really was good fun. In this way I got quite a bit of miscellaneous reading done and sometimes I surprise the old maids by the things I’ve read which they didn’t think the Doctor would read. That reminds me: the other day four of us were at luncheon together in the Museum. We were speaking of the types of books that take with the public and Miss P. said , “Just look at the way a book like that “Three Weeks” sold. Of course I haven’t read it, but you know . . . . .!!” O Pal did I ache, did I long to drop a bomb and say “Of course, I have read it.” But I thought I’d better be careful, it won’t do to shock them too much. As a matter of fact, I don’t like Elinor Glyn’s books. I have read several out of curiosity and it strikes me that she goes out of her way to describe scenes which should be sacred and which, if they aren’t, are better left undescribed. Another book of hers, the title of which I have forgotten, but I think that it is “The Career of Catherine Bush,” tells the story of a poor girl who set out from the English slums with the determination to marry a titled personage and gain wealth and position. This girl deliberately, as a par of her scheme of procedure, went off for a weekend trip with a certain lord somebody-or-other, just for the experience. Her whole career was unmoral, calculated, and self-seeking, and she attained her goal of a brilliant marriage. I don’t like a book of that kind, do you Pal? I don’t like to see unmorality and immorality extolled and to see them portrayed as things which are rewarded. Alas it is true that they are often rewarded in certain ways but they also bring their punishments which none can escape. A person like Elinor Glyn appeals to the worst elements in her readers and does not give a well-balanced picture of life as it really is.

I was speaking of eating my dinners alone and of preferring that to having mother present. I am strongly, perhaps too strongly, affected by environments and by the atmosphere which people create. My mother radiates nervousness, discontent, gloom, chill, pessimism. My home if full of sunshine till she comes in, then it’s like having a dense black cloud pass between the sun and me. I feel like putting on a warm coat, getting my umbrella and overshoes and an extra muffler. Do you know folks who affect you like that? Last summer one day just before I head from the Museum, when I was jobless and down to my last ten dollars, also hungry because I’d begun to cut out meals, mother came up to see me. It was a glorious day with the sun streaming full in my four front windows and I couldn’t but feel joyous. The sun does make me so happy. Mother sat down on my couch and began to weep. I couldn’t find out just what was the matter at first, for she seemed to be suffering from general gloom about having to keep her little apartment (it is smaller than mine) clean and about finding her income too small to enable her to buy clothes. I reminded her that she really had quite a lot of clothes and a number of things stored away, to which she sobbingly replied: “I know that I don’t need any clothes now but if I did I couldn’t buy them.” Tragedy! I said “Oh well cheer up. Don’t you feel bully on a sunshiny day like this?” She stopped her crying short, flounced out of the room with this for a parting shot: “I hate you and your damned cheerfulness!” Mother doesn’t often swear but her feelings overcame her that time. Of course I hadn’t let her know that my money was gone and that I was hungry, for she isn’t the kind of person in whom I can confide one little bit, but even had she known she would still have felt that her own plight was very tragic. I’m afraid we won’t ever hit if off well.

Dear Pal, you represent an environment just the opposite to the one I have described. Indeed, you are an environment, you are sunshine, mirth and laughter, you are sympathy and gentleness, you are the personification of all the happy, twinkling, sparkling things in life. That’s one reason why I like to be with you, like to talk to you, like to write to you. It’s like stepping into the sunshine to write to you.

I am always thinking of new similes and metaphors for you. That is because you are a jewel of many facets. As I look at you now from one angle, now from another, I am continually seeing new phases which attract and charm. You are so rare and true blue that you must be a sapphire of the first water. Your many facets have been carved by God whose tools are love, suffering, experience, joy, and sorrow as well as a multitude of lesser implements, abrasives and buffers.

Good night, Boy Blue