Note: This next letter is labelled Thursday, 21 October, 1920, and has 7 written at the top, as though it is a continuation of the previous letter.

21 October 1920

Truly I have been neglectful in never sending you any Museum news or gossip. I forgot all about it.

Know then that one of your Red Deer River dinosaurs is being mounted in a large frame in seven sections, the creature being partly embedded in plaster but with two legs, the ribs and head standing out free. I am perfectly sure that no one but the Curator of Reptiles really knows how the beast should curve his neck, hump his back and crook his tail. Better come home and give him the “once over.”

The great Asiatic expedition leaves in February to be gone five years. It will be in charge of Mr. Andrews [Roy Chapman Andrews]. For once my heart is full of envy. How I would love to go! I would so love to see the world, to live in the open close to nature, to risk life and limb in the pursuit of adventure. What a wonderfully happy woman Mrs. Andrews must be. Some women seem to have lives laid along such pleasant channels. She has a devoted husband, a baby, money, and all these marvelous chances to travel with her husband. It seems ideal to me. I wonder if she appreciates how lucky she is.

I am finding life at the Museum more agreeable every day. It is very soothing and healing to have all the men and woman so lovely to me. The men are always jumping to do things for me and showing me little courtesies which are much appreciated. One of the men brought me some fruit from the country, another lent me his own special pet hammer and I’ve had donations of chisels of every size and description. One of the ladies – I swear it was a she not a he – brought me a bunch of flowers from her garden. Finally, one of the museum bachelors who, I have heard, is a great admirer of mine, made a special visit to your office to present me with an autographed copy of one of his papers. Fortunately, I was in the laboratory and missed him. The admiration is not reciprocated.

A feature which I like very much is the coming of visitors to the laboratory. Famous men from other countries come occasionally as well as students and classes. It is so different from the Dept. where I was before – I never saw anyone there. I have given little talks on ammonites, their age, how they occur, and how they are worked out, to classes of girls and young women who came to see the vertebrates but stopped to look at what I was doing. They asked many questions which I was happy to answer. That’s the time, Pal, when I love to teach and explain. I like an informal gathering around the fossils and like to have questions hurled at me. Such questions arising out of genuine interest and wholesome curiosity give me my cue for an extempore exposition. I could do that all day and never get tired. I like to sit or stand with my group of listeners and be one of them and have a cozy chat about things. But I do not like to get up on a platform, deliver a set course of lectures which is taken down verbatim by the students, and be, as it were, some lofty person set apart to pour knowledge into unwilling minds. I’m too much of a kid at heart to enjoy being singled out as teacher or professor. The winter that I was twenty-three I delivered the lectures in general geology at Adelphi College to a class of girls, mostly juniors. Why Pal I felt absurd getting up on the platform and giving them lectures and when it came to disciplining them – well, I did it but I know that my eyes twinkled with sympathy at the tricks they played. One girl who was very bright and whom I liked immensely sat in the middle of the front row of the large lecture hall and again and again she would bring to class some novel which she had nearly finished and read behind her note-book. Gee, didn’t I know how much more interesting it was to find out if the hero married the heroine and they lived happily ever after than to listen to a discussion of the agents of erosion. However, I had to have discipline and I must say that I maintained it easily. But I didn’t like the whole arrangement. If I could have gone off with the girls for a walk and have talked to them as an equal, explaining the geology of the commonplace fields, then I would have loved it. At the Museum I am happy because the women ask me questions about things that puzzle them, thing they have seen on their vacations, and when I tell them the story of a glacial boulder, of a dike, of the Palisades and its analogue the Evangeline country in Nova Scotia, they are always interested. One of the women collected a handful of Paleozoic shells on her vacation and brought them to me to interpret. I told her how many millions of years old they were, how they had lived in the sea which covered New York State long before there were any vertebrates in the world, how the sea-floor had been folded into mountains and how long ages afterwards the glaciers had covered the Catskills carrying along boulders which were finally dropped when the ice melted.

Her fossils were all glacially transported, for she had gathered them from the drift. The woman to whom I spoke was entranced to think that the few bits of stone in the palm of her hand held such a story locked up in themselves. In a like manner the ammonites have revealed themselves to the laboratory men and to other passers-by who want to know all about what an ammonite is. I’m never so happy as when informally telling the uninitiated about nature’s wonders. I like to point to a window-sill made of Indiana limestone and tell the story of it; I like to call attention to a ripple-marked flagstone and describe the Devonic seashore from which it came; I like to trace the stylolite structures in the marble of soda-water fountains and tell their tale. I would like those around me to be able to read into the common place the fascinating things which I can read into it. If you have studied and understand nature then everywhere you go you see thinks teeming with interest and romance.

Not all of my listeners are scientifically initiated. There is a student, from Oxford I think, a man well along in his thirties if I judge rightly. He knows nothing of palaeontology but is studying brains and now turning to fossil vertebrates. He is to be some time at the Museum working over brain casts. I like him. We had a long talk today starting from ammonites and passing to a general discussion of evolution. I was able to give him several pointers in his work and refer him to certain papers that will be of value to him. He’s really very interesting and jolly; I’m glad he’s going to stay awhile.

That’s all the Museum gossip I can think of. You once called that place a gossip shop. Pal, it is a gossip factory. If you are overheard saying “amen” to the Lord’s Prayer, in a little while you are reported as having been guilty of swearing a blue streak. A while ago Mr. Blank took Mrs. Blankety Blank to luncheon and straightaway the question was raised if they were engaged; had they been seen at dinner I suppose everyone would have been sure that they were secretly married! Positively, a woman can’t be seen talking to a man without all the talkies starting to buzz. I keep the dear things guessing by talking to all the men – there’s safety in numbers you know. I’m even so daring as to walk out of the building once in a while with one of the bachelors! Scandal! And by the way, I never knew before how many bachelors there are in the Museum. Aren’t they a rummy looking bunch? All except one who is good looking, rather, but [water damaged has erased the last line on this page].

Pal dear, so I look at my life so sane and well-ordered, so happy, carefree and really, I am greatly amused at the little girl who, only last winter, was bemoaning her tragic fate and contemplating a reckless career which was to include, if I remember the words of one of my letters at that time, a knowledge of the length and breadth and depth of the Gay White Way. Of all the silly notions! I wasn’t cut out for the lady villain or for a reckless expenditure of my gifts. It isn’t possible for me to degenerate or permanently to lower my ideals. Last January on two separate occasions I let strange men into my home because I thought I didn’t care a hang whether school kept or not. But I found that I cared a whole lot when I saw my indiscretion getting me into a situation where I was likely to be kissed. I wasn’t scared, only horribly disgusted with myself. On course I did not let myself get kissed but I had my lesson. Since then my home has been a man-less paradise – or better let us say a man-less abode, for no home is a paradise without a man. My one attempt to plumb the depths of the Gay White Way still makes me blush with mortification when I think of it. I never told you because I was too ashamed. Sometime if my Father Confessor asks me I’ll tell him. This much I’ll say: one Sunday afternoon with another woman I set out to do something desperate – anything, I wasn’t particular. I did the most wicked thing I could think of and I was miserable all the time. I came home in the evening a subdued and mortified Marjorie Daw. I had only done what thousands of perfectly all right women do in New York every day but it wasn’t anything that Marjorie Daw was ever intended to do. My career on the Gay White Way was short and I certainly never would tell anyone but my confessor what I did.

Haven’t I passed through the greatest lot of crazy and idiotic phases? I must have been a terrible trial to you. Perhaps you were patient because you had insight, enough to know that I’d come out fairly sane and normal in the end. I really have some good common sense stowed away inside me and this frequently comes to my rescue when I’m on the point of doing something outlandish. Then, too, I have the background of my early training at school as to ethical values and the right way of living; however far afield I roam I always return to those early standards and ideals. Pal I’ve changed a lot since you first met me; yet it’s only two years. I think we’ll have to get acquainted all over again. Wouldn’t it be fun if we could meet not just like brand new acquaintances with no knowledge of all the nightmares we have both been through these past two years? Yet we have been through them (p. 9) together, inasmuch as we have shared each other’s worries, troubles and anxieties, and so they have brought us nearer to each other.

I came across a prayer a while ago and because I liked it I think it will appeal to you.

“O God of all the men who’ve lived and fought since life was young,

Who loved and hated honestly and died with fame unsung;

Who knew the bitter fear of death, of darkness and of night,

But who were smiling valiantly when they went forth to fight –

To Thee I make my prayer and bed, though downward lies my curve

That tends towards failure and defeat, let me not lose my nerve.

O Lord of all the cowards who have known the pang of fear,

Who trembled when Goliath with his might sword drew near;

Whose feet were all for turning and for ignominious flight,

But who remained to stand their ground and win the desperate fight –

On bended knee I pray to Thee that it may not be writ

Though legions came against me that I ever lost my grit.”1

Pal you will think that I was just making believe when I told you how rushed I am these days and you’ll wonder how I have time to write. Indeed I really have heaps of work to do: a large ironing awaits the attention of Marjorie Daw and nearly 200 pages of proof have piled up for the Doctor. Yet I have deliberately played hooky for four consecutive evenings. Why? Because my longing to talk to Boy Blue overcame the dictates of my conscience which urged me to work. Dear Pal there’s no knowing how long you will last. At any moment some wicked witch may swoop down upon you and carry you right out of my fairyland. Then I won’t be able to talk to you any more. After that there will be years and years and years when I can do ironing and read proof and engage in similar stupid occupations. But now, now in this glorious present I may still write to you and for my part other things can go hang. I believe in taking present joys and making sure of them, no counting on future ones which may never be realized. After I finish this letter then I’ll pitch in for several evenings and over Saturday & Sunday and work like sixty on the ironing and the proof. That’s the way I like to do things, first an orgy of work then an orgy of play. Writing to you four nights in succession is my orgy of play. The editor of D.C. Heath & Co. must think I’m dead. Every day I receive a letter from him saying that he is sending another batch of proof etc. etc. I now have four big envelopes of proof which I haven’t opened. You know I really do have a conscience but it isn’t a Miss Percy variety. She wouldn’t take time off to write chummy letters to a pal if there were any proof awaiting her attention. But then she never would have a pal anyway – it wouldn’t be *au fait* and she’d be afraid that in her next reincarnation she would have to pay somehow for the frivolity, if we can call having a pal frivolity.

I think that one reason why I haven’t felt like working in the evenings is that we are having the most beautiful weather. Each day is perfect and just like summer without the annoying humidity. I take a walk always after leaving the Museum and the air just sets my blood on fire. I feel as though I had eaten about ten yeast cakes and they were making me light and effervescent. I’m happy all the time and can’t realize that this life I am living is really my life. The freedom has gone to my head. I have never been really free in every way before – free from worry, cares [words blacked out]. It’s delicious and intoxicating. I would love to indulge in some active good times, for I now could enjoy them very whole-heartedly, but I have no money for amusements. However, I’m used to amusing myself. I tell you it’s some circus at home these days with Marjorie Daw; she keeps the Doctor laughing most of the time.

I wonder if it is part of my Celtic heritage – for there are strains of Irish in my veins from both sides of the family, mingled with the cold, austere English, the hard, puritanical New England strain, and the vivacious French – is it part of the Celtic heritage that I should be thus able to live these glorious to-days with no head for the future and little memory of the past? I have no plans in life; I am drifting, despite the fact that I am temporarily anchored. I think no farther ahead than the next rent-day. If I have my rent and am sure of regular meals for a few weeks to come I am content. I have no plans except negative ones. I know for a certainty that I do not care to go in for a professional career. I did for a while think that I might bring myself to go on the Survey where the salary would be good and I could so have enough money to adopt a child. That dream went up in smoke when I realized that I couldn’t look after a child the way I would want to and be out at work all day. So there was no reason to go on the Survey. One thing more I know: I wouldn’t stay in any institution, even a place so pleasant as the Museum, for any length of time. I couldn’t think of letting myself grow old in one of the Museum ruts. The women who have been here five, ten, fifteen years are to me pitiable. Their health breaks down, their minds run in certain grooves, their lives are a deadly monotonous routine. Several of them have told me that they never intended to get into it, but having started they were afraid to make and change; that they accepted insults, took blame, and slaved, fearing to speak up for fear they would lose their bread and butter and pensions. One of them told me that I was very independent now but as I grew older I’d reach the point where in meekness I’d let people walk over me and say “Thank you for letting me be even a door-mat.” I think she made a wrong bet on me. The spirit of independence burns strong in me, independence in thought and action and feeling. I have never forfeited it except for love and would never forfeit it for anything but love which is sweeter than independence. Just to illustrate that the thought of where my bread and butter is coming from does not in any affect my spirit of independence, I may say that I resigned from the position as secretary at the office for ungraded children on July first, and did not leave because my license had expired, but my chief loved my work so well that she had my [water damage obscures some words, but the gist is that her boss wanted her to stay on]. I resigned without giving my reason, for I wanted to leave no hard feeling behind, but it was on a matter of principle, certain things expected of me as a secretary which I could not do. I gave ten days’ notice. During those ten days came David White’s offer from Washington, which I also refused primarily because I didn’t believe in women engaging in careers. I had nothing in sight. The only money I had was my salary check of $104, half of which went on July 1st to meet my regular monthly bills. I guess that the old maids who think that I’ll bow down before a loaf of bread and make it my god, that I’ll take the easiest way through fear, are pretty far from knowing anything about me. I don’t mean to display an attitude of bravado, for it is something far deeper than that; I simply mean that at all costs I must abide by my inner convictions and hold true to my ideals. I never count the cost; I act and then somehow pay the bill. And in the matters where big and fundamental principles were involved, those principles and ideals which make me what I am, whether good or bad, I have never regretted holding true to them. I have always had to pay in certain ways for abiding by them but life has always been enriched for me by doing so. The most important and critical steps which I have so far taken and which I took for some principle of mine were: leaving my mother’s home, [words blacked out], spending all my savings on Edna, refusing to accept appointments in Yale, Albany, Vassar, and Washington [words blacked out]. Life will undoubtedly present lots of more decisions to me – let’s hope it will, lest I rust to pieces – but I doubt not that I’ll stand by my beliefs and die game (sic). Obviously I’m not made for a Museum rut. I have some hazy plans for the future, but I’m not thinking much about them yet. Travel would be the best thing for me and I have a thought or two on how I might do it. I would have to give up my home but I’ve become reconciled to that – a home for one is stupid and senseless. Dreams, dreams – poof! They are gone. This is today and I am gay, why think of tomorrow? I have the most wonderful pal in the world and what more could anyone wish for? It’s six months last Sunday since you sailed away; I wish you’d soon be sailing home to

Your devoted Marmo

1. Many thanks to Michael Popp for providing the source of this poem, written by William Wallace Whitelock around 1900, and published in several newspapers between 1902 and 1904. Michael Popp is working on a biography of another female invertebrate paleontologist, Dr. Elvira Wood, who worked for the US Geological Survey in Washington DC, and overlapped a bit with Marjorie at the American Museum of Natural History in the early 1920s. Another female research scientist mostly lost to history.

