

The
ANIMALS
at
LOCKWOOD
MANOR

JANE HEALEY

Houghton Mifflin Harcourt
Boston New York

2020

Copyright © 2020 by Jane Healey

All rights reserved

For information about permission to reproduce selections from this book,
write to trade.permissions@hnhco.com or to Permissions,
Houghton Mifflin Harcourt Publishing Company, 3 Park Avenue,
19th Floor, New York, New York 10016.

hnhbooks.com

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data is available.
ISBN 9780358098546

Printed in the United States of America

DOC 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1



One

The mammals were being evacuated. The foxes went first, in their cabinet with dust underneath so thick it was almost fur; next the jaguar with his toothy snarl; the collection of stouts, their bodies lovingly twisted into rictus shapes by the original taxidermist; the platypus in his box, who was first believed a hoax because of the strangeness of his features; the mastodon skull with the nasal hollow that once caused it to be mistaken for the Cyclops; and then the inky black panther, the melanistic Javan leopard, that had been my favourite since I first saw him as a child visiting the museum. I had taken great care tying him up in sacking and rope so that he would not be disturbed on the trip north, stroked his broad nose as if to reassure us both.

The animals and the fossils, the specimens of this fine natural history museum, were being dispersed across the country, each department bound for a different location, to save them from the threat of German bombs in London. The mammals were being evacuated to Lockwood Manor and I was accompanying them as assistant keeper, a position I had reached after a rapid series of promotions due to two senior male members of staff enlisting. I would be in charge there, the de facto director of my own small museum.

It was a position I might have thought forever beyond me only a year ago, when I had made one of those stupid human mistakes that threatens to undo everything you have ever worked towards in one fell swoop. I had been in one of the workrooms under the museum galleries late one afternoon, copying some faded labels for a collection of rodents that had been amassed during the journeys of an eminent evolutionary theorist and which thus had historical as well as scientific importance. I also had the only fossil of an extinct horse species out next to them, ready to clean after I had finished the labels. I had skipped lunch that day, but then that was not out of the ordinary – I was often so fixated by my work that I forgot to eat the sandwiches I brought with me – and I was wearing an older, tired pair of shoes because my usual pair was being reheeled.

I had slipped as I returned from retrieving more ink, my leg buckling and my shoe skidding on a wooden floor polished by many years of footsteps, and I had knocked both the fossil and the two trays of rodents onto the floor and bashed my forehead on the table edge. But I cared not a jot for any injury I might have sustained as I stared in utter horror at the mess of specimens and labels – I had unpinned the latter from the box so that I could look more closely at them and now, separated from their specimens, the collection had been rendered almost useless. And then there was the shattered fossil. The other occupant of the room, a fellow mammal worker named John Vaughan who was the very last person I would wish as an audience for such an embarrassment because he was forever fond of making snide comments with prurient undertones about my being female, watched with a dark kind of smirk on his face.

What made my accident worse, as I was reminded during

my interview the next day – and the particular tone used by Dr Farthing, the head of the department, when he said *accident* made it seem anything but – was that an American visitor was due to arrive any day to study the very fossil I had broken, a scientist who was as rich as those gentlemanly Victorian scientists of old and who the museum had been hoping to woo as a donor.

I had escaped with a reprimand that day – it would have been hard to fire me from my position since the museum was part of the civil service – but despite my exemplary work on every occasion bar that one disastrous afternoon, I knew that any slim chance of promotion had vanished. It was only the arrival of the war, the enlistment of Dr Farthing, and the anticipated conscription of the majority of the male members of staff (added to the fact that my wages as a woman were lower than a man's, and the civil service was keener than ever at penny-pinching) that found me in the position of assistant keeper of the evacuated collection. But as Mr Vaughan had personally reminded me, before he left to join the Navy as his forebears had done during the last war, once this war was over things would be very different: *They'll have you back with the volunteers in no time, just you wait*, were his exact words, by which he meant, back with the *other women*. There were only a handful of women on the permanent staff, and myself and Helen Winters were the only two who were not junior members. The rest of the women who worked for the museum – who prepared and assisted the mounting of specimens, who catalogued and copied and studied, who travelled and collected and made countless new small discoveries – were either 'unofficial workers' paid a measly one shilling an hour, or unpaid volunteers.

My directorship of the collection that was to be housed at

Lockwood Manor was thus not only the chance of a lifetime as a member of my sex, but also a vital opportunity to prove myself for what came after the war, when all the men came flooding back to their old positions.

Plans for the evacuation of the mammal collection had been in place from the first murmurs of war, even before I had first joined the museum years ago, and we had spent weeks packing everything up for the workmen to carry into the trucks. But the museum was too large to evacuate in its entirety, and we had had to decide which animals, dried plants, rocks, birds, and insects would be transported and which would be left to their fate. We played God all the time at the museum; we named and classified and put the natural world into an order of our own making – family, species, genus – now we would decide which of our specimens were precious enough to be saved.

Although the collection at Lockwood Manor was only supposed to include mammals, other creatures soon snuck their way into the plans and onto the trucks. The telephone rang with calls from geologists and ornithologists already evacuated: could we please take the cabinet in room 204, could we fit in the box of nests from the Americas and the collection of ostrich eggs, the chunk of meteorite that was forgotten in the move, or the parrot stuffed by the venerable (and generous) Lady so-and-so? In the final week, items were still being found in corridors and misplaced rooms, their species hastily penned in handwritten addenda to the neatly typed lists we had previously prepared. And then at the last minute we had realized that we had one more truck to fill, and thus the workers carried out specimens from the entrance hall that were not at all rare in a hurried rush – the foxes, weasels, two tigers, a polar bear, a wolf, a lion, and even a plain brown rat.

*

How quickly the rooms emptied of their inhabitants. I had thought that the sight of their contents being whisked out of the museum would make me frightened of things to come, that the empty rooms would look like tombs ransacked by opportunist robbers, but truthfully I was so thankful to be heading away with the animals, to be employed still with the museum and be part of the only happy family I had ever known, that I only felt excited at the change.

No one outside the museum knew that I was going away, for I did not have anyone to tell – apart from my landlady at the boarding house who did not care where I was off to, only that she needed to find someone to replace my rent.

I had a family once. My parents adopted me when I was very young and they were the only parents I had known. They were relatively wealthy, and old; their three sons had been killed in the Boer War and I was brought in as a kind of replacement I suppose. But I was a disappointment to them; a disappointment to my mother.

After all I've done for her, she would say to her closer friends over tea or on the telephone. Such a sulky child, her head always in a book, an ungrateful child.

How was a child meant to be, how was a mother? These were not questions I thought of until much later and they still seem odd thoughts to ponder. My mother was strict with me, unhappy with me, and I received many punishments during my childhood. But surely children need to be punished to improve themselves, to learn how to behave, especially orphans like I was? *We do not know anything about your true parents, one nurse had told me (for, like other children of the well-to-do, I was looked after by various nurses; some kind, some not), so we must take great care to remove any possible influence.* That was the same nurse who used to make me sleep on the

floor because my bed was, in her opinion, far too soft, who did not believe that children needed luncheon as it would make them too indulgent as adults, who made me write out bible verses until my hand cramped.

The nurses who looked after me did so in separate rooms of the house, and thus it seemed that my mother occasionally forgot that I was there – although perhaps she did not, perhaps that is just a child’s fairy-tale thought, for how could you forget you had adopted a daughter?

Once, when my nurse was sick, my mother had forgotten that I needed meals and shouted at me when I stole a couple of apples after feeling dizzy with hunger. When she did notice me, she often said that my face was *glum* and *peaky* and *ugly* – when in fact it was only a pale face that has never smiled very easily – and she beat me on the legs with the fire poker for it. She compared me often to her natural sons. *I could have left you there, I didn’t have to adopt you*, she would say, and I could hear it in my mind even decades later, *so buck up*.

I remembered a phone call from my mother when I was at Oxford studying zoology, and how excited she was at first. *I hear that Professor Lyle has taken a particular interest in you*, she said. *Yes, he’s been encouraging my work on mammalian locomotion*, I replied innocently. *Oh, you stupid girl*, she had said after a gaping silence. *When your father and I allowed you to remain at university it was with the understanding that you at least find yourself a husband, however meagre his standing might be. I shall hear nothing more of this nonsense. Call me when you are engaged*, she had said, then hung up the telephone.

When my father died of old age, I came home to see her. She told me after the funeral, and after I had told her about my interest in someday working for a museum, that I was a

spiteful girl. I was not allowed to use my full double-barrelled surname anymore, she decided, I was renounced. *I do not want to be connected to you. You shall be Miss Cartwright from now on*, she said, hissing the 'Miss' aggressively. So I had been Miss Cartwright ever since, and though I might have wished to be *Professor* Cartwright, I had still achieved more than I had dared dream.

I became an adult with a strong sense of fairness, of right and wrong, and I was not cowed by my childhood despite it being as unhappy as I thought it might have been in comparison to others. Even if I had not yet found love, and often felt lonely or sometimes had to go to the bathroom and cry after a difficult encounter with a superior or a co-worker like Mr Vaughan, being dismissed by others only made me work harder to prove them wrong. I was prouder than anything of my work with the museum – at least I had been until my accident – and it was my dearest hope that my time at Lockwood would help restore that confidence.

I would not let one stupid mistake spoil everything, I swore, as I checked my office for anything I had forgotten before the next day's journey and folded my coat over an arm; I would not be the useless girl my mother had believed I was, and my time in the country would be my making.

When I had first heard the name Lockwood Manor I had imagined something out of Brontë – wide, rugged moors and a dark house full of secrets and barely restrained passion. But there were no moors in the home counties, and the house was owned by a major who had, according to the precise letters from his secretary, *spared no expense with the modernization of the manor*. I knew that if I had told my mother where I was going she would have looked up Major Lord Lockwood in *Who's Who* and then, finding out from her friends that he was

a recent widower, get desperately excited that I might catch his eye. I had seen a photograph of him in a newspaper after I asked a librarian if she could find me anything on the history of the manor: he looked tanned and fit for his age and had a crowd of lean hunting dogs at his feet. The article was about his investments and imports from the empire, his munitions factories. But all that mattered to me was that he had promised us space for the museum; lodgings for myself for the duration of the war, and temporary accommodation for two other workers from the museum – Helen Winters and David Brennan, who expected to be conscripted soon – who would both be accompanying me initially and staying briefly to help make sure the animals were settled; free range of the entire house; the assistance of his staff should we need it; and retired members of his former regiment, who were too elderly to enlist, for guards. The lovely grounds the house was situated in, the *estate*, would only be a bonus.

The proctor turned off the lights in the museum with a chorus of clicks and pings but it did not scare me; I had never been frightened of the dark. The windows had been boarded up but it seemed there was still light sneaking into the building somewhere, it was not quite pitch black. I stared at the great shape of the mammoth skeleton, which in the darkness seemed to be made of something darker and heavier than air, a silhouette cut out of the afternoon. It was too large to evacuate and would be surrounded by sandbags and ballast in the hope that it would remain unscathed when the war was over.

When the war was over. Would I be much changed then, I wondered, and what would the museum be like? How many walls would still be standing?