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Kate Barnard

1875-1930

BY CLAUDE D. KEZER

*With thanks to Deena Fleck for
research assistance.*

Kate Barnard came upon the political scene in Oklahoma at a time when women didn't have the right to vote. Her destiny, unrelated to her size, her looks, and her demeanor, was to be the voice of the poor,

the downtrodden, the incarcerated, the disenfranchised.

Her rise to prominence was based on her commitment to helping others, her logically reasoned oratorical capabilities, and her wise and powerful use of the press.

She became the bridge between the haves and the have-nots, between the rich and the poor, between the emotionally stable and the emotionally bankrupt.

When she asked the rich to help the poor, she was successful. When she challenged the rich for robbing the poor, she was destroyed. Asking for help, she appealed to their guilt. Challenging their abuse, she threatened their power, and powerful people will do anything to maintain their power base.

So, she was attacked. They cut her support. "Kill the legs of the runner and he can't run." They cut her retaliatory capabilities. "Keep the orator from addressing the people, and they're talking to the wind." They killed her spirit. "Make a person feel like a failure, and you create a loser."

They were successful.
She died of a broken spirit.

(Sitting in a chair with a lap robe covering her. She reaches up and rubs her eyes, scratches her arm, scratches her head, rubs her other arm briskly, then speaks as a tired, beaten woman.)

My little room. . .

I don't really need more space. . . I only need someone to fill part of the space I have.

God. . . I'm lonely.

I'm so tired.

I hurt all over.

. . . Old maid. . . alone. . . a total failure with my life. No family. . . no friends. . . living in the poverty suite of the Black Hotel, downtown Oklahoma City.

But I brought it all on myself. Nobody forced me to do what I did, make the choices I made. It's too late to cry over the milk I've spilled. . . The life's blood I've spilled. (A wail.) Failure.

I had what I thought were friends. . . what I hoped were friends, from the time I first set foot in Oklahoma City. (She gets up, lays the lap robe neatly on the chair, and her youthfulness begins to return.. the flicker of the flame before it dies.)

I was born in Nebraska in 1875. My mother was a beautiful lady. . . I've still got a tin-type of her. I never got to know my mama. She died when I was a year and a half old. . . I wish. . . Oh, how I wish I'd got to know my mama.

Papa. . . Papa had to be

gone a lot. . . He loved me. He told me so once, when he got to come see me. He was gone a lot.

I had to stay with my aunt and her. . . husband. My aunt was really nice. She taught me to sew and cook, and saw to it that I could read and write. She saw to it that I had a full education clear through the eighth grade.

My un. . . her husband wasn't a very nice man. He scared me a lot.

For three years I was a store clerk, a tutor, and a helping hand around the house. The house. It never was a home.

I never felt that I was good enough to marry. . . (Big break). I don't know why, but I never had any boys calling on me. Maybe I wasn't pretty. . . or maybe I lacked charm. . . or maybe. . . Oh, my, "spilled milk" again. Too late to cry.

I made a big decision. Papa said I could come to Oklahoma City and live with him. . . If I wanted to. So, at seventeen years of age, already on my way to being an old maid with nothing to gain or lose, I got on a train and left for Oklahoma.

I'd heard and seen trains whistling and rumbling along, but never had I ridden on one. I was full of excitement and nervous anticipation when I handed the porter my bag and stepped on that train. Goodness! It was beautiful inside! I experienced something that I'd experienced before at times when I was really nervous. I had to go to the necessary room. So I found the door marked for ladies, and went in to take care of my. . . business. (She takes off part of her garment—possibly a shawl—to reveal a change in attitude. She pours and splashes a bit of water on her wrists.)

My, that was refreshing. . . a little splash of cool water on my wrists always makes me feel better.

I returned to take my seat to find a most handsome gentleman sitting where I belonged. I excused myself to him and told him he was sitting in my seat.

Well, what did he do but tell me I could find a seat somewhere else. He wanted to sit by the window.

I put on my sternest face, looked him right in his eyes and said, "Sir, I paid for that seat, and that seat is where I'll sit." He didn't even budge. So I said, "I'll just have to get the porter to move you."

He said, "Ain't no black boy porter got the gall to try and move me."

What I didn't know was that the conductor was standing just three seats away collecting tickets. He'd overheard our exchange of words and came directly to my rescue.

"Sir," said the Conductor, "you sit in your assigned seat and don't cause trouble for this little lady, or I'll stop this train right here and put you off myself."

I got my seat. . . by the window. . . How glorious the scenery became as I sat in MY seat in victory over a crude man. Maybe the world was finally changing. Maybe a woman could have a place after all.

There was a lesson here for me to learn. What you've legally bought and paid for is yours, and no one has a right to try and take it from you. No one!

That train clackity-clacked along at breathtaking speed between stops, but there were so many stops it seemed it took forever to get from Nebraska to Oklahoma.

The wide open spaces of Nebraska, Kansas, and Oklahoma were dotted with farmsteads, crop lands, grazing lands, clusters of trees along creeks and washes, cattle, and finally. . . Indians! I'd seen an Indian at a Medicine Show once, but he was dressed fancier than the ones I saw when I came to Oklahoma Territory. I couldn't help wondering just how dangerous it was going to be living in the middle of the Territories. . . Oklahoma on the west and Indian on the east.

I was somewhat afraid of the Indians. We always tend to fear what we don't know about, and I did fear the Indians.

Papa had some acreage near Oklahoma City, and I was so anxious to start raising chickens and a garden. How I had planned and dreamed of this new start, a real home, a daddy who loved me. How I fantasized about doing wonderful things to make him proud. . . truly proud of me.

The train pulled into the depot at Oklahoma City. I saw him waiting on the platform. I waved excitedly. He saw me. I got my bag, hurried off the train, ran to him for a welcome hug. . . but he said, "Not here Katie, gimme yer bag." Well, he never was very expressive of his love. At least I was here with him and we'd live in a nice home on the farm, and maybe I'd meet some nice folk, and. . .

What we did was get in a hired hack that eventually stopped in front of a shack that was surrounded by junk. . . filthy junk, in a neighborhood of shanties peopled by poor, dirty, hungry and ragged adults and children. . . Children with no shoes, dirty empty faces, rags on their bodies that they called clothes, foraging in trash cans for scraps of food.

"Papa, what's this place?" I asked.

"Home, girl. This is home," he said.

I didn't want to get out of the hack. I wanted to cry, but my good manners wouldn't let me.

Sadly, I got down, took my bag and trudged disappointedly to the door. Opening the door, new assaults pervaded my senses. The evident smell of old foodstuff molding, the rancid smell of decay, the sickening smell of cooking grease that stuck to the walls, the smell of dirty clothes filled with sweat, the musky smell of a man in the unmade bedcovers.

Well, at least he cleaned up to come meet me at the depot.

"Papa, what happened to the hundred sixty acres?" I asked.

"Lost it," was all he said, and I never learned how.

Papa was a surveyor. He'd always traveled a lot, and that didn't change. He'd always return with enough money to feed us.

I spent a lot of time alone in that smelly house, until I realized that my life could be wasted if I didn't do something.

I really didn't know what to do, but one thing I missed was laughter. Even among the children there was no laughter in this poor part of town. Nothing to lift the spirit or feed the soul.

I had recited pieces at our Literaries in Nebraska. We all enjoyed the Literaries, so I decided to organize one with our neighbors. I invited people by word of mouth. I didn't expect many to show up, but was I ever surprised. I ran clean out of lemons. I had to make four buckets of lemonade to give everyone a drink. We had religious reading, beautiful pastorals and love poetry, and funny readings. People cried, and smiled as they dreamed and laughed. Ah, it was a wonderful time. . . Laughter! What beautiful music.

The Literaries became a much looked-forward-to weekly event, and every family brought two

lemons—occasionally some shared their sugar too to take the burden off of me. . . the hostess. I worked for this. I earned it. I had found a place.

Hostess of hobos! Well, it was a start, and everyone—especially the down-and-out—needed spirit, beauty, and laughter in their lives. I was helping them to find it.

Thinking about the good feeling I had one night after our Literary, I wondered what it was that made me feel so good. Being important, making something of myself wasn't it, and this puzzled me.

I thought and thought, and suddenly it hit me. "Do unto others as you would have them. . ." That was it. Doing for others, making other's lives better, giving of yourself, making the world (my world) a better place in which to live, that's what everyone's purpose is. Some just never realize it, but I did.

It was like a spiritual birth, an awakening, a quickening of life. My heart pounded in my chest as a plan began unfolding. . . but the plan. . . it was like a command from God. It held my destiny. It was my reason for being.

When the emotional flood of this awakening started to subside, I began—as though guided by some great power—to establish a step-by-step outline for achieving the plan.

Before the next Literary, I got word that the parents should come to our yard thirty minutes before the children. When they arrived, wondering what was in store, I asked a simple question, "What do you want for yourselves and your children?"

Well, you'd of thought there was a fist fight going on at the rabble that they raised when they all started yelling their answers. "Jobs," "Education," were the most dominant demands.

"Do you folks mind if I write to the newspaper and ask for help for all us poor folks?" I asked. Needless to say they all agreed that I could speak for them, but they all felt it would do no good.

The children came. We had our entertainment and lemonade, but throughout the evening all I could think of was writing that letter.

It was just a few days later.

Praise the Lord, there is power in the word. Food, clothing, even some cash money came

pouring in. I got some of the women together. We sorted clothes and gave them to all who needed. We divided the food as far as it would go. With the money, we bought books and sent the children to school.

Some of the ministers of churches in town decided to form a mission to help us poor people. They called it the Provident Association. They even hired me to serve as "Matron" of the organization.

Things were looking up for the children, and the help from the churches was a blessing for entire families. But something was still needed.

So I called all able bodied men and women to a large meeting. We met in the street 'cause our yard was too small to hold the number. I was a paid "Matron" but too many others who wanted work couldn't find it.

Papa came straggling in when the crowd was gathering, asked what his "crazy daughter" was up to now. He looked so tired and old. He went into the house and laid down while the meeting raged outside.

"I called you people together this evening because something has to be done in this town to make things better, to make things right.

"Many of you people came here to find new hope, and all you found was no hope.

"You all have skills, trades, talents that you could use to do a job of work. . . if you could find the work. Well, I've thought of a way to let the work find you. (She acknowledges the cheers.) I know! I know it sound great. To some it sounds like it won't work. But I think it will.

"I think we can form a workers union, where you all sign up your name and your skills. We'll make a list of all trades by name and make that list available to a job market every day down town. Then, those that need your labor can find you."

Well, everyone went for the plan, and sure enough, it worked. We got jobs for over four hundred members in practically no time at all.

My big plan, my GRAND PLAN, was working. I didn't have to look for my place any more; people were putting me in it. These workers of our union decided I needed to be their representative to the State Federation of Labor meeting at the Shawnee Convention. All of us delegates or representatives were from Farm and Labor organizations, and we

were going to have some say in who was going to write the Oklahoma State Constitution.

I'd learned sometime back not to be shy, to speak my mind, and say what I had to say with conviction. So, I got permission to talk, and what I talked about was what I knew, and what I knew was there was a whole lot of good people who had been exploited. Exploitation isn't fair, and sometimes it's downright cruel.

I demanded compulsory education for our children, abolition of child labor, and the state government creation of a Department of Charities and Corrections to help the poor, the orphaned, the insane, and those accused of crimes.

I'm pleased to say I articulated the needs and the programs well enough that all three were included in the platform of the Democratic Party.

And, included in the language of the proposed Department of Charities and Corrections, I made sure that these words were used in describing the office of the commissioner as being "his or her" office.

Furthermore, my grand plan continued to work. Those people nominated and elected me as Commissioner of Oklahoma's first Department of Charities and Corrections. I heard it said that my popularity and my "gifts as a public speaker" are what got me elected. . . I figured it was just hard work to benefit others, to fill a need, was what did it. Of course a little bit of the aggressiveness and blarney of the Irish didn't hurt either. Besides, men don't rightly know how to think of a small and prim woman who's as tough as a boot underneath her woman's charm. (She laughs.)

Now these first Oklahoma politicians didn't know that I was a statesman who knew how to play all their political tricks. I've read about it in history, and I've seen it happen in my own time. You put a statesman, a person who truly cares about and works for the general good of the country or the state, in a politically powerful office, and some fur is going to fly.

Well, it didn't take long for me to skin the cat.

I pulled in experts to work in my office. Experts in the areas of reform schools, insane asylums, training programs for the handicapped and medical

aid for the poor. When I got all their experience working for me, I went hunting a cat to skin.

I'd heard lots of talk about Lansing Prison up in Kansas. We didn't have a prison in Oklahoma, so we had to contract with Lansing to take all our prisoners at a cost to Oklahoma of forty cents a day per man or woman.

Well, what I'd been hearing was that our Oklahoma prisoners, many as young as seventeen years old, were being badly, no, horribly mistreated up there.

So, what did I do? I went up there unannounced, paid my admission fee, and took the public tour of the prison. What I saw was bad enough, but when the tour was over I went to the warden—Warden Haskell. He wasn't any kin to our governor Haskell, and after identifying myself, I demanded to be taken on a complete tour of the facility and its factory and coal mine where the prisoners were forced to work.

Now Warden Haskell was not pleased with my little deception. He was downright angered at my demand for further inspection, and chose not to allow my investigation. He strongly challenged my "right" to, as he called it, "spy" on his prison.

Well, let me tell you, I let him know I would see "all" or be "ordered out" by him. He knew what problems that would cause. . . so. . . I got the full tour. I crawled through the mines, saw the punishment chamber (the crib where men were shackled hand and foot behind their backs and placed in a coffin-like box), saw the "water cure" pit, saw the dungeons with men chained to the walls.

Oklahoma had at this time five hundred and sixty-two men and thirteen women prisoners in Lansing. They were fed on 10.9 cents per prisoner per day.

Goodness, I could go on and on about that terrible place, but what is important is the last line of the story. After my report to our governor Haskell, a plan developed and we came to its conclusion in January of 1909. We removed all Oklahoma prisoners from Kansas and reinstated them in Oklahoma's brand new and most modern prison in McAlester.

With the prison battle won, I was in demand at many places around the country to lecture to various clubs and organizations. My office was well staffed

and running smoothly, and I was trying to decide what the next project would be, when in 1910 the decision was made for me. We'd already got compulsory education for our children, safety standards in mines and factories, education programs established for the handicapped, and prison reform. These were all programs in place and being well cared for by the capable people I'd hired to oversee them.

Isn't it strange how, when things are running smoothly, we become somewhat complacent? We feel comfortable and tend to rest on our laurels, our accomplishments.

That's the time we should all learn to be wary, for that's the time when if anything is going to go wrong it will.

One of our field representatives got a report that first amused, then intrigued, and later created great anger in me. He told the story as he'd been told, that three "elf" children were living in a field nearby. They slept in the hollow of a tree and begged food from nearby farm houses.

Elves? In America? I could believe the story in Ireland...but America? In Oklahoma?

Realizing there had to be some validity in the story, I sent some of our people to catch the "elves."

What they found were three Indian children. We learned that their parents had died. They were sick, filthy, hungry, and scared. Once cared for, we learned from them that they had been set under the care of guardians who had "thrown them away." Further, these children owned very valuable land in the Glenn Pool Oilfields, and the guardian was collecting their money. Under close scrutiny, we discovered this "guardian" had fifty-one other minors assigned to him, for whom he was collecting money from our state government, and their money from property. . . and, he had, as he claimed, "lost all track of them." Lost all track? No! This man was nothing but a cunning thief! Well, he was certainly prosecuted by our office and made to pay his due.

But, was this an isolated case? I asked myself.

I set our investigators to work, and I was shocked, no, horrified at our findings.

This was a widespread practice. What we discovered made me sick to my stomach, and I

ordered an attack on the problem with no holds barred.

Oh my, oh my, oh my. The Scots have a saying, "The best laid plans of mice and men gang aft astray," and this was the beginning of the end of my GREAT PLAN.

Our systematic investigation began producing some very familiar names. . . some very powerful names. . . names of wealthy local businessmen, names of lawyers and powerful politicians.

When these names kept coming up again and again, the politician side of me urged caution. "Be careful," it said. "Give them the benefit of the doubt," it pleaded. "You can use this information to your own advantage," it tempted. Then, my stronger nature, the statesman side of me said, "Justice is blind," and "Equal prosecution under the law," and . . . we drew prosecution orders against them all.

I thought that my good work, my successes in so many programs, and the fact that I was well liked and highly respected could carry us through. But, politicians and statesmen make strange bedfellows, so they say.

I didn't realize the power of combined political character assassination. Oh, it started softly. They reduced my proposals such as the one where I asked for the responsibility of overseeing and ensuring Indian rights. Well, they allowed our office to oversee the affairs of orphaned Indian children, but we were told "hands off" of any representation of the uneducated Indian adults.

I asked for the opportunity to create an office of Public Defender to handle Indian claims, but the Governor himself vetoed this proposal. However, sometimes, "when there's a will, there's a way." I asked for and received a larger budget for my Department, and I had control over the spending of my Department, and I assigned twenty-five hundred dollars a year for legal fees, which we spent helping the Indians. J.H. Stolper was our lawyer, and he did his job quite well. He brought to trial and prosecution over a hundred of those unscrupulous "guardians" of Indian's property and money. In one year he recovered over nine hundred thousand

dollars to give back to the Indians who had been cheated. Why, one of Oklahoma's Washington Congressmen even called me "a fearless defender of the weak and helpless." I still had a few friends in high places.

Of course our state politicians couldn't attack me personally yet. I was still too well thought of by the public. So, they went after Stolper. It took them until 1912 to do it, but they trumped up some minor charges and got him dismissed. They wanted me to replace him with a lawyer of their selection, but I wouldn't do it. I knew full well what their intentions were, so I refused.

They know how to create pressure, and finally, here it came from the top down.

Those. . . well, I'm not going to call them what they are, those. . . politicians cut my budget; not just a little. . . not just in half. . . they cut the whole thing out. I had no way to pay my staff or myself. They teamed up with some local newspaper publishers and started a regular smear campaign. They just tarnished me at first, and I tried to fight back. But, I couldn't get access to the newspapers to take my fight to the people. They'd cut the legs out from under me. I had no public platform to use to state my case.

I paid some of my staff out of my own savings, but that wasn't enough. I just couldn't hold the department together anymore. Dust collected on all the files. Spiders spun their webs all over my office as deftly as the unscrupulous politicians had spun their webs for me. This office, where good, caring Christian men and women had worked diligently to overcome the dishonesty of a few greedy people, this office was dying.

One by one, all my staff had to leave to find gainful employment at other places. They, after all, had to support their families.

The dead petals dropping from the trees of winter reflected the dropping, no, the dead hopes and dreams that had so recently been vitally alive in this office.

(She picks up her discarded shawl and puts it back over her shoulders. She begins to age again.)

I guess I must have thought I was the Ghost Dance Woman. Invincible—invulnerable to the

politician's bullets.

But I wasn't.

They won.

They destroyed my Grand Plan. . . They made me a failure. (Getting a bit stopped up with hay fever.)

If I just hadn't been so stubborn. . . If I'd of just played politics. . . If I had just compromised, I could have. . . No. NO! What's right is right, and graft and corruption is not right. . . and truth, and justice (deep breath—five beats) don't always win. . .

I tried. I tried so hard, Papa. I wanted you to be proud of me, and I've been nothing but a failure. (She starts rubbing her skin.) This dry skin disease will drive me to total distraction. And the hay fever is getting me all stopped up. My lungs feel heavy and hurt.

Sometimes I just wish I could die. I'm 'bout out of money. . . completely out of friends. (Angry.) I did so much for so many, it seems like someone

could do something for me for a change. (Pause as she sits down and replaces her lap robe.)

No. . . I guess that's not the whole truth. Most of what I did for others was mostly for me. For my satisfaction. I wonder if that's good or bad to feel that way. . . I just don't know, God. I just don't know.

I sure came into this world of public life a lot different than I'm leaving it.

No power.

No money.

No family.

No friends.

(Tearfully.) All alone.

Fifty-five years old and . . . all alone.

Fifty-five years old and . . . a failure. . . forgotten.

I (She grabs her chest with both hands.) Oh, Jesus! Oh, Jesus. . . Papa. . . Papa. . . (A wail.) Mama? ■

Prairie Monument

BY NORMAN ARRINGTON

Dark monolith of a strong man's passage
marks slow turning of dim stars

Gnarled timbers engrave splintered visions
of bone and vein
pierced by memory of rain

A scorpion pauses
between iron bedstead and shadow fragment
cast by waning moon

In the yard
wind rattles a rusting pan ■