

YOU'VE TREATED US LIKE GENTLEMEN

Clara Barton, the Universalist founder of the American Red Cross, in October 1862 during the Civil War organized a wagon train to carry medical supplies from Washington to the front near Harper's Ferry. The eight drovers and mule breakers assigned to her were rough and coarse. They had driven wagons throughout the disastrous Peninsula Campaign and vowed never again to go near the fighting. And now they were asked to risk their lives once more, and do so under the direction of a woman.

The sullen drivers led their wagon train onto the road, but stopped for the night at 4 o'clock, angrily telling Barton that they would not drive in the night. She replied that they could drive till nightfall, and would find it in their interest to do so. The men conferred, indignantly cracking their whips, and with full perversity proceeded to drive their teams deep into the night. As they were moving in the right direction, Barton did not interfere.

Eventually they made a camp, and while the drivers were tending to the animals, Barton prepared from her own supplies a supper which could "grace a well spread table." She spread a cloth on the ground, poured hot coffee, and invited the men to put up their cold rations and join her. The men came slowly, sat quietly, and ate well. Barton chatted as if nothing had happened. Afterward the men went about their tasks. Later that chilly night, as Barton was spending a last few moments by the warmth of the bed of coals, she saw the men emerge from the darkness. She welcomed them by the fire, "the red glare of the embers lighting up their bare, brown faces."

Their spokesman was hesitant, but finally said, "The truth is, in the first place we didn't want to come. There's fighting ahead and we've seen enough of that for men who don't carry muskets, only whips; and then we never seen a train under change of a woman before, and we couldn't understand it, and we didn't like it, and we thought we'd break it up, and we've been mean and contrary all day, and said a good many hard things, and you've treated us like gentlemen. We hadn't no right to expect that supper from you, a better meal than we've had in two years. And you've been polite to us as if we'd been the General and his staff, and it makes us ashamed. And we've come to ask your forgiveness. We shan't trouble you no more."

Barton readily forgave them, but reminded them that "it was their duty to go where the country had need of them. As for my being a woman, they would get accustomed to that. And I assured them that as long as I had any food, I would share it wither them. They listened silently, and when I saw the rough woolen coatsleeves drawing across their faces it was one of the best moments of my life." The next morning, the men made breakfast for her.

Ref.: Percy H. Epler, *The Life of Clara Barton* (New York, 1915), pp. 60-63.