Sunday evening, Nov. 22, 1959

Thanksgiving week. Wherever you are you’ll be having some heartaches. So shall I. You will probably be someone’s guest. You’ll tell funny stories, but underneath you won’t feel so funny. Finally, at day’s end, you’ll be alone. Here’s a little chapter for your entertainment. It’s not uproariously funny, but I think maybe you will at least find mild amusement. For the moment, I’m leaving Beardstown in suspense. Let’s be gay and go to the New York Opera Comique which flourished up to, and into, the Great Depression.

This was a nonprofit, educational corporation, found by just about the wealthiest millionaires to be found in New York City. A Morgan partner, Steele, who drew a cool $5 million a year from the firm. Then there was Colt, President of the Bankers Trust, Bisbee, millionaire corporation lawyer, and an assortment of very wealthy women – all in the Social Register. New York’s blue bloods. Well, this group organized the Opera Comique for the training of young American singers. It was a complete company – singers, musicians, scene designers, and costume designers. They had a budget of $100,000 a year and total personnel of 100.

In 1929, just before the crash, I had resigned from a very good position as a promotion director in the second largest private bank in New York State. I quit on a matter of principle. Me and my principles! Several years before I had met a publicity woman when I was doing some research for another bank. When I resigned from my position in 1929, she asked me to become financial manager of the N.Y. Opera Comique, and to help her with promotion work. I asked B. what he thought of it, and he said “No!” Singers! Theatrical people! Dissolute, immoral people! Judging from those I had met, I didn’t see anything wrong with them. But, anyway, I refused the job. My publicity friend, Mrs. Warner, asked me to reconsider. The Comique has headed by E. Roland Harriman [brother of W. Averell Harriman] and the Board of Directors was loaded with Social Registerites. I persuaded B. to let me accept. I think he hated everyone in the group during the five years I worked for the Comique. He disapproved thoroughly. But the singers were earnest students and I never saw a thing amiss or heard a thing off color. One of the singers was Risé Stevens, now with the Met.

I looked after all financial matters and got some wonderful training from Harriman’s auditors. Also I helped raise money – large sums in $1,000 to $10,000 gobs. I saw a great deal of New York’s high society, not only going to board meetings, but being invited to their homes for luncheon, tea, or dinner. Then, too, social affairs were arranged for, and by, the women. This was a routine designed to get newspaper publicity for the Comique by writing up some social function and saying Mrs. So-and-So was present. Then would be listed the names of all the wealthy women who had been there. Now here was the gimmick. Women in the Social Register are very class conscious. Those who are lesser blue bloods break their little hearts to get their names in the papers as having been at a function attended by the bluest of the blue bloods. Such striving and pushing.

I remember one woman who was extremely wealthy, but she wasn’t in the upper brackets of the blue bloods. She had a pasty-faced daughter who was just reaching the age when she should be introduced to high society – put on the auction block, you know. She lived in a very swanky, duplex apartment on Central Park West. That was on the West Side of town. The blue bloods lived on the East side – Fifth Avenue or Park Avenue. Well, she agreed to pay the Comique $5,000 if we’d help her throw a big party for that anemic daughter of hers and if we’d get the bluest of the blue bloods to attend the party. Mrs. Warner, my publicity friend, and I arranged things and persuaded the blue bloods to attend so that we could cop the $5,000 for the Comique.

Bob, it was the darnedest performance. The social climber hired butlers and maids in such numbers that you couldn’t turn around without bumping into a flunky. The daughter was a vapid nonentity whose greatest asset, so far as I could see, was her father’s millions. Well, we got her picture in the paper in the society column – and, believe me, that’s some achievement. The pressures on those columns is out of this world. That was Mrs. Warner’s job. She was good. The vapid daughter led a perfectly worthless life from my point of view. She would dance till 3:00 or later every night, then sleep till noon.

One of the blue, bluebloods was Mrs. Eldon Bisbee. Her husband was a Morgan attorney. She was then in her sixties. Social position unassailable. She told me once that she simply couldn’t keep track of her bank balance and was always over-drawing. The bank always honored the checks and called her husband to make a deposit. I used to drive around a lot with her in her limousine to meetings, teas, etc. She became quite friendly and unburdened herself. One day she said, “You know, I don’t really have a friend. People make up to me because they want something from me. But if I ever wanted anything I wouldn’t know where to turn.” She used to play bridge all day every day except when doing things for the Comique – her pet charity. She was an unhappy woman because her life was so empty of purpose.

I remember one evening when I had dinner with her and her husband – just the three of us – I thought the meal was dreary. By the time the butler got the stuff to the table from the kitchen on the floor below, everything was cold. Mr. Bisbee was tired and didn’t eat with gusto. I felt that the meals I had at home tasted lots better and I know B. enjoyed them more. We retired to their private upstairs sitting room – an intimate affair, less formal and a bit more comfortable than the main drawing room downstairs.

The depression was underway, and Mr. B. told us how an old college chum of his, then unemployed and stone broke, had visited him and asked for a loan. Mr. B. had given him $5,000, which meant as much to him as a dollar would mean to you. But he lamented that he felt he shouldn’t have given the man the money. His wife admonished him and said: “Now, Eldon, you should be happy that you can afford to help him.” But Eldon wasn’t happy.

I saw a good deal of the inside lives of these millionaires and their wives. They were an unhappy lot, trying to kill time. I often went to their cocktail parties. Here were jaded, weary, discontented middle-aged women tanking up with too many cocktails, complaining, and venting their spleen over the unemployed and the breadlines. Their cocktail party tables were loaded with sandwiches, hors d’oeuvres, and assorted cocktails. They were completely indifferent to the unemployed. I became quite disgusted.

It’s getting late so I won’t try to say all I had intended to say about Comique. I’ll return to it later. But right now I’d like to wind up with a Thanksgiving story. In 1934, as the depression deepened, this group of millionaires really went into a panic. They began to say: “It’s each man to himself, let the Devil take the hindmost.” They decided to close the Comique and throw 100 more persons out of work. That’s exactly what they did. I really didn’t think they would do it. Steele, with his $5 million a year, was coining money selling short. He alone could have supported the Comique.

It was sheer tragedy for me. Bill had just lost his job. We lived in Long Island where we had bought a house in 1928. There were monthly payments. I had to cancel insurance. Savings soon vanished. I was unemployed for 8 months. I wouldn’t go on relief. We got down to no coal in midwinter and no food. I lost 20 lbs. from slow starvation. I couldn’t get any kind of job at any salary.

Thanksgiving was approaching, but I honestly didn’t give it a thought because I didn’t have any money. My dear second mother, who by that time had also moved to Long Island, a few miles from us, dropped in to see us a couple of days before Thanksgiving. I asked her if she could lend me 25 cents to buy some stamps so that I could mail a scientific application I had filled out. That rather spilled the beans about our financial situation. She offered to lend me $5, and I accepted. From that time until about three months later I borrowed $5 every two weeks from her. On that $2.50 a week I kept B. and me in good health, though our meals sure were slim.

Suffering along with us was my very dear cat, Jerry. We shared and shared alike. Jerry was an adorable cat with the cutest ways. He endeared himself to the neighbors. Everyone liked Jerry and he liked everyone in turn. B. had taken out a pane of glass in the window in the basement and substituted a swinging wooden door so that Jerry could come and go at will.

On Thanksgiving day, of course, we had a very thin meal. We sure were hungry. At dinner time we heard Jerry jump down from the window in the basement and start upstairs to the kitchen. He was evidently carrying something because it went thump, thump on the basement stairs. Finally, he walked into the kitchen proudly and dumped a huge turkey leg on the floor. Both joints! My eyes popped and I licked my chops hungrily. Then I gasped: “Gee whiz! Jerry has stolen somebody’s turkey leg.” I knew he had the run of the house next door and I expected momentarily that an angry householder would ring the bell and cuss out Jerry. But nothing happened. He settled himself happily in the middle of the kitchen floor and ate that entire leg while we watched with envy.

It wasn’t until some months later that our neighbor had occasion to remark: “We were so disappointed at Thanksgiving. We had a big turkey, but at the last minute our guests couldn’t come. We just didn’t know what to do with so much turkey so we gave a leg to Jerry.” The suspense was ended. Jerry wasn’t a thief after all. I told the neighbor what had happened and how worried I had been.

Well, bye now. There’s my Thanksgiving story. I hope you have a good day.

Note: In early December 1959, she met with Dr. Robins in person in Dallas at a medical conference, the first time they had met in person since beginning this correspondence.