11/9/1959 “Life With Edna, Pt. 2” (excerpts)

She had progressed well in the nurses’ training course, receiving good marks in her tests. She had fallen in with the strict regime – early rising, long hours of work, sensible shoes and clothes, etc. The hospital must have been desperately short of help or Edna must have been very captivating because the psychiatrist had put her to work on the ward at night with the dangerously insane. She was locked in with some 10 to 12 dangerous patients and she had some hair-raising experiences.

But that wasn’t the worst. The doctor – entranced, I don’t doubt by bewitching Edna – had entrusted her with the keys to the drug cabinet. Edna laughed as she told me. Huge joke. I chided her and said she ought to tell the doctor about her own drug addiction. “Now, Pete,” she said, “He doesn’t suspect a thing. He thinks I drink. He doesn’t know about the drugs. Besides, I haven’t touched a thing.” Picture Edna in a hospital for mental disease, holding the keys to the drug cabinet, and handling a dozen dangerous patients!

She remained at the hospital for two months. By then she was weary of the rigorous life and her thoughts turned to Broadway. So, home she came to Pete. Then calamity struck us both. The American Museum counted on NYC for salaries. Periodically the City would announce that no more funds would be available for a month or two. The scientists weren’t out of a job; they simply didn’t get paid. It had happened to me before. I always went right on working on my research, living on savings. But this time was very different. I had spent about a thousand dollars on Edna and had almost no savings left.

I told Edna we’d both have to get jobs in order to pay the rent and buy food. I told her she couldn’t be fussy. We’d just take any work. She agreed. We went through the “Help Wanted.” At that time I had no business experience, but I thought maybe I could get a job as salesgirl. Huyler’s candy store had an ad in for salesgirls, so we both applied. Edna lied like all get out on her personnel application blank, cooking up a great yarn about work experience in another city. I simply withheld information. I admitted to an A.B. degree only and claimed lack of business experience. Didn’t say a word about my scientific background. By gum! We were hired! When asked when we’d like to start, we said “Now!” That pleased the personnel woman. So-o, we were instructed on how to pack a box of chocolates when the customer wanted a special assortment and we were wised up on this and that.

Edna was expansive and jolly with the other girls. And did she honey up to the male customers! I was decidedly shy, but I waited on customers carefully. Presently an enchanted male handed Edna a big tip after she went all out to charm him. She was thrilled. “Look, Pete!” Before long, a less enchanted male handed me a tip! I nearly died. Edna laughed and said “Aw, Pete, it’s money. We need it for food.”

The job didn’t last long. The store was very drafty and we both caught terrible colds. Besides, we had to travel an hour on the subway to and from work and the hours were very long in those days. We took our pay and decided to try for something else. We went separately for different kinds of jobs. Nobody wanted me. I guess I looked like the wrath of God in my cheap clothes; and I really didn’t have anything to sell. We’d meet at luncheon in the automat where we could get coffee and donut for a dime.

Came the time when there wasn’t even the dime for luncheon and no money for any other food. One afternoon while job hunting alone I became dizzy. The world went black and I was about to drop to the street when I grabbed a lamppost and hung on. I was so hungry! After a while the world stopped going around in circles and I went home. There I collapsed from hunger. When Edna found me, she was positively transformed. Her anxiety and grief were unbounded.

“Pete, I’ve killed you. No one has ever been so good to me. Now you’re dying. It’s all my fault.” I assured her I wasn’t dying, but I sure was hungry.

(I should note, parenthetically, my mother had an apartment in the same building. She thoroughly disapproved of Edna. We were hardly on speaking terms and I’d have died of starvation before I’d have asked her for one cent.)

Edna was beside herself. She blamed herself for having used up my money. She cussed herself out as a drunken bum. She heaped abuse on herself and vowed she’d save Pete. She’d get a job!

Next morning she was up bright and early and out for a job. Gone all day. At day’s end she came in with arms loaded with food. “I got a job as a model, Pete! And look, food! I got an advance on my salary.” She opened up the packages of food and finally brought forth a bottle of – what? Whiskey for Edna? No, sherry for Pete! I wept. Edna, of course, had no earthly use for sherry. Whiskey was her drink. But she hadn’t bought any.

Edna cooked dinner. I was in bed. Too weak to stand. She served me and brought the sherry. She seemed tremendously impressed that anyone would care so much for her as to face starvation. She couldn’t get over it.

Next morning she went to work. It was several days before I was strong enough to get up. Just hungry. Edna cooked the meals and waited on me. I guess it was the first time in her life that she was completely unselfish. Nothing mattered but Pete. She went to work regularly. As I recall, her pay was something like $25 a week. She bought food and paid the rent. I grew stronger. Then came a welcome letter from the Museum. Money was again available for salaries. With Edna and me both working, we got straightened out. She stayed sober.

Then, out of the clear blue sky, she was offered a job as understudy to a Broadway star. Salary $60 per week. She decided, and I agreed, that she’d better be near her job. My apartment was way up in the Bronx. She took a room in a small hotel. When she moved she left behind the beautiful suit she’d bought (at $100) out of her $200 gift check. It wasn’t worn, but she was tired of it.

I was desperately in need of a suit. My clothes were right down to zero. So, I tried on the nifty suit and looked at myself in the mirror. I blushed. Oh my! Such a short skirt! I could NEVER appear in such a thing. I’d feel undressed. I took off the sinful thing. But I still needed a suit and I didn’t have any money to buy one. So I tried on the beautiful – but sort of wicked – suit again. Would I dare to wear the thing? Right down to the Museum? I debated. Finally, I put it on for work. I was in a state of trepidation. I’d never worn a $100 suit before, nor had I ever been so daring – and so much in fashion. Well, sir, the effect was astounding! My co-workers oh’d and ah’d. Beautiful! So stylish! Lovely suit you have! (Of course, none of them wore $100 suits! They didn’t have the boy friends Edna had.)

Bob, that little episode transformed my life as a woman. I suddenly saw clothes in true perspective. From that time to this I’ve thought of Edna whenever I’ve made an important clothes purchase. I say to myself: “What would Edna buy?” She had clothes sense, style, an appreciation of her own grace and beauty and how to enhance them with the right clothes. You see, for more than a decade she had had large sums of money for clothes and jewels. She went to the best stores. Her stock in trade was her beauty. And, of course, she enhanced it in every way that money could help.

Edna revolutionized my life, permanently. Slowly I took to heart all that she had said about my appearance. I began to realize that I could have brains and also dress well. She was brutally frank. She hurt my feelings. But I was willing to accept facts about myself and also willing to do something about my shortcomings. Now I love clothes. I’d go to the limit if I could afford to.

I doubt not that I derived much more benefit from my year with Edna than she derived from me. She got back on her beloved Broadway. It may surprise you, but we gradually lost touch with each other. Her life was very different from mine. Then, too, I had not solved my personal problems. Three years later, I left New York on a long hike (that’s another chapter). And I never heard of Edna again. George M. Cohan, her sponsor, as you know, is dead. So, too, I surmise is Eugene Walter. I’ve meant to write to N.Y. to find out what happened to Edna, but I just never did.

I’d like to point this out. Edna came into my life when I was in the depths of despair. Have you not found that somehow, right out of nowhere, help comes when you most need it? And you don’t know where that help will come from. Not necessarily where you expect. Edna served a great purpose in my life. For one critical year she took my thoughts off myself. I worried about her instead of about me. After a year, my wounds were partly healed. It’s that way in life, don’t you think? The solution for any great grief is to throw yourself into the solving of someone else’s problem. You can’t find solace if you devote yourself to your own grief. I don’t say this in any goody-good fashion. But as a practical matter, you must lose yourself in other’s woes in order to ease your own.

So far as Edna was concerned, we had tried everything. Nothing worked. In the end, she was stunned into some sort of realization when she saw that another human being had cared enough to face death by starvation for her. She was transfixed. It did something to her. I hadn’t planned it that way. Things just happened. I did what I had to do, being what I was.

The other day Bill found an old letter file – 40 years old. It was mine. I thought I had destroyed all personal matters before I married. In the file were letters from friends long dead. Old Christmas greetings. NO OLD LOVE LETTERS. But, a bunch of letters from Edna to Pete. Her outpourings of appreciation brought tears to my eyes.

Well, my dear, that was life with Edna. Maybe you’ll like it, maybe not. One never knows what someone else will like. She’s very real to me. Often in my thoughts.

(Bob, as you can readily see, I haven’t written this little chapter to a Trustee. Just to a dear Joe who is human and full of understanding. Whisper – I don’t think I even like Trustees. Shirts too stuffed, and all that. I do hope you’ll love Edna. If you don’t, I shall have failed as a true story teller. Tell me some time if you love Edna. She was the most beautiful, glamorous, utterly gorgeous, scintillating woman I’ve ever met.) My gosh! If she’s alive, she’d be 70!

(Bye now! 1:30 a.m.!! Printer early, then disability hearings!)