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CATALOG ESSAY ON EDITH KERMIT ROOSEVELT

by

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One day in the mid-1860s, a New York neighbor of Mr. and Mrs. Theodore Roosevelt saw two young children sitting side by side on the steps of the family's brownstone at 28 East 20th Street, just off Broadway. One was the oldest son of the household, Theodore Roosevelt, Jr., aged about eight, and known to his familiars as "Teedie." Though slight and frail-looking, he was concentrating intently on his companion, a girl of about five with chestnut hair and blue eyes. She was wearing a white dress and looked serious beyond her years, as she read aloud from a book. Her name was Edith Kermit Carow, but she was sometimes teasingly called "Spotless Edie," on account of her neat appearance and meticulous habits.

Edith lived a few blocks away on Livingstone Place, near 14th Street, and had met Teedie some years before, while playing in Union Square. Martha Roosevelt noticed the growing closeness between them, so she invited the girl to join Teedie and his two younger siblings, Corinne and Elliot, for kindergarten lessons in the second-floor nursery.

Their teacher was Mrs. Roosevelt's sister Anna Bulloch, a diehard Southerner with an inexhaustible fund of Br'er Rabbit stories. For her pupils' more formal tuition, she used the respected McGuffey Readers, designed "to impart valuable information and to exert a healthful influence" on young American minds. She also included in the

curriculum the popular magazine "Our Young Folks," which introduced her charges to such classics as Louisa M. Alcott's *Little Women*, along with other tales stressing morality and the virtue of good conduct.

A love of reading inculcated in the Roosevelt schoolroom stayed with Edith. Well into old age, she could recite reams of verses by Longfellow, Tennyson, Browning and Shakespeare. The last was her favorite, and she said that if *As You Like It* was ever lost, she would be able to "write it out" word for word. She seldom traveled without a copy of Shakespeare and once, while waiting for a carriage, she was seen sitting on a pile of luggage reading *King John*.

Although Edith bonded quickly, as a child, with the sickly, short-sighted and studious Teedie, she was, with most people, shy and somewhat remote. A classmate would say that she "always seemed deeply detached from the external accidents of life … her warmth and passion lay far beneath the surface." Yet she also displayed "a great strength of character and ineluctable willpower."

Edith's coolness was self-protective, partly caused by the strained circumstances of the Carow household. Her father, Charles, had inherited a thriving shipping business from his father, Isaac Carow (an early sponsor of the New York Society Library) but profits had declined during the Civil War, and Charles had taken to drink. By 1867, when Edith was six, 50,000 New Yorkers were out of work, her father among them. Gertrude Tyler, her neurasthenic mother, was forced to turn to her own family for support.

There was, however, enough money for ten-year-old Edith to attend Miss Comstock's School, a prestigious private academy on West 40th Street. In addition to the basics, the girls studied zoology, botany, physiology, etymology, philosophy, music, Latin, German and French. Perhaps due to her Huguenot ancestry, Edith became fluent enough in the last language to pepper her letters and conversation with Gallic phrases. But her best subject was English Literature, and she soon became an accomplished amateur poet. Her adolescent themes, more complex than average, included despair, regret and loss, reflecting early experiences, and pessimistically anticipating later ones:

Soon these helpless tiny fingers
By life's thorns will wounded be
Holding close the cruel roses
Plucked from life's deceptive tree.

In the fall of 1876, when Edith was fifteen, Theodore entered Harvard, and her relationship with him changed dramatically. At the end of his first semester, he returned to New York for Christmas, and took Edith to a party. After supper, Corinne found them in a dimly-lit room having a "cozy chat." They were beginning to look like a romantic couple. Then, in January, Theodore wrote home to say that he had met a girl in Boston who "looked quite like Edith -- only not quite as pretty as her Ladyship: who when she dresses well and don't frizzle her hair is a very pretty girl."

Enamored of him, and aware that he was encountering many eligible young women in Massachusetts, Edith wrote a metaphorical poem:

I have many noble castles
In the air
Buttress, battlements and turrets
Showing fair
Clear defined each age-dark story
'Gainst a rosy sunset glory
Pure and rare.

To my castles none may enter
But the few
Holding to my inmost feelings
Love's own clue
They may wander there at will
Ever welcome finding still,
Warm and true.

Only one, one tiny room
Locked they find
One thin curtain that they ne'er
Gaze behind
There my lost ambitions sleep,
To their tear-wept slumber deep
Long consigned.

This my lonely sanctum is;
There I go
When my heart all warn by grief
Sinketh low
Where my baseless hopes do lie
There to find my peace, go I,
Sad and slow.

The sentiments expressed here by Edith are astonishingly similar to those of her distant cousin, the novelist Edith Wharton, writing sixteen years later, in a short story entitled "The Fullness of Life."

> A woman's nature is like a great house full of rooms: there is the hall through which everyone passes … the drawing room where one receives formal visits; the sitting room, where the members of the family come and go … but beyond that, far beyond, are other rooms, the handles of whose doors are never turned … and in the innermost room, the holy of holies, the soul sits alone and waits for a footstep that never comes.

Mrs. Wharton achieved romantic and sexual fulfilment only in middle age. Edith Carow knew from childhood who her lifetime love would be, the one person admitted to her "inner sanctum." But his venture across her threshold would not be without missteps.

After hosting a party for Edith in Cambridge in the spring of 1877, Theodore wrote home to say that she had behaved "as sweetly as she looked," and that his male friends had admired her "intensely." A year later, when he entertained her again at the Roosevelt summer home in Oyster Bay, his mood had grown somber. His much loved and revered father had died some months earlier, and Theodore, at nineteen, had taken it hard. He sought Edith's companionship more than ever, taking her sailing, rowing and driving. But then, for reasons they never fully explained, the tranquil days were made stormy by a quarrel. It led, TR said later, to a break in their "intimate relations." Both of them "had tempers that were far from being of the best."

According to Edith in later life, Theodore had proposed marriage to her more than once during his first two years at Harvard, but her maternal grandfather thought her too young. Corinne said that Theodore Senior had also discouraged the match, because he feared the long-term consequences of Charles Carow's alcoholism. Edith simply said that her erstwhile suitor had "not been nice."

That fall, Theodore turned twenty, and the name of Alice Hathaway Lee, a beautiful, blonde Bostonian, appeared with increasing frequency in his diary. Yet he still sent his love to Edith via Corinne -- "if she's in a good humor: otherwise my respectful regards … I hope when I see her at Christmas it will not be on what you may call one of her off days." During a subsequent weekend of tennis and strolling with Alice, he suddenly decided to woo her. When he wrote a note to congratulate Edith on winning *The World* literary competition, it was from the Lee house on Chestnut Hill in Brookline.

Sensing that Theodore had drifted away, yet sure that she would regain him in time, Edith earned the reputation in New York social circles of having "an utter lack of susceptibilty." As had become her custom when thwarted or depressed, she took solace in books. Her reading list that winter included Swinburne's *Life of Blake*, Gilmore's *Life of Coleridge*, Brown's *Life of Southey*, and fiction by Dickens, Thackeray and Henry James.

On August 6, 1879, Edith received a copy of *Lucille*, a long poem by Owen Meredith, inscribed "To Edith K. Carow on her eighteenth

birthday, from her sincere friend Theodore Roosevelt." In New York briefly that fall, he called on her and, as always, they talked of literature. Afterwards, he declared her "the most cultivated, best-read girl I know." He seemed to be vacillating between "sweet, pretty" Alice and his companionable old friend.

But not for long. On January 25, 1880, TR proposed marriage to Alice Lee. She accepted, and Edith Carow added a new title to her reading list: *Splendid Misery.* Yet at Theodore's wedding reception on October 27 -- his 22nd birthday -- she defiantly "danced the soles off her shoes." As she later told a granddaughter: "I knew that someday, somehow I would marry Theodore Roosevelt."

And wed him she did, on December 6, 1886. Alice had died tragically young, of Bright's Disease, almost three years before, having just given birth to a daughter and namesake. After a honeymoon in Europe, Theodore, Edith and her little stepdaughter Alice moved into Sagamore Hill, a three-storied gabled structure with twenty-two rooms in Oyster Bay, Long Island. There, in September 1987, they had their first child, "Ted," who was followed at intervals over the next eleven years by Kermit, Ethel, Archibald and Quentin.

During that period TR held numerous positions: Civil Service Commissioner, New York City Police Commissioner, Assistant Secretary of the Navy, Colonel of the Rough Riders regiment in the Spanish-American war, Governor of New York State, and then, at the turn of the new century, Vice-President of the United States. Finally, in September 1901, the assassination of William McKinley catapulted him into the presidency.

Notwithstanding her inate reticence, Edith would play her role as First Lady superbly. But first the Executive Mansion -- as it was then called -- had to be made habitable, and equipped for elaborate social functions. A fire in an earlier administration had caused the executive offices to encroach on the upstairs living quarters, cutting

the number of bedrooms. To accommodate a family of eight and occasional overnight guests meant a drastic change.

Congress obliged with an appropriation of half a million dollars, to restore the newly-named "White House" to its original classical simplicity. Edith asked the renowned architectural firm of McCim, Meade and White to make renovation plans, and busied herself in every detail. The rebuilt West Wing offices were connected to the house proper by Thomas Jefferson's original colonnade, which in the Victorian era had been swallowed up by a huge greenhouse. Above the East Room, two extra suites with adjoining baths replaced the President's old study and secretarial offices. A grand stairway was installed, the size of the State Dining-Room was increased, and a First Ladies' Portrait Gallery was carved out of the basement that hitherto had housed pipes and ducts.

Most of the construction took place during the summer and early fall of 1902, while the Roosevelts were at Sagamore Hill. But Edith kept in constant touch with the architects. When McCim submitted an unsuitable design for her desk, she insisted it be made to match rosewood furniture already in place. Always thrifty, she ordered that drapes taken from the formal rooms be used to re-cover furniture in the family quarters. Since no complete set of executive china existed, Edith ordered 1,320 pieces (120 place settings) of creamy English Wedgewood decorated with a two-inch wide Colonial motif. She then collected surviving crockery from twenty-five other administrations, and displayed some of the best in cabinets on the new Ground Floor.

Determined that future occupants should not be cavalier about national heirlooms, Edith made an inventory of the entire contents of the White House. From then on presidents were not allowed to dispose of its historic objects by the wagon load, as Chester Arthur had done.

When the family returned in October, they found the building's Victorian accretions mostly gone. The main corridor was no longer cut off from the entry vestibule by a Tiffany screen. The East Room had been shorn of its floral carpet, stuffed circular sofa, and bulbous chandelier. Reinstalled were American Federal and French Empire-style pieces used by the earliest occupants.

The enlarged State Dining-Room now seated a hundred, and the East Room became the scene of elegant entertainments, all paid for out of Theodore's salary. As passionate about music as literature, Edith Roosevelt initiated a series of evening Musicales, to be performed there during the winter season. Among the performers were the opera diva, Nellie Melba, the pianists Ignace Jan Paderewski, Josef Hofmann and Feruccio Busoni, the Vienna Male Voice Choir, the Philadelphia Orchestra, and a young Spanish cellist, Pablo Casals, who would return sixty years later to play for the John Fitzgerald Kennedys.

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The Roosevelts quit Washington in March, 1909, leaving behind many bereft friends, among them the historian and descendant of presidents, Henry Adams. Edith had visited him regularly in his large, red brick Henry Richardson house on Lafayette Square. He could not bring himself to say farewell. "Is it not enough that I should have to look out of my window every moment," he wrote her, "and that, whenever my eye falls on the White House the thought that you are not there should depress me without having also to assume an air of cheerfulness and go to bid you goodbye as though we both like it?"

Quiet, enigmatic and self-effacing though Edith had been, the staff also felt a void after her departure. She was "a sort of luminiferous ether, pervading everybody and everything," said TR's chief aide. In seven and a half years as First Lady, "she never made a mistake."

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Husband and wife were apart for long periods -- in one case, over a year -- during the decade 1909-1919. TR led a marathon scientific safari through East Africa, and spent seven months lecturing and exploring in South America. In between, he ran unsuccessfully as a Progressive in the 1912 presidential campaign, and was almost killed by a would-be assassin. Tropical fevers, and the wear and tear of his strenuous life, aged him rapidly. His heart had never been strong,

after struggling with chronic asthma in childhood and youth. A Harvard physician had warned him to be more sedentary. But Theodore would have none of it. "Doctor," he said, "if I've got to live the sort of life you have described, I don't care how short it is." Later, he added that he intended to "spend and be spent" until he reached sixty, no matter the consequences. This he did, dying in his sleep at Sagamore Hill on January 6, 1919.

"She is not only cultured but scholarly," TR once said proudly of Edith Kermit Roosevelt. Acknowledging her astuteness, he said that he ignored her advice at his peril. "The person who had the long head in politics was mother," their daughter Ethel remarked. A White House valet observed that the First Lady was a shrewder judge of people than her husband. Mark Sullivan, the editor of *Collier's Magazine* wrote that in the opinion of many, Mrs. Roosevelt was "greater among women than her husband among men."

Memories of such compliments did little to mitigate Edith's loneliness in widowhood. After her youngest son died in World War I, and her other children married, she looked increasingly for intellectual sustenance. A New Yorker bred, if not born, and an omnivorous reader, she found her Society Library membership helped to fill a diminished life.

In the early 1920s, she began a bookish correspondence with Marion King, the Society's long-term librarian, which would continue for over twenty-five years. Some 600 letters from the former First Lady to Mrs. King have been recently deposited in the Theodore Roosevelt Collection at Harvard University. They reveal Edith's ability as a literary critic, just as her weekly package of books -- sometimes as many as nine -- show her catholicity of taste. On one typical occasion, she asked to be sent Byron's letters, Racine's essays, Willa Cather's novels ("a great rock in a weary waste of twaddle") and some "sexless" Agatha Christie mysteries that she called "nightcaps." Another time, she ordered a tome on French cathedrals, biographies of Lincoln,

Voltaire, and the opera star Chaliapin, along with the poetry of John Clare and Gerard Manley Hopkins. She also re-read Joseph Conrad's *Allmayer's Folly*, and reported that it was "even more wonderful than I remembered." Accounts of Gertrude Bell's Iraq travels enabled her to hold her own in discussions of Middle Eastern culture and politics with her grandson Archie, an Arabist who spoke sixteen languages.

Literary gossip occasionally made its way into the letters. "The Elinor Wylie thing was shocking! If you had known her [the American poet and novelist] from the beginning of her career as I did!" After finishing a life of Coleridge, Edith expressed disappointment with the characters described in it, as if she had actually known them. "What dreadful people those Lake poets were. So selfish!" As for A.A. Milne, the author of *Winnie the* Pooh, she found him "a quiet mousey little person -- not a man -- who whispers in your ear about Christopher Robin ... Not a ray of social talent and an unattractive wife."

Edith diverted herself with foreign travel in the winter months of her late years. "I have salt water around my heart," she wrote, quoting an old Breton saying. On lengthy sea voyages she re-read all of Shakespeare, as well as Spenser's *Faerie Queen*, the lives of Calvin and Cervantes, and a volume on the art of Goya. As an octogenarian she turned more frequently to her own shelves and finished, for the umpteenth time, the six novels of Jane Austen.

Although Edith always signed letters with her full name, or the initials EKR, she began addressing Mrs. King as "Marion" as time went by, asking about her daughter, and even advising her on how to deal with exhaustion. "Spend some Sundays in bed with your door closed ... nothing in particular to eat. No books or letters or papers. All my life this has been the best medicine: *Peace, happiness and repose / Shut the door on the doctor's nose.*"

Gas rationing in World War 11 cramped Edith's movements. She had to cut back on chauffeur-driven trips to Connecticut, where she was born, and especially to a house in the state that she owned. It had once

belonged to her Tyler ancestors. The deaths of Ted of a heart attack after the D-Day landings in Normandy, and of Kermit, an alcoholic suicide, while on military service in the Aleutians, curbed her favorite pastime. "I cannot read much now … So much to think over." Besides, "My eyes are not what they were at twenty."

Before Kermit's death, Edith had collaborated with him on writing two books. One, about her ancestors, was called *American Backlogs*. The other, describing her travels, was entitled *Cleared For Strange Ports: The Odyssey of a Grandmother*. She took the second title from a phrase in her passport, and in the introduction she wrote:

> Women who marry pass their best and happiest years in giving life and fostering it, meeting and facing the problems of the next generation and helping the universe to move, and those born with the wanderlust are sometimes irked by the weight of the always beloved shackles. Then the birds fly, the nest is empty, and at the feet of the knitters in the sun lies the wide world.

It was predictable of her to scatter phrases from Shakespeare, such as "knitters in the sun" from *Twelfth Night*. They were seared in her brain. Her most precious possession was a leather-bound set of the Bard's works, a gift from Theodore. When the volumes fell apart from heavy use, she asked Mrs. King to "get the Library's binder" to repair them. In addition she wanted a "strong, light leather box for the three volumes," which "must close with a snap, not be just a case."

Edith Kermit Roosevelt died on September 30, 1948, at the age of 87. Born in 1861, in Lincoln's first term, she saw Harry Truman campaign for his second. Thorough in death, as in life, she left instructions for her funeral. "Simplest coffin possible. If the church has no pall, cover it with one of my crepe shawls. Nothing on coffin but bunch of pink or blue flowers from my children … The anthem from Beethoven's

Ninth Symphony. Do not take off my wedding ring and please no embalming."

One of her favorite poems was the Canto "Death" by Walter Savage Landor. Four lines from it could well serve as her own epitaph.

I strove with none; for none was worth my strife;
Nature I loved, and, next to Nature, Art;
I warmed both hands before the fire of life;
It sinks, and I am ready to depart.