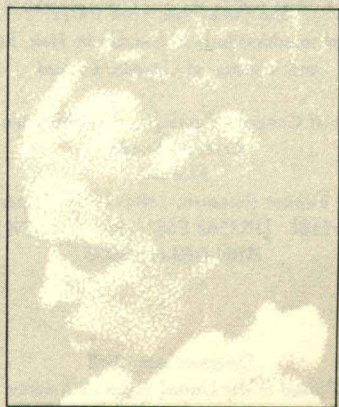


# Eleanor

*A Novel*



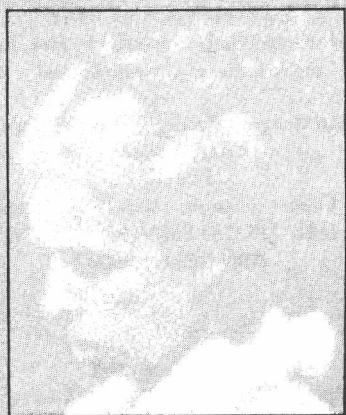
*by*

RHODA LERMAN

HOLT, RINEHART AND WINSTON • NEW YORK

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TO CURTIS ROOSEVELT,  
WHOSE GRACE AND WISDOM LED ME, PAINFULLY,  
TO KNOW HIS GRANDMOTHER



# EXCURSION ONE

*The Canteen, Summer 1918*





## IN WHICH I LEAVE FOR THE CANTEEN

THE rewards of war, to be sure, are quite different from the rewards of marriage and that is perhaps why, in the summer of 1918, after thirteen years of marriage to Franklin, war so tempted me. I was thirty-three that summer and awakened by war, much as the city had been awakened. Sleepy, obliging, genteel Washington swelled, suddenly voluptuous with summer heat, teeming with strange men, sodden with new vapors, diseases, desires, her streets and alleys widening to welcome war because war, we had found, the city and I, was passion and passion was a partner with whom I in my daydreams against the black stage of my life with Franklin had danced long and lonely.

On July 9, 1918, Franklin left on the U.S.S. *Dyer*, secretly, with only the splash of the oars and the clink of chain as he was rowed out to the darkened troopship, and because he was gone, whatever it was that had tempted me now drew me and

I was free to answer. It was a dangerous time for me, a time between the daydream and the real, a time when the walls between them bent and buckled and I couldn't tell if I were holding them up or pushing them down. I cried often.

Franklin was Assistant Secretary of the Navy then, under Josephus Daniels. We rented a home in Washington, shared a house with Franklin's mother in New York, owned a summer cottage next to hers in Campobello and belonged, ultimately, with her in Hyde Park in the big house. I was thirty-three, Franklin was thirty-six. We had five children: Anna, twelve, James, ten, Elliott, almost eight, Franklin, four and Wee Babs John, two. I was too thin, too tall and too tense. I had shingles, nightmares, constipation, a world of daydreams to ease the pain of my days, twice as many teeth and three times as much energy as anyone else I knew except my Uncle Ted, and very little courage. There were some things I could not bear.

And so it was perhaps just as well, the way I felt, that Franklin had gone off. It was to have been our second honeymoon. Instead, that summer, that fall, I spent in the canteens.

In Washington, I served the men who were going to war. From tea to dawn, from dawn to tea, until two or three in the morning, day after day that summer and fall, under the steaming tin shed of the canteen at Union Station in Washington, I served the men. A Navy League Auxiliary tea might keep me away or a lunch at the New Willard, less often at the Powhatan, or a Liberty Loan speech by Mr. McAdoo or a lecture by a British flier who had been a German prisoner. Sometimes I would visit the wounded and insane at St. Elizabeth's Naval Hospital. But more often than not I was at the siding of the railroad station. When the troop trains moved in, my heart beat wildly to the shaking of the foundations and when they moved out, as inexorably they did, with their sad freight, my heart emptied until the next train, the next whirlpool of men waiting, hundreds of them,



with tears and songs and greetings and the emptiness that I, among others, would fill for a few hours in the lives of these men who were leaving for war. We were all very serious and I, everyone thought, more so than the others.

But in the New York canteens, I danced with the men who had come home from the war with ribbons and medals and gold fourragères. Franklin wrote: "Don't get so tired in New York. Please." Mama wrote to Franklin: "Eleanor was in Hyde Park. She came up from New York and she is thin with exhaustion. Whatever is she doing there?" And I wrote: "I have spent hours today working at the canteen in New York but feel that I have in some way contributed to the war effort."

I danced with the doughboys. With long and tall and short and fat and Boomers and Scooters and Billies and Willies and Horaces and Morrisies. I didn't care with whom I danced. I had no tiny pencils wrapped in silk and no engraved programs in which to write names. I danced fox-trots and waltzes and I told the boys, when they inquired, that my husband was in the Navy but I would never tell them which ship. They didn't really care. They just wanted a girl to hold, a smile, sometimes a name. They held me; I smiled. Some went over again. Some went home.

I exchanged names, I knit sweaters and socks and over-the-tops for their puttees and wove in, when I was at the borders of my gray knitting, a long piece of my own auburn hair as a blessing. They held me. Some waited to dance with me and hummed "Mademoiselle from Armentières" as they waited, shuffling on the sidelines, reeking of cheap pomade, fresh wool and free smokes. I closed my eyes and wondered what that woman was like, that Mademoiselle from Armentières, and the men spoke haltingly about my eyes, their wives, their apple trees, a hill full of goldens gone from the rains, letters, their units, their rifles, their fear, going back, going home, war. "Certain possible death," they would say, hushed. Or "possible certain death." Some knew my husband's name

and they danced with me all the more, weaving feet and fate and asking me "When does he say it's gonna be over? Will there be a Navy battle? That's what I wanna see, a Navy battle."

I bought them tiny Bibles like my father's to wear in their breast pockets. They brought me little bits of violets and flags for my lapels. The buttons of their tunics brushed the flosses and silks of my chemise. "It won't be over too soon," I promised them. "Oh, Dem Golden Slippers," I would sing. "Golden slippers I know so well." And they'd answer: "Gonna lead me straight to hell," and I would laugh a silvery laugh and shame them. I thought of them as my children—and of course, most of them were much shorter than I—but I liked their arms slipping around my waist, their brass against the lonely lump of lead in my stomach. I wore my After the Shower gown of French gauze sprinkled with glistening steel beads; I wore a coat-of-mail dinner frock with miles and miles of looped ribbons overlapping in black silk cascades. And I pinned their violets in my hair. Franklin wrote from Europe: "Don't get so tired in New York. Please." It was in Washington I tired, not in New York. In New York I blew up red balloons with bicycle pumps and I wore brown velveteen with wide panniers and strung the balloons across the pressed tin ceiling of the storefront recreation hall on Eighteenth and Fifth Avenue and we sat like ladies of the night in our gowns from the House of Callot, sat in the parlor and waited for the dark, for the doughboys to arrive, and then we turned on the Victrola and each of us took turns winding it, a large lovely lily blossoming with my music.

Sometimes we served cider and doughnuts, sometimes lemonade and doughnuts, sometimes coffee and doughnuts.

"I have seen the war," Franklin wrote. "I have found four Hepplewhite chairs with our crest." I have feet of lead and hammertoes and shingles.

My heels were thin and turned, my slippers torn and my

soles ingrained and pitted with the glassy sands we sprinkled on the wooden dance floors.

Some men came again and asked for me, I understand. Some left little notes. They called me Lady. I wrote little notes to their wives and found small donations for their families and then took the train back to Washington and hummed the songs of the dance hall as we passed through Jersey and Philadelphia and Baltimore and then slowly, in front of my linen closet on the second floor outside the bedroom, my throat would close as I put myself and the linens away.

"But you have ten servants, Babs," Franklin had said once when he caught me at the linens. "What are you afraid of? A rumpled sheet? Relax. You can't control *everything*." By "everything" he had not meant the linens; he had meant himself.

Over the damask cloths and the percale sheets and the seersucker spreads Franklin preferred, I would hum "Mademoiselle from Armentières, parlez-vous," over and over until my smile and my voice cracked and the wicker baskets were emptied and waiting for the next week's load. Finally I couldn't sing or smile. I stood before the linens and tied ribbons around the stacks of towels and the melancholy I felt poured out on the sidewalk, on picnics with the children, at balls and dinners, on Sunday excursions in the Stutz, and there was no musette bag, no valise, no kit bag, nothing to pack up my troubles in, nothing to contain my shame except the shingles raging on my spine and around my throat in an ever shifting map of my soul. "Can't we just have fun, Babs?" That was Franklin's plea when he was home. I would sit winding balls of gray wool from hanks of gray wool off the arms of a chair or a child who squirmed in the process and I would knit. Then I would run my fingers along the silken fringes of a painted silk lampshade, Fontainebleau scenes in fabric paint, around and around the light, along the fat gold

tassels of silk on the drapes, bulbs of cords and upholstery fringe and braided butler pulls, until my fingers were numb with the nub of the silk and then I would kick off a shoe, slip off my hose, and pick purposefully at the dry patches of skin on my heel and lift the skin off in little squares and strips. There was something inside me that my own fingers, tearing and ripping, sought to free.

But I was free that summer, freer than I'd ever been. The children were in Hyde Park with Mama, Franklin gone, no one to care for, no one to wait for, no schedule. It was the first summer since my marriage that I was neither nauseated, pregnant as a cow nor nursing a large and hungry Roosevelt. My friend Isabella said I looked like a nineteen-year-old. "Slim and lovely," she wrote from Colorado where she lived with her husband, Bob, whom I think once loved me. "Hardly a matron." We were both very much matrons in the proscribed, circumscribed, circumspect conscriptions with all the rules and roles of the upper class. But that summer, even the air smelled different to me: metallic, acrid, tart. Something burning. Metal parts wearing thin.

At daybreak, dimly, one July morning not long after Franklin had left, I heard the cry of the troop train approaching Union Station. There was nothing to keep me from it. Although the moon was still in the sky, although it was not yet dawn, I rose and left my house, left the sleeping servants, hurried along N Street to the garage and rapped softly on the door for our chauffeur. Huckins, chamois-gloved and pomaded when he at last emerged in his uniform, delivered the Stutz to the curb, helped me into the driver's seat and took his place smartly on the running board.

"Ready, Huckins?"

"Yes, madam. Ready, Mrs. Roosevelt."

And with a complaint from the tires on the cobblestones, we were off.

I, a matron, with my hair brushed high, too much rose water behind my knees, too much color rubbed into my

cheeks, the scarlet cross on my chest, my Red Cross cape flying behind me, the wind rushing at my teeth—Franklin had neglected to replace the windshield—ribbons of steam curling toward me from the railroad tracks, and rose petals, beaten by the night's rain, strewn on the curb, I thundered toward Union Station as if it were the Front. Past the solid red-brick houses with their box-hedged yards and their three-stepped stoops, their striped awnings and screened piazzas, past the cast-iron fences and cast-iron lightposts and wastebboxes at each corner of each clean sidewalk, past each precise front yard, each backyard just large enough for a war garden, a swing, an arbor. Past, past, past.

Huckins, poor soul, I'm certain regretted ever having agreed to teach me the technicalities of the Stutz. He, like Franklin and Mama, thought I should have an electric car and drive round the city streets in an upholstered living room with a tiller to steer by and flowers in a vase, no faster than thirty miles per hour and no farther than twenty-six miles from home. I wanted to drive the Stutz.

As we drove toward the canteen, Huckins' drooping mustache blew upward into a Cheshire-cat smile, while he clung to the doorpost and mouthed over the engine: "Madam, the cart. Madam, the curb. Madam, the pig. Madam, I beg you." And I smiled and ignored him in much the manner Franklin smiles and ignores me when he doesn't wish to listen and I drove on at high speed startling an occasional darky hymning his slow self across the street, stampeding an early morning dairy horse and his clip-clop milk wagon over the cobblestones, ice wagons, peddlers, pushcarts, tubs of oysters, racks of rabbits and manure everywhere and Huckins' gold-crown eight-dollar Painless Dentist set of teeth shut and rattled as the Stutz took the trolley tracks, circled Lafayette Square, the White House, and the shuttered windows of the house from which dear, brilliant, bitter Henry Adams watched the presidents come and go and laughed at them all.

## IN WHICH MAMA SUGGESTS A SECOND HONEYMOON

That the summer of the war would be a second honeymoon for Franklin and me had been Mama's idea. Mama had suggested it on a day already too warm for spring in Hyde Park. It was late in May. The first wave of American boys were on their way to Belleau Wood and the sky over Flanders was orange with bursting shells. Over the Hudson, our sky pressed in upon us, heavy, close, stagnant, swarming with maddening gnats, and over the greening Catskills above the river haze, traces of heat lightning cut at the sky. We sat on the back porch of the big house, Springwood, Mama's house, fanning ourselves, Mama sighing occasional full-bosomed suffering sighs, I knitting and waiting for her pronouncements, as I had come to her with an entirely different idea.

The river side of Springwood still sprawled, uneven, gray board and batten, pieces, porches, parts, underhangings,



overhangings, as comfortable as it had been when Mama came to it as a bride. But the front side of the house which faced the highway had been redesigned by Franklin, a team of obsequious architects, a great deal of cocoa-colored stucco and Mama's capital. Three years before, when Franklin had unfurled the blueprints for me as if they were holy scrolls and Springwood the New Jerusalem—I shall not continue the analogy to its son—he explained how the two new wings on either side and an extended roofline would balance the old house, how the new façade between the wings would connect them and how the elegantly terraced porch running across the front would give Springwood a rich symmetry. What he meant was that it would be more like the other pretentious homes up and down the river. Unrolling another scroll, Franklin showed me the two master bedrooms on the second floor of the south wing, the narrow sitting room between them, the balcony and, on the first floor, running the entire length of the wing, his library. Nothing had been left out of the library wing. Detail after detail, cherry paneling, miles of shelves, the circular space for the Winged Victory, the wood boxes behind hidden panels near the fireplaces so logs could be brought up from the cellar with a handlift, locked cabinets for the treasures, crevices and recesses for the urns. "And no bathrooms, Franklin?"

"Good Lord!" Then he smiled and his eyebrows jumped that impish half inch. "You don't suppose Mama would give up her snuggery . . . turn that into the bath? It's right off the library."

"I don't suppose."

"No, neither do I."

A year later, when we drove up to the new Springwood for the first time, I said: "And no footlights, Franklin?"

"Babs, you know how much I want you to like it."

I did know and because I knew, I chose the sitting room for my bedroom. "So Mama," I explained, "can have the other master bedroom, the large room."

"As you wish," they'd both said, Franklin and Mama, looking at each other. I was the bad child whom they would discuss later. But I had already punished them by framing their pretentiousness with my monastic cell.

"Splendid," Franklin hissed as soon as we were out of Mama's hearing. "You can finally come between me and my mother."

"Really, Franklin, that's horrid."

"I'm simply being amusing."

"I'm not amused."

"You never are."

And I, in my own way, made quite certain neither Springwood nor the patterns of its life, nor of Mama's life, would become mine. I did not know then that two years later, in the spring of 1918, I would need Mama and all that Springwood meant to save my own life. But there we were two years later on the back porch, looking over the Hudson, rubbing oil of citronella on each other's arms and necks and sitting on wicker rockers newly repaired with twists of pliant green willow, the new knots and lengths still unpainted, the old wicker white and peeling, creaking on the porch slats as Mama and I rocked together. Mama was a big woman, almost old, impeccably wrapped in the wisdom of a life lived without compromise and without question. I had seen her that morning at the train station sitting straight-backed in the rear of her new Cadillac brougham, the seat next to her piled high with baskets of chickens and vegetables on their way to my house on the 10:40 to Washington. Except that I had appeared, unexpected. I had come to her with my dream.

Now we sat and I waited for her judgment. Her face was flat, stubborn and intense, like Franklin's. Flatter. Her mouth still rose-shaped, tight and thorny now in dismay, the dark eyes, cruel and fixed as an owl's, flashing and narrowing in puffy folds, her cheeks heavy purses sagging with my dream.

"I'm sorry, Mama. I didn't intend . . ."

"Hush, child, while I think."

Beyond us, Mama's land sloped and dropped in terraces to the Hudson, a collar of daffodils first, then the pale lacy cloud of blossoms in the apple orchards, then the dark wealth of walnut and pine, and, far below, the marshes and the reed-fringed river. Just beyond the porch, Plog, Mama's manager, was whistling as he polished the Cadillac. The bull was roaring in his stalls in the old gingerbread barns beyond the greenhouses, and farther out, hounds barked, plucking faint chords in the fields.

What I had come to Hyde Park to say to Mama I had already said. "Dearest Mama," I had said with my arms around her neck, her arms around my waist, my chin on her shoulder. "Dearest Mama, it is my dream. I so want to go. Others have gone with their husbands. Ted's wife has gone; a Vanderbilt girl. And someone is *needed* to run the Red Cross installation at Évian. Dearest Mama, I dream of it."

"A Vanderbilt is hardly a model for a Roosevelt, let alone a Delano," was all she had answered. Then, fanning, sighing, rocking, creaking, pleating her long black skirt with thumb and forefinger, back and forth along the sateen, sharpening and flattening the pleat as if it were I, listening to herself, she sat there while I forced myself to knit. Franklin was like that, bred with a bloodstone in him, engraved by the kingdom's finest lapidary, some wonder-filled coded gem of the Delanos ready for emergency. One had only to turn the gem over and, voilà, the answer to anything would present itself, dancing into the light. Not I. I had nothing like that. I've watched them in emergencies. Franklin and Mama don't think. They wait for their answers. Saturnine, taciturn, they sit until the bloodstone turns and takes the light, then sudden mercurial insight, then the pronouncement and then, with that judgmental, monumental smugness around the corners of their mouths and eyebrows arched like keystones, the answer. That day I was the question, the family emergency.

I was the skein of gray wool dancing in my own lap like a small animal as I knit and tugged at myself. I was the large