

A Rake or a Boor

I didn't think much of Franklin Delano Roosevelt when I first met him. But in my defense, almost no one who met him in those days would've dreamed he'd amount to much.

He wasn't born a great man, and I'm not even sure he was a good one. Goodness and greatness came later.

When I met him, he was still an insufferable popinjay . . .

My new job required mixing with the city's upper crust, people with old names or new money who could use their influence to support our causes. So I was grateful to procure an invitation to a late afternoon society tea dance in Gramercy Park, where—after my long-standing habit of surviving on nothing but coffee and the occasional banana sandwich—I was inhaling cakes and crudités like I'd never get another meal.

That's when I overheard the beginnings of a rather spirited argument between a group of old walrus-mustached high-hats and a clean-shaven young dandy wearing a starched collar that seemed to prevent him from dipping his pointy chin low enough to look upon the little people.

"Now, now, Frank," one of the old men said. "Don't get worked up about your uncle Ted. We know you have to side with your kin."

"I'm not kin to Theodore Roosevelt except by marriage," the popinjay protested, throwing his head back and sneering down his nose in the most supercilious gesture I'd ever witnessed in my life.

But it wasn't the gesture that got my attention. It was the name.

Theodore Roosevelt.

Despite the popinjay's starched collar and supercilious gestures, my interest was piqued by mention of the former president.

Mary knew everyone at the party, of course. In fact, she knew everyone who was anyone. So, pointing discreetly with my celery stick, I asked, "Who is that?"

"Franklin Roosevelt?" she asked. "Eleanor's husband."

Though I was forming a true friendship with the gregarious Mary Rumsey, I had only a passing acquaintance with the tall, shy Eleanor Roosevelt through our mutual work. And now I was confused. "Did he take Eleanor's name upon marriage? That would be quite modern . . ."

Mary grinned. "No, no, Franklin and Eleanor are distant cousins. And nothing alike. As you know, Eleanor is a very hardworking, earnest, and reserved person, whereas Franklin . . . well . . .let it suffice to say that at their wedding, I had to scold him for brooding every time someone congratulated him on his good luck in winning Eleanor's hand. His vanity was so pricked that he's made it a habit at every society wedding since to tell the bride she is lucky to have nabbed the groom."

I laughed. "So he's a rake or a boor?"

"Worse." Mary let out a tinkling little laugh. "He's a lawyer."

I laughed too. "Is he someone I should know?"

"Probably not, but I'll make an introduction anyway."