

# THE WIDOW ROOSEVELT

*"Her hair is almost completely gray. Sometimes she forgets where she has put her spectacles. Yet, she is more active today than ever."*



*By Lilian Rixey*

PROMPTLY at 10:50 A.M. a side door of the United Nations conference room at Lake Success, Long Island, opened and Mrs. Roosevelt strode in with an overstuffed black brief case under her arm. She sat down at the semi-circle of desks facing the auditorium and behind a black-and-white desk sign which read "United States Chairman." Mrs. Roosevelt was appointed sole United States delegate by President Truman and her unanimous election as chairman occurred in the committee's first meeting.

On hand for this morning session of the Human Rights Commission were only half a hundred sightseers, many of them middle-aged matrons dressed as for a matinee on their Saturday off. No secretaries, no stenotypists, no translators had yet put in an appearance. The sightseers were herded into the first three rows of seats; they talked and twittered in the hushed tones usually reserved for the moments just before a curtain goes up. When the tall, gray-haired woman dressed in black entered, the

twittering rose until it sounded like the cooing of dozens of pigeons:

"I can't see from here. Are there *two* strands of pearls around her neck?"

"My dear, she always gets here before anyone else."

"Well, yes, she *has* aged, but I wish I had some of her zip."

It is true that, in the two years since her husband's death, Mrs. Roosevelt has aged. Her hair is now almost completely gray. Sometimes she forgets where she has put her spectacles. Arthritis troubles her a bit and she often unobtrusively places a hearing aid against her left ear. Yet she is, as the Widow Roosevelt, more active today than ever, and, even without the round of dinners and receptions of official Washington, busier than she was in the White House.

FOR six weeks after Franklin D. Roosevelt's death in April, 1945, Mrs. Roosevelt remained in se-

clusion in her rambling, two-story frame cottage at Hyde Park. Together with her companion-secretary of 25 years, Miss Malvina Thompson, she read and answered the correspondence that poured in from all over the world and filed it away in the Roosevelt Memorial Library at Hyde Park. On the drizzly day she left the White House Mrs. Roosevelt had told reporters who met her at New York's Pennsylvania Station: "The story is over." But actually another phase of the story had only just begun for her.

By the early summer of 1945, Mrs. Roosevelt had started back into the activities which had interested her all her life. With something of her old bounce, she told one interviewer: "You can't keep the Roosevelts down."

In June she was up in the Pocono Mountains attending the summer gathering of the International Ladies Garment Workers Union. She opened an office, presided over by Miss Thompson, on New York's Madison Avenue, to handle mail which was still coming in at the rate of 200 letters a day. She gave support to the National Citizens Committee to Aid Strikers' Families; she served as honorary chairman of the relief drives to send food and clothing to Greek and Yugoslav refugees, and she went on a tour of New York's tenements.

By November of 1945, Mrs. Roosevelt had moved down from Hyde Park to New York City and into her six-room Greenwich Village apartment. It was the apartment that she and her husband had rented after they had sold their double house on New York's East 65th Street in 1940.

HIGH UP in this old-fashioned apartment house on the corner of Washington Square, Mrs. Roosevelt has gathered around her all the things she loves best. From the dining room, which is dominated by an oil portrait of her father by Huntington, the view takes in the broad Hudson. In the living room, the walls are covered with the Turner water colors which used to hang in her bedroom in the 65th Street house, and here Fala, who was always "Pup" to Franklin Roosevelt, stretches out paws fore-and-aft before the fireplace. Below, on the sixth floor of the same apartment house is the office-apartment of Miss Thompson.

Miss Thompson's day with Mrs. Roosevelt begins at their 8 o'clock breakfast. Mrs. Roosevelt, who never needed more than six hours sleep, is always up by 7:30. While discussing the day's program with Miss Thompson, Mrs. Roosevelt has her fruit juice, her café au lait, and a thin slice of unbuttered toast (to keep her weight down to the 150 pounds which is normal for her height.) If there is time before 10 o'clock, when the United Nations conference limousine calls for her, she will dictate her *My Day* column. Usually, however, the column has to be postponed until evening when it is somehow sandwiched in after dinner. Miss Thompson then settles down to her morning office routine and Mrs. Roosevelt joins the carload of other United Nations representatives for the hour-long drive to Lake Success.

The Human Rights sessions over which Mrs. Roosevelt presides usually begin at 11 A.M. At 1 P.M. a recess is taken for lunch. Mrs. Roosevelt and some

of the other Human Rights delegates frequently choose to go down the line with their trays in the United Nations' public cafeteria rather than patronize the delegates' private dining room on the second floor of the converted Sperry Gyroscope building. At 2:30 the commission meets again and is scheduled to break up for the day, six days a week, at 4 P.M. But the 22-nation commission often gets into procedural and ideological snarls which keep Mrs. Roosevelt presiding until 5 or 6 P.M. Sometimes she does not get back to her apartment until nearly 8 in the evening.

When she is that late, Miss Thompson is the one who takes Fala on his walk through Washington Square. Generally, however, Mrs. Roosevelt gets home in time to feed Fala his bowl of meat and cooked vegetables and take him for a brisk three quarters of an hour jaunt.

By now nearly everyone in the Village knows Fala, who is as friendly and neighborly as his mistress, and Mrs. Roosevelt has come to know every nook and cranny of the winding streets in that part of town.

MRS. ROOSEVELT has always enjoyed having her family and her friends around her and she still entertains frequently though informally, both in her Village apartment and at Hyde Park. At the latter retreat she and Miss Thompson spend every week-end in which the Human Rights Commission is not in session.

Miss Thompson has also had to take the place of Mrs. Roosevelt's White House social secretary and help plan the much less lavish

and more pleasantly informal gatherings which Mrs. Roosevelt now holds. Mrs. Roosevelt is partial to buffet suppers for no more than 20 guests. One of those in 1947 was for her fellow Human Rights Commissioners. It was quite successful, says Miss Thompson, because everyone, including the somewhat serious young delegate from Soviet Russia, Valentin I. Topliakov, "told jokes."

Other evenings Mrs. Roosevelt may have a few such close friends as Miss Nancy Cook and Miss Marion Dickerman in for dinner with Miss Thompson, or she will go uptown to dine with other good friends like Mrs. Henry Morgenthau and Bernard Baruch. But whether she dines out or in, there is still her daily column to write and her mail to read and sign before going to bed. To save time, Miss Thompson now takes the column down directly on the typewriter as Mrs. Roosevelt dictates it. She reads the column over as soon as it comes out of the machine, makes her revisions and corrections on the spot and that is the last time she sees it.

Although Miss Thompson's work is now done for the day, Mrs. Roosevelt always goes on to the mail which Miss Thompson has prepared for her. In the morning Mrs. Roosevelt regularly hands Miss Thompson about 100 letters, some signed, others with pencilled notes which merely say: "Yes," "No," "Regret," or, even more typically, "Tell them what I think."

By now Miss Thompson knows pretty well what Mrs. Roosevelt thinks on a remarkable variety of subjects and says it for her in simple, straightforward letters

with no flowery nonsense about them. This pleases Mrs. Roosevelt, and she often tells her friend, "They sound just like me."

There are several other projects besides the mail and *My Day* on which Miss Thompson works closely with Mrs. Roosevelt. She helps with the monthly articles for *The Ladies Home Journal* and occasionally with the second installment of Mrs. Roosevelt's autobiography, *My Story*, which will deal with her days in the White House. Much of this work is done in planes, day coaches, and pullmans on their travels around the country.

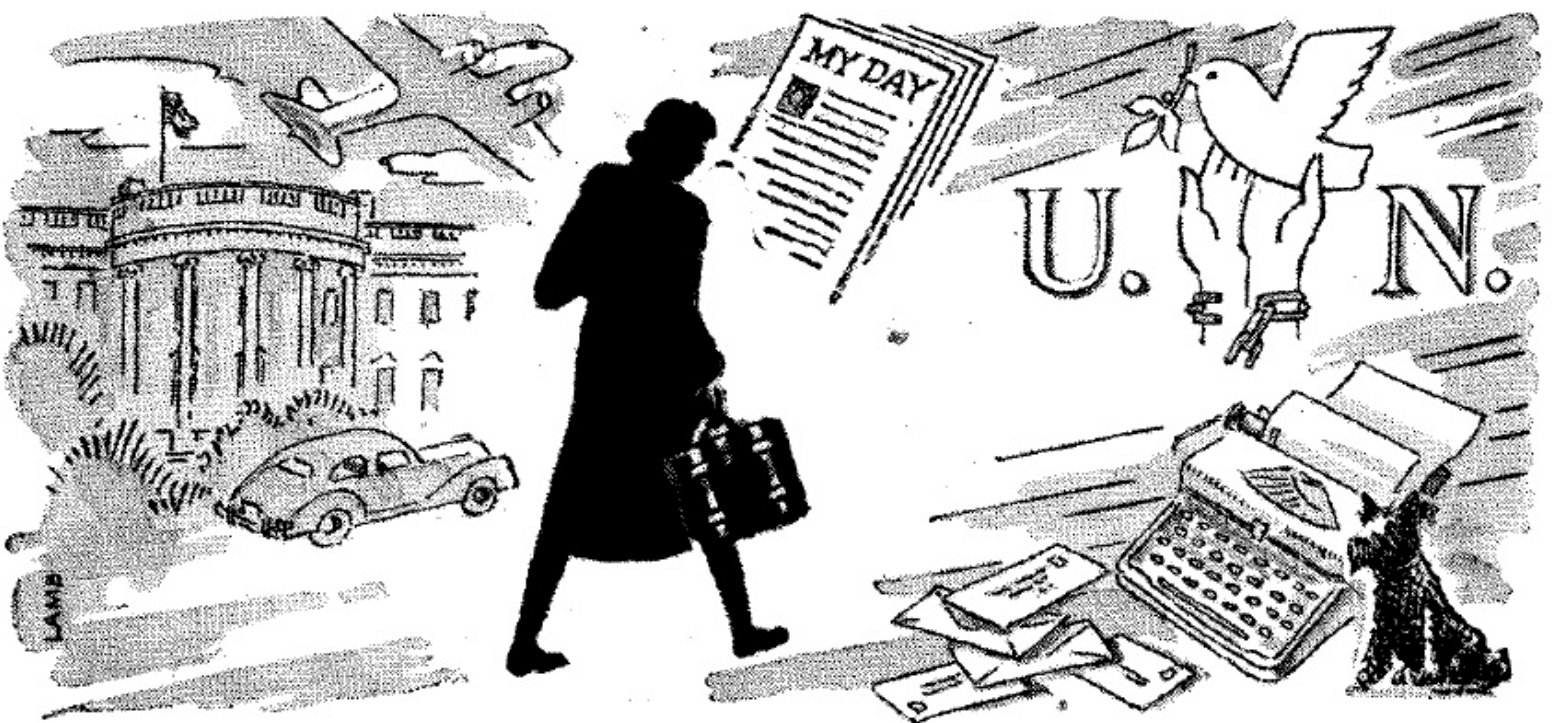
About twice a year Miss Thompson accompanies Mrs. Roosevelt on her ten-day lecture tours. Mrs. Roosevelt has a list of half a dozen topics from which audiences may choose, among them "The Individual and the Community" and "The Problems of Youth." She has, of course, had to drop from the list "A Typical Day at the White House" and "The Mail of a President's Wife." For these she has substituted another range of subjects, reflecting the widened area of her

current interests, under the general heading, "Have We an Instrument for Peace?"

With this as her title, Mrs. Roosevelt, who was once not too expert a speaker, is perfectly capable of extemporizing in Omaha on "The International Status of Women," or of giving the audience in Phoenix, Arizona, a spirited talk on "How to Get Along with the Russians."

MRS. ROOSEVELT'S performance during the first session of the General Assembly in London during the winter of 1946 surprised and pleased even those who had once been her husband's most bitter political foes. Despite a full social schedule, which included luncheons with the Churchills, Foreign Secretary Bevin, and the King and Queen at Buckingham Palace, and which skipped only Lady Astor's tea at Cliveden, she managed to spend long evenings boning up on voluminous memoranda and to attend each Assembly fully prepared.

She frequently waved aloft the triangular "United States" sign



on her desk to gain recognition from the chair and, once she had the floor, debated with considerable success even against such formidable opponents as the Soviets' Andrei Vishinsky. Her fellow delegate, Republican Senator Vandenberg, came back from London loudly singing her praises at Washington dinner parties. Mrs. Roosevelt modestly explained to colleagues that Russian delaying tactics were scarcely new to someone who had spent long hours listening to the stormy sessions of the communist-infiltrated American youth movement of the 1930s.

The chief bone of contention between Mrs. Roosevelt and the Russians has been very plain in the Lake Success sessions of the Human Rights Commission. Just as in London, where Mrs. Roosevelt stoutly maintained that Russian-born refugees in western Europe had a right to choose not to risk repatriation to their homeland, so at Lake Success she has continued to fight for the rights of the individual as opposed to the state. As official United States delegate and chairman, she has also learned to compromise and to be as patient as Job—a trait which comes more naturally to her than to other Roosevelts—each time the Soviet representative tries to refer resolutions back to subcommittees or to get time to consult Moscow.

"I hope she holds out," said one of her close friends recently. "She has put on a pretty good show as presiding officer—very good indeed for someone who never presided over anything but her own dinner table until she was almost 40."

Actually Mrs. Roosevelt pre-

sides at meetings with some of the "gracious lady" manner with which she graces her own dinner table. She is politely careful to give the Soviet representative the floor each time he blandly waves his yellow pencil in her general direction. She switches easily from English to French when the dignified, bearded delegate from France bows over her hand in greeting, and she has a cheerful "Good morning, good morning," accompanied by a friendly wave of the hand, for every one of her colleagues.

To people who have not seen Mrs. Roosevelt for a while, it will come as something of a surprise that her long, well-groomed hands now have lacquered red fingernails, that her neat coiffure is caught up with silver combs, and that her black dresses are much more chic than they used to be. At her throat she still wears the diamond fleur-de-lis brooch which her husband gave her as a wedding present.

MRS. ROOSEVELT has a formidable task ahead of her. She must draw up, with the help of the other officers of the Commission and the United Nations Secretariat, a draft of an International Bill of Rights. To be successful—that is, acceptable both to Russia and the democracies—that draft must somehow reconcile the needs of the individual and the needs of the state. If it is successful, and a way can be found to enforce it, the International Bill of Rights which Mrs. Roosevelt will have helped to write may become an even more important document than the Bill of Rights of the United States Constitution.