

THEODORE ROOSEVELT

I

BOYHOOD AND EDUCATION

THIS fugitive study of a memorable life may at several points help to make clearer issues which are momentous still. If it is written with no desire to give offense, but no obsequious fear of doing so, it may contribute to frank and sympathetic discussion between two great peoples. Above all, it may arouse more interest in a powerful and a noble man, whose fate it was for a considerable while to rivet and indeed fatigue the attention of civilized mankind, then to undergo eclipse, which outside his own country endured; and it may do this last while the recognition of greatness in the modern world continues to be peculiarly needed. It can claim to do no more. Candidly my reason for writing it is, that, having been invited to do so, I am disabled from refusing by a boyish hero-worship which I conceived very long ago for Theodore Roosevelt — then and ever since unknown to me.

When a statesman has been only four years dead, the disadvantages of a biographer who belongs to another country are almost unmixed,

though, after a longer time, he would on the whole be in a position of advantage. Besides this, the existing books on the subject of this biographical essay are not a few; they cover their ground very adequately; and several of them are extraordinarily good books. But in England, at any rate, they have been almost unnoticed in comparison with any comparable memoirs. It is strange to me that I seldom hear mention of a political biography such as *Mr. Bishop's Life and Times of Theodore Roosevelt*, told, as it is, chiefly by an admirably restrained selection from the letters of a first-rate letter-writer, and ranging, as it does in the charming correspondence between Roosevelt and Sir George Trevelyan, so far beyond the regions of mere politics. Nor can I here help adding the titles of Mr. Thayer's brief and wise *Theodore Roosevelt, an Intimate Biography*, of Mr. Hermann Hagedorn's poetic but truthful study of a vanished frontier life in his *Roosevelt in the Bad Lands*, and of Roosevelt's own *Autobiography*. I shall be well content to write even a very slight book if it serves to advertise its predecessors.

Theodore Roosevelt was born in New York, on October 27, 1858. Of his ancestors, concerning whom he himself recounted shortly and humorously the little that was worth saying, we need note only that they represented many nations, and chiefly the

robustly Protestant elements in those nations. Like his name, the dominant tradition of his family past was Dutch; but the Dutch blood was blended with that of French Huguenots, German Protestants of the Rhineland who fled from Louis XIV, Scotsmen from the confines of the Highlands, Ulstermen, Southern Irishmen, Welsh Quakers; there was also a little English blood coming partly through the Pennsylvanian Quakers, and partly by way of Holland. How the potent but incalculable effects of physiological inheritance show themselves in any individual is a matter of most idle speculation, but a man's own idea about his ancestry is important and not always harmful. The whole history of Roosevelt's native city illustrates the composite character of the American population even from early days, and his own pedigree was a marked instance of it. His writings insist much on this composite character and even exaggerate it.

Americans who understand and value England are often conscious of an Anglo-Saxon stock from which they come, and to which, and to its central home in this island, they owe and pay a certain loyalty. Now few Americans have understood England so well as Roosevelt; no Americans and few Englishmen have understood the British Empire as he did; and very few men have ever had so

many, such well-chosen, or such dearly cherished friendships with men of another land as he had with Englishmen. But from first to last he had no Anglo-Saxon feeling. The notion of an exclusive friendship between the English-speaking peoples would not have appealed to him. In theory he would have been as ready to find quarrel with England as with any country. He had in the end good reason to fall foul of the hybrid American citizenship which retained an active allegiance to Germany or to Ireland; but his sentiment was outraged hardly less by those tendencies of culture, or more often of fashion and of pleasure-seeking, which may lead an American to feel or to wish himself an Englishman. Hence in later years that insistence upon an "Americanism," which might seem either meaningless or blatant to men of other countries whose patriotism is not exposed to these subtle dangers. It was on the basis of an exceeding respect and love for the native tradition of his own country, with its motley racial origins, that he reared an unusual capacity for fair and respectful dealing with other countries, and a still more unusual love of individual human worth, not only in many different forms but in widely separated lands.

He was preëminently American in another sense. Like Lincoln, of whom, with a humbler estimate

of himself than might be supposed, he aspired to be the disciple, he was no more a Northerner than a Southerner. His father, after whom he was called Theodore, and whom he venerated but did not (it would seem) resemble, was a reasonably prosperous business man, attentive to his affairs, but untiring, original, and sagacious in every sound work of philanthropy; with a redeeming love for dancing and a dash of reckless courage in him; a punctual but inaustrere adherent of his Church, and possessed of a rare faculty of companionship with his children. When the Civil War came, his whole heart was in the cause of the North, and he was a man of fighting spirit; but his wife came of a prominent family in Georgia, and her nearest relations were in arms for the South. A sound feeling led him, therefore, to find his way of serving the Union in distinguished and able services, not exempt from toil or from danger, to the wounded. The younger Theodore's memory began with a time when the war was at its height, and when he was already a passionate little Unionist who, in saying his prayers at his mother's knee, once got back his own, after some rebuke from her, by invoking a blessing on the Northern arms. That beloved mother was never in her political opinions reconciled or "reconstructed," and in no other sense needed to be

reconciled. The nursery culture of Theodore and his brother and sisters was enriched with the genial folklore of the plantation. Two uncles of his served in the Southern Navy, one of them designed that ill-omened ship, the Alabama; the other fired her last gun. They lived to become in England somewhat virulent British Tories, but never to cherish bitterness against their victorious kinsfolk. Their famous nephew was reared in a Unionism which went deeper than a mere assertion of supremacy, in a home atmosphere charged with political difference which must be sternly fought out, but which never raised a malicious thought.

In strange contrast with his adult life, his childhood was dominated by physical suffering and weakness, caused by asthma. He was an object for special home care and never went to school. It is common enough for a delicate child to end with a rather sudden change into an unusually vigorous man or woman. But the change was promoted in his case by deliberate physical culture, provoked in part by the discovery of his helplessness in an encounter with boys who teased him, and encouraged by the teaching of his father, that for him it was a duty to "make his own body." It will be needless to recur often in these pages to the physical prowess which he ultimately achieved. His bodily growth was

slow; but, helped by this effort at self-development and by his whole way of life in early manhood, it resulted in a very exceptional robustness of frame. He had the drawback of very short sight and had to wear glasses whenever they could be worn. "I had no idea," he remarks, "how beautiful the world was till I got those spectacles." It is curious how many people who have shared this great disadvantage with him have been like him in the power of rapid and delicate observation. In riding, shooting, boxing, and not a few other things which demand strength, or skill, or nerve, or all three, he rose to a very fair degree of excellence; he was fond of declaring that most men could do as well as he in all these things if they tried, while in each of them a small minority could become first-rate, and in each a small minority was naturally hopeless.

It would be doing him an injustice to say that he pursued his various sports upon principle; his love of them was part of a general sense of the whole joy of life, a joy from which the men who shrank would shrink from life's duty as well. But deliberately he thought it admirable to make one's body a good servant, and deliberately he valued the moral discipline of those ways in which, without criminal recklessness, the danger of death now and then becomes perceptible to a man and he feels himself

dependent for his safety on his own best efforts. He learned a sympathy which is often lacking in men of books, such as he was, for all manner of rough "men of their hands." Perhaps without his early experience of weakness and suffering he could never have learned to link so intimately as he did all the delights of exuberant vitality with the most serious of human purposes. When in later years the robustious ex-President testified to English undergraduates of Cambridge against the sin of mere athleticism, he had recently, while at the White House, had the sight of one eye knocked out in boxing; and he continued to addict himself to the like pursuits, just so far as age allowed him; but he was none the less giving utterance to a conviction in which he lived.

In another way, closely connected with this, his early sheltered home life, with parents who took due care that their children should have country pleasures, gave scope for a ruling taste of his which school life, for all its advantages, sometimes represses. He became of himself an eager naturalist — the sort of boy who is likely at any time to have a toad in his pocket — and founded with his sisters, in the nursery, "the Roosevelt Museum." This impulse, too, lasted to the end. The "charm of birds," the romance which attaches to beasts, great

and little, and their haunts, the beauty of nature in its broadest and in its minuter aspects — to these he would turn back whenever he could; and that truthfulness of observation which goes with genuine love of them inspired some of the best written pages of his vigorous and profuse literary work.

Perhaps, too, the instincts of the traveler, and the readiness to know and like far lands and alien breeds of men, were fostered by early training. For the children were taken abroad early. Their first trip to Europe, when Theodore was ten, was indeed a failure educationally. They all hated it; the works of art which were to have been a revelation to their little souls bored them, and there is no indication that he ever became very much awake to beauty of that order. But four years afterwards they traveled in the Holy Land and Egypt, going far up the Nile, with which he was to be well acquainted later. Ancient monuments could be tolerated and even enjoyed now, for Theodore had his first gun and could begin his career as a collector of birds. On the way back they passed a summer with a German family in Dresden, and the boy acquired an affection which never forsook him for the qualities which, in quiet times, are most conspicuous in ordinary German life.

As the boy grew older and less delicate, boating

and fishing and shooting adventures played a larger part in his life, and the keen eye of Theodore's mother began to see a strain of the Berserker in his character, for which he seems to have been wholesomely chaffed. All the while, not to speak of the tuition which supplied the lack of schooling, he was getting that broader education which is peculiar to homes where good books are put in young people's way but never forced upon them, and where the best of them are enjoyed amid hearty fun by the children and their parents in common, without a suspicion in their minds that they are, as in fact this family was, an uncommonly "cultivated" lot.

Further details of Roosevelt's early days do not concern us. His autobiography treats of them in a pleasant and a sensible fashion, and, here as throughout, the more expansive record of his life by his sister, Mrs. Douglas Robinson, is not lacking in humor or in affectionate charm. But it does concern us to notice that he passed the remainder of his life in accordance with this beginning. The, possibly audacious, publication since his death of his letters to his own children, has given us an image of his later days which recalls in full that which we possess of his father's and mother's household. His years held plenty of wandering, adventure, and

turmoil, and were passed, even excessively, under the public eye; yet there can seldom have been even a moderately stirring man more firmly anchored to home and all its relationships, and to whom, for all his stirrings and ambitions, the quiet central things of life counted more. And his was a life highly favored. There was a brief interval of loneliness and sorrow, and the element of tragedy which marks the career of most great actors in public affairs stands out strongly enough in his; but there was given to him full measure of that intensest happiness upon which biography does well to touch only with the light hand of reverence.

We need linger even less over the four years at Harvard, with which the sheltered days of a life that never sought again any shelter, closed. Delightful as college life normally is, both to live and to look at, the dreariness of tattling reminiscence about it is usually proportionate to that delight. We may take it as certain that Roosevelt loved such a place as Harvard and that it did him good; but with his purely home training and with considerable arrears of growth still to make up, he was not likely to distinguish himself much. He did not; nor was he very distinctly aware afterwards of what he had learned there. He did well in natural science and moderately well in other parts

of the miscellaneous assorted curriculum which he was allowed or encouraged to choose for his college course. Quite outside that course, and unhelped by the criticism of his teachers, he began his first published book, on the Naval History of the War of 1812. Englishmen, accustomed to the more democratic life of their own universities, may be allowed to be a little shocked when they learn that his family antecedents helped him into clubs which enjoyed high social prestige. But it was not as a fashionable youth that he was noticed. The contemporaries who liked him best recall him as a shy, though agreeably pugnacious eccentric, who persisted, in spite of protest, in wearing whiskers when fashion among gilded youth had discarded them, but in other respects went his way inconspicuously. They had the insight to wonder where his own curious way would lead him, but did not guess that it would lead him to fame. In Mr. Thayer's happy phrase, the chief thing about him was "his loyalty to his own hobbies."

For some inscrutable reason it is hard to write about the combination of a fine muscular system not only with adequate animal courage but with unusually clean and lofty aims in life, without causing derision and even persuading men who are deficient in any of these respects of some occult superi-

ority on their own part. I shall be silent therefore about more than one incident from this time onward which showed Roosevelt as the violent champion of gentle things against that which is cruel or foul. But one little edifying anecdote of his college days should be recounted since it was ominous of his fate. While at Harvard he taught in a Sunday School. He was always loyal to the spirit of his father's piety, though perhaps he never much appreciated any of its doctrines. But his first connection with a Sunday School ended in sad conflict with the denomination concerned. For there came to his class one day a little boy with a black eye; he inquired about that black eye; the little boy had honorably earned it in fighting a boy who pinched his sister; and Roosevelt commended and rewarded him. This was too much for the elders of that Church. We all know that principle of old-fashioned piety and new-fashioned enlightenment, upon which to punch another boy's head is deemed the typical exhibition of the brute in man, while the spirit of the Gospel is held to show itself in not caring how much he pinches one's sister. Against this bastard Christianity Roosevelt was destined, all his life, to do battle, and to die with the battle going against him.

Shortly before the end of his time at Harvard the

death of his father left him to his own guidance. That father had already told him that he had earned enough for his son to be free of business or a profession, if he would keep free also of expensive pleasures; he had told him, too, that he would countenance his son's taking up some nonremunerative line of work, if, though his living did not depend upon it, he "intended to do the very best work that was in him." Theodore's hope at first was to find work as a field naturalist for some scientific institution. The careers of men like Audubon fascinated him, and he continued to believe long after that there was as much value in the study of beasts as they lived, and the bigger the beast the better, as in microscopic examination, say, of infusoria in a laboratory. But the scientific authorities of Harvard discouraged him — he insisted later that theirs was a narrow view of biology, and we can at least believe that Darwin would have found a ready use for him. So the question what he should do with himself became a very doubtful one, till at last a friend who asked him about it received the startling answer: "I am going to try to help the cause of better government in New York; I don't know exactly how." His own later judgment sought candidly to belittle the Quixotic exaltation of this resolve, but his reading of his own past, if

correct, only tempers its nobility with a genial boyishness. Government, he was told, was a dirty trade, in which gentlemen were not welcome and from which gentlemen should stand aloof. But, gentleman as he might be, he was nominally a citizen of a self-governing country. He did not say in his heart that as a better man he could make the world better, but he "intended to be one of the governing class" and to find out "whether he really was too weak to hold his own in the rough-and-tumble."