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EDITOR'S FOREWORD

Alone among twentieth-century presidents, Woodrow Wilson had two first ladies during his eight years in the White House. His first wife, Ellen Axson Wilson, died in August 1914 after eighteen months as the woman in the White House. Fifteen months later, Wilson was remarried to Edith Bolling Galt, a resident of Washington, D.C., who served as first lady during the remainder of Wilson's presidency. Two women of very different characters and personalities thus contributed their talents to the emerging institution of the first lady during this critical period in American history.

Kristie Miller has tracked the complex relationships that the wives of Woodrow Wilson had with their talented and troubled husband. She has re-created with sensitivity and insight the marriage of Ellen and Woodrow, including the future president's intimate linkage with Mary Allen Hulbert Peck after 1908. Miller follows Ellen Wilson's role in her husband's presidential candidacy in 1912, and her efforts to improve Washington, D.C., in the brief time that her health gave her in 1913–1914.

Wilson's second marriage began with controversy over his romance with Edith Galt and the attempt of his close advisers to prevent or postpone the union. But the role of Edith Wilson provoked even more questions during Woodrow Wilson's stroke and its aftereffects from the autumn of 1919 until he left the White House in March 1921. Was Edith the first woman president? Did she serve the national interest with her handling of her husband's medical condition? Miller addresses these and other related issues with a sure knowledge of the literature on Edith Wilson and with insights gained from her own research into primary sources. The result is a sensitive, gripping narrative of how private and public emotions interacted at a pivotal moment in the history of first ladies. No better introduction exists to how love and marriage shaped the triumphant and tragic elements in the life of Woodrow Wilson and his two first ladies.

—*Lew Gould*



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PREFACE

Woodrow Wilson is among the most admired presidents in our nation's history.¹ He was an intellectual, author of many well-regarded books on government, and president of Princeton University. In his first term as president of the United States, Wilson promoted a progressive legislative program that ushered in the Federal Reserve, tariff reform, and the income tax. He led the country during World War I and afterward worked for a world body that was the forerunner of the United Nations.

Known as the “schoolmaster in politics,” Woodrow Wilson looked like the minister he might have been—both his father and his grandfather were Presbyterian clergymen. In private life, Wilson showed a very different side. He liked to dance and sing and tell silly jokes. He was, by his own admission, unusually dependent on the affection and admiration of women. He was a man who needed love every day.²

The first great love of his life was Ellen Axson Wilson—the sweetheart of his youth, whose love meant more to him than “wealth or power or opportunity.”³ She gave up a promising career as an artist to rear their three children and provide Woodrow with the emotional support he craved. To advance his career, she made digests of his readings, translated German monographs, critiqued his work, and supplied apt quotations. She advised him on negotiating his college appointments and improving academic standards. Although she had misgivings, she encouraged his political ambition. Her deft intervention helped him build coalitions with a variety of men.

Despite Ellen's devotion to her husband, Woodrow Wilson had an intense seven-year friendship with another woman. Ellen accepted his relationship with Mary Allen Hulbert Peck, an attractive and vivacious socialite he met in Bermuda. Although their liaison pained Ellen, she tried to protect her husband from political fallout.

With his wife's help, Woodrow Wilson reached the White House.

But Ellen died just seventeen months after her husband's inauguration. Because her death occurred so early in his presidency, and was almost instantly followed by the outbreak of World War I, her accomplishments as first lady have been largely forgotten.

Wilson's second wife, the widowed Edith Bolling Galt, was a late-life romance. Her vitality revived the grieving president. Her style matched his prominence on the world stage, and her strength supported him during a long illness. She is primarily remembered, however, for usurping executive power after Wilson suffered a catastrophic stroke.

Woodrow Wilson was the only president in the twentieth century who had two wives while in office.⁴ These two women were strikingly different from each other. Ellen Axson Wilson was quiet, intellectual, dutiful, and frugal. Such qualities are admirable, but not always admired in a first lady. Edith Bolling Wilson was flamboyant, fashionable, and confident. Prior to Wilson's stroke, she was very popular.

In recent times, Edith Wilson has been portrayed as a manipulative woman who abused the role of first lady. Certainly, she made decisions that had negative consequences for the country. One cannot excuse these decisions. But they can be understood, at least in part, as the actions of a conscientious wife who tried to anticipate and implement her husband's wishes.

Ellen Wilson is remembered (if she is remembered at all) as someone who had little impact on history. However, during her short stay in the White House, she used the office in such a way as to inspire a young woman who later became very influential, Eleanor Roosevelt, whose husband was then an assistant secretary in the Wilson administration.

The time has come for a closer look at each of these women. Both Ellen Wilson and Edith Wilson expanded the role of first lady. Edith became a cautionary tale for what first ladies should not do. Ellen, through her influence on Eleanor Roosevelt, set a pattern that most modern first ladies have attempted to follow.

INTRODUCTION

On the second Sunday in April 1883, in Rome, Georgia, a small, slender woman of twenty-two entered the First Presbyterian Church for morning service. In mourning for the death of her mother, she was dressed severely in black and wore a black crepe veil over her head. She led a small boy (her brother) by the hand, and so appeared at first glance to be a young widow. She took her seat, unmindful of a young man behind her who had been distracted from his worship by the sight of her face as she passed.

Woodrow Wilson, a young lawyer from Atlanta, was in Rome to handle a property dispute. He was staying with his aunt and uncle and had accompanied them to church. In spite of the young woman's somber garb, he noticed her "bright, pretty face," framed by bronze-gold ringlets, and her "splendid, mischievous, laughing eyes." He thought to himself: "I'll lay a wager that this demure little lady has lots of life and fun in her!"¹

After they had taken communion and the service ended, Woodrow took another good look as she passed and formed the resolution of inquiring her name and seeking an introduction. Happily, she stopped to speak to his aunt. When she was gone, he asked his aunt who this lovely young woman might be and was told that she was their next-door neighbor, Ellen Axson, the daughter of the minister, Edward Axson. This was good news: Axson was a friend and a col-

league of Woodrow's father, Joseph Ruggles Wilson, a Presbyterian minister in Wilmington, North Carolina.

Later that day, Woodrow paid a visit to the Reverend Axson's manse, or parsonage. After some perfunctory conversation with the reverend in the parlor, Woodrow asked rather pointedly after the health of his daughter. Ellen was summoned to meet him. Now her velvety brown eyes looked directly up into his. A deep dimple showed when she smiled. She saw a tall, slender man of twenty-six, his strong jaw softened by close-cropped sideburns and a moustache. Later, when her friends asked her to describe him, Ellen, who could quote poetry to suit any occasion, chose William Wordsworth: Woodrow, she said, was "a noticeable man, with large grey eyes." Woodrow soon realized he had "found a new and altogether delightful sort of companion."²



PART ONE
ELLEN AXSON
WILSON



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C H A P T E R O N E

THE SCHOLAR'S
HELPMET

Ellen Axson, by background, training, and temperament, was almost ideally suited to be Woodrow Wilson's wife. She was intelligent and well-read, devoted to family, passionate and ambitious for a life of service to a higher goal.

She, like Woodrow, had been born into a family of Presbyterian clergy: in addition to their fathers, both her grandfathers and one of his had been in the ministry. Although Ellen and Woodrow were reared in the South, their parents and grandparents were of northern stock. Both families even had ties to Princeton.

Ellen's mother, Margaret Jane Hoyt, known as "Janie," was a beautiful and intelligent woman who had earned academic honors at her school near Atlanta before marrying Edward Axson in 1858 at the age of twenty. Edward was ordained the following year and was called to his first church in South Carolina. Ellen, their first child, was born on May 15, 1860, at the home of her paternal grandparents in Savannah, Georgia.¹

The little family was soon challenged by the outbreak of the Civil War, which began before Ellen was one year old. Her father joined the Confederate army as a chaplain but returned home in December 1863, suffering from an unspecified illness, possibly stress related. He became pastor of a Presbyterian church in Madison, Georgia, and established a school for boys and girls in their house. Ellen began at-

tending class before she was five years old. She also received instruction from her academically gifted mother.²

In 1866, Edward accepted a call to reestablish the First Presbyterian Church of Rome, Georgia. Although the Union army had used the church to store food and stable horses, the Axson family could finally settle down. The following year, when Ellen was seven, her brother Stockton was born. Public schools had not yet reopened, so Janie continued to tutor her daughter at home. When Ellen was eleven, she enrolled at the Rome Female College, a secondary school. She was a voracious reader and easily excelled at English literature and composition. The Rome College course of studies included philosophy and logic, algebra and geometry; Ellen taught herself trigonometry over one summer. She was also gifted in art.³

Ellen graduated in 1876. She would have liked to attend Nashville University and had passed the exams with distinction, but her father could not afford to send her. So she spent a year as a postgraduate student at Rome Female College, studying advanced French and German and taking private lessons from the college's art instructor, Helen Fairchild, who had trained at the prestigious National Academy of Design in New York. In 1878, Fairchild submitted her students' work to the Paris International Exposition; Ellen won a bronze medal in freehand drawing. International recognition earned her a statewide reputation, and she began to receive commissions to do crayon portraits based on photographs.⁴

At Rome College, Ellen had formed a close friendship with Elizabeth "Beth" Adams. Ellen suggested that she and Beth set up a residence for unmarried women, which Ellen would support with the earnings from her art. She was beginning to think it unlikely she would meet anyone suitable for her to marry, in a town notably lacking in "manners, morals, education and brains," according to a contemporary observer.⁵ She began to be known as "Ellie, the Man Hater."⁶

Meanwhile, Ellen's family was demanding more and more of her attention. A third child, Edward, had been born in 1876. Four years later, in the summer of 1880, her father, who had been depressed for some time, suffered a breakdown and left home for a long convalescence. By the following summer, however, Ellen's mother, by then almost forty-three, was expecting yet another baby.⁷

On October 10, 1881, Janie gave birth to her fourth child and second daughter, Margaret Randolph, afterward known as “Madge.” Less than four weeks later, Janie was dead of childbed fever, or septicemia. Ellen was devastated. She and her mother had been unusually close, drawn together by common interests, companions for each other during Edward’s long absences. Ellen could not succumb to her grief; she had her despairing father as well as two young brothers to care for. (Janie’s sister Louisa took baby Madge.) But Ellen was so distraught, she swore never to paint again.⁸

By the following summer, however, Ellen went north to visit cousins in New York. This trip must have rekindled her desire to study art there as her teacher had done. But Ellen’s friend Beth had married, and the vision of a female art salon was now impossible. Ellen’s only hope for a home of her own was to marry. However, her suitors so far had failed to meet her standards: she was looking for “congeniality of mind” and a marriage of mutual self-improvement.⁹

Thomas Woodrow Wilson seemed at first an unlikely candidate to win this exacting woman. He had not made an impressive start in life. He did not learn his letters until he was nine, and did not learn to read easily until he was twelve. (He may have suffered from developmental dyslexia.) He was largely educated at home; his mother and two older sisters read to him when he was young—he would always enjoy being read to—and his father, a stern but loving taskmaster, instructed him in English composition, stressing orderly thought and clear expression.¹⁰

Wilson’s mother, Janet “Jessie” Woodrow, had immigrated to the United States from England as a girl. She named her first son Thomas Woodrow, after her father. The boy and his mother were exceptionally close, and throughout his life he would always seek out the company of women. As Woodrow later explained to Ellen, his mother, “with her sweet womanliness, her purity, her intelligence, her strength,” had taught him to look for and appreciate the same qualities in a woman.¹¹

In 1875, Wilson entered the College of New Jersey (later Princeton University), where he studied history and political philosophy and participated in the debating society. After graduation, he enrolled at the University of Virginia Law School but withdrew, pleading ill health, before completing the course. He finished reading law

at his parents' home, passed the Georgia bar in 1882, and went into practice in Atlanta with a former classmate. The two novice lawyers found little work, but Woodrow was more interested in politics. Around the time he met Ellen, he had applied to Johns Hopkins University in Baltimore to pursue a Ph.D. in history and political science.¹²

It had been on legal business that Woodrow had come to Rome in April 1883, when he met Ellen. He returned to Atlanta, but he was eager to court this interesting woman. The following month, Woodrow was able to return to Rome to conclude his legal case and pursue his courtship. He invited Ellen to accompany him on picnics and drives through the springtime countryside. On one memorable occasion, as they climbed a hill, he outlined his ambition: "to fight for the good" rather than "to rail at the ill." She admired his ideals and his courage. He quickly realized he had found the perfect woman to share his intellectual labors.¹³

Ellen Axson's intellect complemented Woodrow Wilson's. He thought deeply about a few things, specifically, politics and government. She read more widely and taught him to appreciate poetry, art, and the natural world. She was highly focused, and he would come to depend on her efficiency and powers of concentration. While he was comfortable with his religious faith, she constantly probed for deeper answers to life's riddles. In matters of racial bias, she recognized her shortcomings and strove to be more tolerant. He never challenged the status quo in this regard. In time they would discover other similarities: both were passionate and romantic; both would believe in Woodrow's potential for greatness and be willing to sacrifice for it.

With all their similarities, one difference emerged over time. Although both Woodrow and Ellen were subject to occasional dark moods, Woodrow's were offset by a sense of playfulness and good humor. Ellen would struggle with sadness in varying degrees most of her life; it would be the only element in her character to threaten their long and loving relationship.

Over the summer of 1883, as they vacationed separately with family and friends, Woodrow and Ellen wrote frequently to each other. Woodrow's letters rapidly progressed from "My dear Miss Axson" to "My dear Miss Ellie Lou," and soon he was asking for assurance "that

you are interested in my work and fortunes. . . . To be *believed in* by the woman who has his highest esteem is, you know, [everything] to a man." Ellen was far more circumspect. She continued to address him demurely as "Mr. Wilson" and told her friend Beth that she had finally met someone whom she *could* love, but that she "did *not* love him and never meant to."¹⁴ However, she kept writing.

As Ellen and Woodrow moved from place to place that summer, their letters were often delayed by forwarding, and sometimes they completely miscarried. By September 9, Woodrow had not heard from her in a month and had no idea where she was. Ellen, who had been visiting Beth, was on her way home, having received word that her father was ill. On Friday, September 14, Ellen arrived at Asheville, where she had to change trains for Rome. She had taken a room at the Eagle Hotel where she could wait for her train in peace and privacy. Woodrow was in Asheville, too, staying with family nearby. Walking past the hotel, he looked up and recognized Ellen in the window. He called at the hotel and persuaded her to stay over the weekend, in order to meet his family. Woodrow planned to propose to her on Sunday, just before he had to catch the train to Baltimore to begin his studies at Johns Hopkins. He reasoned that if she refused him, there would be no awkward lingering.¹⁵

Ellen still thought of herself as "the girl who had never loved." Perhaps she still clung to her girlhood notion of independence; perhaps she did not feel free to leave her father, who was increasingly dependent on her. However, on Sunday, when Woodrow declared his love, "the joy of a sudden meeting and the pain of an imminent parting" shocked Ellen into realizing she did love him, although she was too surprised at the time to say so. Woodrow pressed his suit: he was sure of his love and needed assurance of hers if he was to do useful work in Baltimore. That was a winning argument for a girl who admired his ambition. Ellen accepted him. They kissed for the first time in the hallway of the hotel. They agreed that Ellen should tell her father of the engagement, and Woodrow would write a few days later to ask the older man's blessing. Woodrow, too, was unbalanced by his emotions. Running for the train, he remembered he did not know her ring size. He rushed back to borrow a ring.¹⁶

When Ellen returned to Rome, she discovered that her father was still suffering from "nervous exhaustion," so she delayed breaking