

# 21 A Lonely Little Girl

*I knew a child once who adored her father. She was an ugly little thing, keenly conscious of her deficiencies, and her father, the only person who really cared for her, was away much of the time; but he never criticized her or blamed her, instead he wrote her letters and stories, telling her how much he dreamed of her growing up and what they would do together in the future, but she must be truthful, loyal, brave, well-educated, or the woman he dreamed of would not be there when the wonderful day came for them to fare forth together. The child was full of fears and because of them lying was easy; she had no intellectual stimulus at that time and yet she made herself as the years went on into a fairly good copy of the picture he had painted.*

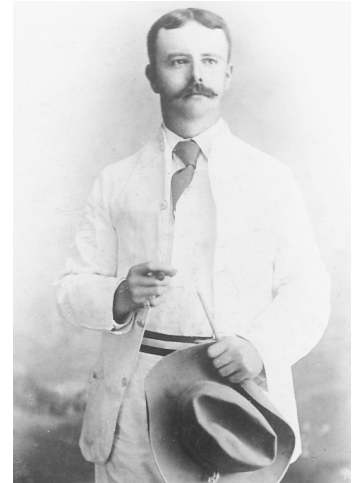


**Even at three Eleanor was lonely. Her mother called her “Granny,” because she was “old-fashioned” and not pretty.**

Eleanor Roosevelt was writing about herself. She wasn’t ugly, but she thought she was, perhaps because her mother was a great beauty. Eleanor had long blond hair, blue eyes, a plain face, and teeth that seemed too big for her mouth. She was shy, easily frightened, and serious. Sometimes she told little lies because she was afraid people would not want to hear the truth.

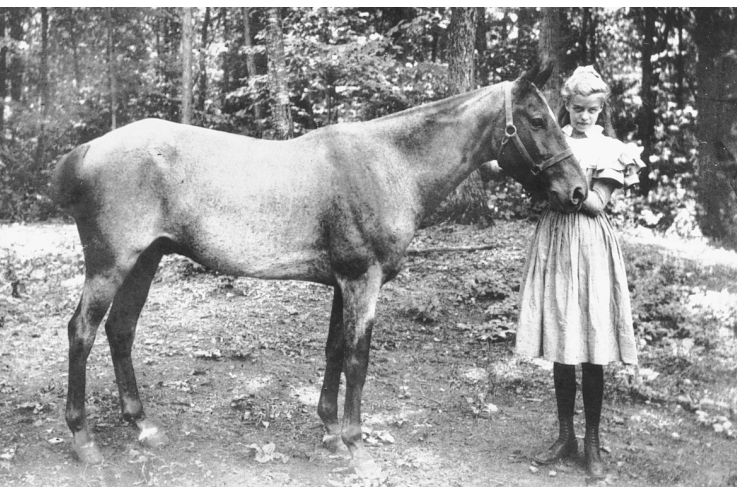
Her father, Theodore Roosevelt’s handsome brother Elliott, was a daredevil horseman and a man-about-town. Everyone who knew Elliott loved him. He was sweet-natured and charming. He became an alcoholic. It ruined his life, and his family’s life, too.

But he loved his sad-eyed daughter. He called her “little Nell,” and told her that he wanted her to grow up to be good, brave, kind,



**Elliott and Anna Hall Roosevelt, Eleanor’s father and mother. Her mother was a great society beauty, but cold to her daughter. When she died Eleanor seemed to hardly feel the loss. But when Elliott died, two years later, she refused to believe it. After that he was always alive for her.**





**Eleanor at her grandmother's. She loved her horse and hated the childish short dresses her grandmother made her wear.**

### **Eleanor's Other Mother**

**M**arie Souvestre was the principal of the school that Eleanor attended in England. She was a strong, proud Frenchwoman, and the girls at Allenswood had to speak French. She taught Eleanor to think for herself, and she taught her that women could become something without the help of men.



and honest. And she did. She always remembered those things that were fine in Elliott Roosevelt and forgave him his shortcomings. All her life she kept his letters, read them and reread them, and tried to be the kind of woman who would have made him proud. That wasn't easy.

She had a dreadful childhood. Not an ordinary unhappy childhood; a horrible, awful, terribly lonely one.

She adored her father, but most of the time he wasn't there. She lived for his visits. Sometimes there were wonderful carriage rides with her father driving the horses fast and little Eleanor holding him tightly. Sometimes he promised to see her and then, perhaps because he was drunk, he disappointed his child. Once he took her and his prize terriers for a walk. They stopped at his men's club and he left Eleanor and the dogs with the doorkeeper while he went inside "for just a minute." Hours later he was carried out—drunk; the little girl was sent home in a taxi.

When she was eight her mother died. When she was nine her brother died. When she was ten her father died.

Is this too sad to read? It is all true. Eleanor and her younger brother, Hall, went to live with their grandmother. The grandmother didn't know anything about bringing up children. She lived in a big, spooky house. The noise of children playing bothered her. A governess took care of Eleanor and Hall. The governess didn't like Eleanor. She was mean to her.

Then Eleanor was sent away to school in England. Finally, her life took a happy turn. The principal of the school realized that Eleanor had a good mind and a generous, kind nature. Eleanor became her favorite student. Eleanor soon became everyone's favorite. She had a talent for leadership. She was able to inspire others to do their best.

The child who had not always told the truth, who had struggled against the demons that make people lie, was becoming the kind of person her father had wished her to be. For the rest of her life, Eleanor Roosevelt would be known for her truthfulness.

**Eleanor smartly dressed for European travel on a school vacation.**

