

FDR's Convention Conspiracy

A Missy LeHand Mystery

By Kelly Durham and Kathryn Smith

PROLOGUE

Merrick Markham sat in the darkened room, shifting impatiently in his seat, as the film projector began to whirl. A white beam of light splashed on the makeshift screen hung on the office wall. A blurry image appeared then came into focus as the camera panned a broad valley from an overlook. Perhaps the view was from a small mountain. A very small mountain. It was late fall. The trees were already shedding their leaves.

Then the camera holder, somewhat hastily, moved to a higher point, capturing a jumble of jerky images. When the film came into focus again, it showed two convertibles driving slowly across the side of the hill. Markham leaned forward in his chair, staring intently. The two cars came to a halt a few yards away from the movie camera. No question, the driver of the second car was the President of the United States, Franklin Delano Roosevelt. Next to him sat his wife, Eleanor.

“Who are the people in the back seat of the car?” Markham asked his companion, a tall, slim man in an expensive, bespoke suit.

“A couple of his secretaries. The man is Marvin McIntyre, his traveling press secretary. The woman is Marguerite LeHand, his personal secretary.”

“Oh, sure. She’s the one they call Missy, isn’t she? How about the first car?”

“Secret service, plus some personal bodyguards, Miller and Gennerich. Watch what happens next.”

The first car held two Secret Service men and two other members of FDR’s inner circle: Earl Miller, who had served as First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt’s bodyguard for many years; and Gus Gennerich, who was assigned to FDR. The camera caught the men surrounding the President’s car, opening doors, and helping the women out. Once the car held only the President, the two Secret Service men removed the bench-like back seat and carried it away. The camera’s focus remained on the President, who was chatting amiably with Missy LeHand. Then she opened the door of the car and he laboriously shifted his body so that his legs, supported by metal braces worn outside his trousers, were pointing out of the door.

“Now there’s a sight you don’t see every day,” Markham said.

“He’s much more casual about it at Warm Springs,” the tall man replied.

Gus Gennerich knelt in front of the President and helped him lock his braces so that his legs were as stiff as a pair of knitting needles. Then he pulled FDR to his feet. Earl Miller joined him then, and the two men formed a seat with their hands. The President settled into their seat,

putting a beefy arm around each of their necks for added security, throwing his head back and laughing all the while. They began to slowly walk toward the camera.

“I always wondered how he managed on occasions like that when it wasn’t possible to use a wheelchair,” Markham said.

“They’ve had a lot of practice,” his companion said.

On the screen, there was a mishap. Markham gasped. Earl Miller’s knee-high boot had been snagged by a tree root. He lost his balance, spilling the President to the ground. He and Gennerich were quickly on their feet again, while FDR, as helpless as a turtle on his back, lay on the ground laughing.

“Incredible,” Markham said.

The two men picked up Roosevelt again as he made a show of dusting off his trousers and resumed their journey, finally depositing the President on the bench seat that had been removed from his car.

There was a pause in the action. When the film resumed, FDR was surrounded by picnickers. A waiter in a white coat poured coffee into his china cup. Mrs. Roosevelt sat a few feet away, chatting with a woman whose face was shaded by a wide-brimmed hat, both of them furiously knitting.

“Look at that,” Markham said. “Always knitting. She could have knitted a cover for his damn swimming pool by now.”

“That’s Elizabeth Pearson next to the President,” the tall man said. “Adores him. She’s from Detroit. Friends with the Edsel Fords, who have donated handsomely to his little charity in Warm Springs. And the lady with the curly hair is Mrs. Roosevelt’s friend Nancy Cook.”

Marvin McIntyre, the traveling secretary, was sitting beside a man who was as bald as Marvin was thatch-haired, and as plump as Marvin was cadaverous. “Ah, the other McIntyre brother,” the tall man said. “Dr. Ross McIntire, White House physician. Never mind that they spell their names differently. The joke is that they are twins separated at birth.”

“Twins from different mothers,” Markham commented. The camera panned the crowd, pausing to capture Missy LeHand, delicately licking her fingers. “Who else was there?” he asked.

“The usual sycophants and hangers-on. Some of the polios from Warm Springs.”

The camera panned a little farther to catch a late arrival.

“Is that who I think it is?” Markham asked, leaning forward and squinting.

“Yes, indeed,” said his companion. “Miss Bette Davis, fresh from Hollywood. She’s a big supporter of the President. Attended his first inauguration.” Davis, looking every inch the glamorous star in her full-length mink coat, shook hands and smiled all around, finally settling beside the beaming President and accepting a cup of coffee. She waved away a plate of food.

“Mrs. Pearson looks a little miffed,” Markham said. “I guess Hollywood royalty trumps even big money.”

The camera followed Davis around for a few minutes, and then the film ended, its tail flapping against the reel as the projector continued to beam light onto the screen. The man at the

projector switched it off, the room falling quiet except for the ticking of the ornate grandfather clock in the corner. He flipped the lights on.

Markham's eyes glittered as he turned to his companion. "The public has no idea how disabled he is, that he can't even get out of a chair by himself. You know, if this film got in the wrong hands it could ruin the President's chances of re-nomination."

"Are you kidding?" the tall man replied, with a hint of a smile. "This guy's got the public eating out of his hand. And give him some credit. Unemployment has fallen from almost 25 percent to 15 percent, nobody has to worry about their bank closing and taking their life savings with them and almost every hamlet in the country is getting a new post office or a new school or a new park from his WPA." He rattled the ice in his glass. "Not to mention the fact that the stuff we're drinking tonight is now legal again, reviving an entire sector of the economy that Prohibition put into the deep freeze. No, Roosevelt's too popular, except maybe with big money and big business."

"Don't people understand that it's big money and big business that drive the recovery, not government hand-outs?" Markham exclaimed. "The White House is doling out cash like there's a printing press in the basement, killing the work incentive. If Roosevelt and his New Dealers would stop throwing sand into the gears with all these regulations and tax increases, the Depression would be over in six months. And if the Republicans would develop some backbone and put together a strong ticket, they could give this pathetic cripple a real run for his money. In fact, I can imagine a scenario where the Democrats might even jettison Roosevelt."

The tall man chuckled, highly amused. "Oh, be serious. The Democrats wouldn't dare switch horses. It'd be political suicide."

"I'm not so sure," Markham said. "People see this, and all the old stories would start up again. That he has syphilis and it will eventually affect his brain. And even if they believe he really did have polio, they won't forgive him. People don't like to be deceived. And this is one grand deception." He turned to stare at his companion. "How much do you want for the film?"

The tall man laughed. "Not for sale at any price," he said. "You know I'm in his corner this time. But I wasn't the only one with a camera at that picnic."

The two sat in silence for a few moments. Finally, the tall man looked at Markham and smiled slightly. "I'll bet you a box of Diplomaticos that he wins re-nomination in a walk."

"You're on," Markham said with a grin.

THURSDAY, JUNE 18, 1936

CHAPTER 1

Washington, D.C.

Missy LeHand took a sip of her third cup of coffee of the morning, lit a Lucky Strike, and contemplated the huge stack of mail awaiting her brass letter opener with its ship-shaped handle. “Well, nothing to do but jump right back in,” she said aloud, reaching for the first envelope. Though the White House mail room handled the bulk of the fifty thousand letters the President received each week, anything that appeared to be personal mail was directed to Missy. She and her staff answered the majority of the letters without bothering the President—requests for his autograph, for example, which were too numerous for him to fill. Unless, of course, the request came from an important donor, person of influence, or friend of his mother, the formidable Sara Delano Roosevelt.

As Missy sliced through the envelopes, her mind drifted back to the previous four weeks. They had barely returned from their vacation in Warm Springs, where she had helped Eleanor Roosevelt save an unfairly convicted woman from the electric chair, when they had set off from Union Station again on a train tour of Tennessee, Arkansas, Texas, Indiana, and Kentucky. It was ostensibly a goodwill tour, but was actually a thinly disguised campaign trip, meant to draw attention away from the Republican National Convention that was going on about the same time in Cleveland, Ohio.

While FDR was speaking to enthusiastic crowds in Arkansas and Indiana and visiting such sites as the Alamo in San Antonio and Abraham Lincoln’s birthplace in Hodgenville, Kentucky, the Republicans were nominating a rather colorless candidate, Governor Alf Landon of Kansas, to run against him in November. Landon was a nice enough man, Missy reflected, as she tore through another envelope, but he hardly measured up to F.D. Nor, she mused, could Mrs. Landon measure up to Eleanor Roosevelt. A recent tongue-in-cheek article in the press had suggested the Canadian Dionne Quintuplets should be brought to the U.S. when they turned sixteen and trained, as a group, to be a future president’s wife. “No *one* woman ever can stand the pace that has been set by Eleanor Roosevelt,” the writer said.

Missy had enjoyed the journey, hot and exhausting as it was, except for a short side trip in Texas to the home of the Roosevelts’ second oldest son, Elliott. She had good relations with all the other Roosevelt children, especially the President’s only daughter, Anna, and his oldest son, James, who had recently joined the White House staff. But Elliott was a problem child and always had been. He had walked out on his first wife and infant son right after the inauguration and taken off for Texas, cashing in on his family name at every opportunity. He had quickly found an heiress to marry—*amazing how far someone can go on looks, charm, and a surname*, Missy thought—and had recently accepted a lucrative position with Markham Press Group, managing a chain of radio stations. Elliott’s second wife, Ruth, had seemed nice enough, Missy reflected. She had last seen

Ruth the previous fall in Warm Springs when she and Elliott had come for a visit. Eleanor Roosevelt had even taught Ruth to knit and she had taken to it like she had been born with needles in her hands.

Missy sighed. The measure of FDR's skills as an actor had been well demonstrated during his reunion with Elliott, whose stations' on-air personalities were known for their vitriolic hatred of the New Deal. Markham Press Group had carried the program of the evangelist-turned-politician Deacon Owen Knox until his disgrace the previous winter; he had been a dupe in a Russian plot to influence the presidential election. And now it was broadcasting the even more abhorrent programs of the Detroit-based radio priest, Father Francis Coughlin. Recently, Coughlin had called FDR "the dumbest man to ever occupy the White House" and even accused him of being "anti-God." *Well, no matter what Coughlin says, the nomination of FDR for a second term at the Democratic National Convention in Philadelphia next week is a foregone conclusion*, Missy thought.

Her pile of mail barely showing a dent, Missy took a drag on her Lucky and reached for the next envelope. It was a large one, and she noted that the postmark was from Grand Central Station in New York. She opened it, withdrew a photograph, and gasped. It was a grainy enlargement, taken at the Warm Springs picnic the previous fall, capturing the moment FDR and his bodyguards Earl Miller and Gus Gennerich had tumbled to the ground.

There was a short note paper-clipped to the photo, typed and unsigned. It read:

Is the President afraid to admit he can't walk?

"Jesus, Joseph, and Mary!" Missy exclaimed. She was on her feet in an instant, the photograph and note in her hand. She glanced at her wristwatch. The President's first appointment was in fifteen minutes, just enough time to bring this to his attention. Missy strode to the doorway separating her office from the Oval Office and rapped lightly on the door frame. FDR looked up, his face breaking into a smile.

"Good morning, Missy!" he boomed. "How lovely you look! Something to discuss with me?"

"Yes, F.D.," Missy said, walking briskly across the large plush rug. "Something rather upsetting, I'm afraid."