

# "Dear Mrs. Roosevelt,"

300,000 letters of criticism, advice, and appeal—  
my mail for one record year

BY ELEANOR ROOSEVELT

I FEEL fairly sure that some people when they awake to a rainy day and can not get out, say to themselves: "This is a good day to write to So and So," and they check their list of public officials whose names they have seen in the paper recently. Sometimes these people are just cranks, sometimes they are people who, for one reason or another, are up against some problem which they can not solve by themselves, and feel that their government, as represented by some public official, is their last resort.

Before my husband went to Albany as Governor of New York State, I had had the usual amount of mail that comes to any one whose name is listed in the telephone-book or the *Social Register*. There would be more appeals if we gave a party for young people, or if it was recorded in the newspaper that we took part in any social or civic activity.

Not until my husband was Governor did I find it necessary to set up some kind of system for handling the mail. Even then I continued to open, read, and answer all the mail myself and sign personally all the letters which were sent in reply. Incidentally, nobody ever signs my name, but to-day, of course, there are many letters signed by Miss Malvina Thompson. In Albany, I shared with my husband the services of Miss Grace Tully, and kept Miss Thompson in New York, only bringing her occasionally to Albany. I kept a file of all the letters and answers, and, during that time, they began to come from all over the country, even though most of them still came from New York State.

Before the Old Age Pension Bill went through in New York, I remember that a farmer's wife wrote me about it. When it finally went through a year or so later, she wrote me again, beginning her letter: "I am the farmer's wife who wrote you a year ago, and you told me to write again when the Bill went through." "The farmer's wife" was quite delightfully naïve, for already there were a good many farmers' wives who had reached an age when old-age pensions meant something to them, and I was glad of my files where I could find the letter from the lady who thought she was the only one. This letter amused me very much at the time, for I thought it rather unique, but I was to find as the years went by that everybody thinks his situation unique, and everybody thinks he alone has written on a particular subject.

Fortified with this modest system of ours, and the fact that we had built up an unofficial organization of some one in almost every state in the Union who could investigate a particularly interesting or appealing letter if it seemed necessary, we moved to Washington. The time was a serious one, and the need of the people seemed great. I had a feeling that even to be able to tell some one near the seat of government about their troubles would be a help, so in a broadcast which I made I said I would be glad to hear from those who felt that any government department could assist them in their need.

Our initial preparation for the new work which we were to encounter in Washington was to accept the very kind offer from our old friend, Edith Benham Helm, who had been Mrs. Woodrow Wilson's secretary, to come in as a volunteer and guide Miss Thompson and myself along the social path that lay before us, for we were both at sea in Washington. Mrs. Helm came to New York to see us and helped us as a volunteer until we decided that some one would have to take full charge of the society end of our mail, or Miss Thompson would never get any time to sleep.

Almost immediately on moving into the White House, we took stock of what was known as the Social Bureau, which was under Miss Thompson's direction. There were two divisions; one, under Mr. William Rockwell, does all the work on the social end—letters, invitations, dinner-cards in perfect script, lists, et cetera.

The other, under Mr. Ralph Magee, does all the other work which such a tremendous mail entails. When we turned over the society end of the work to Mrs. Helm, she immediately became direct head of Mr. Rockwell's department. Both Mr. Rockwell and Mr. Magee have been in the White House for many years and are a tremendous help to any President's wife and her secretaries.

We asked at once what had been the previous custom in answering mail which was addressed to the President's wife, and we were brought a pile of form letters which were supposed to cover every contingency. Some of them dated back to the days of President Cleveland! If a woman wrote and said her child pined for an elephant and would Mrs. Blank provide it, the answer under the "form" system would automatically be: "Mrs. Blank has had so many similar requests, she deeply re-

grets she can not comply with yours!" This system seemed a little inadequate because of the gravity of the questions that were coming to us in 1933. We did away with many of the old forms and set up a system of our own.

The first year, three hundred thousand pieces of mail came in addressed to me. Gradually, as the need lessened, the mail decreased. Two years ago, I received one hundred and ninety-eight thousand pieces of mail; and last year, even though it was a campaign year, there were only one hundred and ten thousand.

The mail comes in to the mail-room in the executive office. There it is sorted, and all mail addressed to me is sent to the ushers' office and finds its way very quickly to Miss Thompson's desk in her office in the White House proper. She goes through that mail the first thing in the morning, takes out all personal letters and communications from government departments, Senators, and Congressmen, and any other letters which she thinks look from the outside as though they required immediate attention.

The remainder she puts in a basket unopened, and it is called for by a messenger and taken back to the Social Bureau. There trained people open and classify it. The classifications are roughly as follows: Letters asking for contributions to church bazaars. Since time immemorial, the contribution sent by the President and his wife is a small engraving of the White House with a message from both engraved on it. That is done in the Bureau without being returned to Miss Thompson.

Letters asking for contributions of any other nature are sent back to Miss Thompson. Letters asking for information are classified according to the government department which should be able to furnish the answer, and they are sent over immediately for attention. Requests for speeches, or greetings to organizations, or short messages to be sent to various types of publications are all returned to Miss Thompson.

The balance of the mail, which includes every possible kind of request that does not seem to classify itself into any of the foregoing groups, is returned to Miss Thompson. She reads them all and, when she is able to do so, takes appropriate action and answers them herself, or dictates the (Continued on page 107)

