

# PATH OF PERIL

by Marlie Parker Wasserman

## EXCERPT

*Maurice Latta*

*Sunday, January 19, 1947*

For forty-one years I honored my oath to President Theodore Roosevelt and his bodyguard to conceal the events of November 15<sup>th</sup> and November 17<sup>th</sup>, 1906. On each of those days I agreed to a conspiracy of silence. Last year, that bodyguard died, and TR is long dead. Before I follow them to the grave, I will disclose the perils we faced during the President's historic trip to Panama, to clarify the record and to unburden myself.

My tale begins in the White House clerk's office, where I served as a stenographer during the McKinley administration and where I serve now, with a higher title, fifty years later. At first, I felt no connection with the other fifteen fellows in the clerk's office. I suppose I looked the part, with my regular features and unremarkable bearing. If my appearance fit in, my background did not. Most men working for the President, even at the turn of the century, were college boys. Some had taken the grand tour of Europe. A few had gone to universities in New England. Three, fancying themselves adventurers, had traveled to the West with President Roosevelt, that is, President Theodore Roosevelt. Two of the older gentlemen had been heroes in battles in the South during the Civil War. Most of the White House office workers had nothing to prove, to the President or to themselves.

I followed a different path to Washington. After an unmemorable youth on a Pennsylvania farm, I moved to Oklahoma, where I took my first job as a junior clerk. I filled in paperwork for the more memorable 1893 land rush. Over time my responsibilities and the commands of the head clerk grew distasteful. A friend back in Pennsylvania recommended me for a position as a clerk for a state senator in Harrisburg. I worked for that state senator for one year and two months. Forgive the precision—I like to be accurate with details. Then the legislator was elected to Congress and took me to Washington. Three years later, almost to the day, word spread across town that President William

McKinley's office needed a stenographer. By that time I had married Clara Hays Bullen and had two sons. I aimed to improve my lowly position and my meager salary.

I moved down Pennsylvania Avenue from the Capitol to the White House. My official duties, those that were known, started on August 8, 1898. Three years and one month after I started, all hell broke loose in the office. Of course I wouldn't have used such language then. Leon Czolgosz, an anarchist, assassinated President McKinley. Like other Americans, I felt sorrowful. I had seen McKinley pass down the hall daily, but I had never been introduced to him and he never spoke to me.

My clerk's job continued. Theodore Roosevelt became President. Little changed in the routines of our office, except now the President knew me by my first and last name. Maurice Latta. To be precise, Maurice Cooper Latta.

When the President's Secretary, William Loeb, promoted me from Stenographic Clerk to Assistant Secretary on June 4, 1906, I hoped I might have the opportunity to travel, at least up and down the East Coast. Two months later, I heard rumors that TR wanted to assess progress on his canal. Oh, let me interrupt myself for a moment. While conducting my official capacities, I called the President President Roosevelt. Informally I called him TR. By the way, he was the first president to be known by his initials. And some called him Teddy, though I never did so. I am told his relatives called him Teedie. You will hear all these names in my tale.

This trip would be the first time a president, while in office, had ever left the United States. Many Americans thought a president should not travel to foreign soil. That seems odd to us now, after Versailles and Yalta. But in 1906 most Americans didn't give much thought to the rest of the world, not until TR changed that.

I assumed Secretary Loeb, always interested in the press, would accompany the President to the canal. Mr. Loeb would want to shape the stories in the dailies and weeklies. Reporters called him Stonewall Loeb because of the way he controlled their access to the President. To my shock, Mr. Loeb asked me to go in his place.

Today, even after working in the executive offices of nine administrations, now for President Truman (no, I never call him Give 'Em Hell Harry), and managing a staff of 204 clerks, my title, a rather misleading title, is only Executive Clerk. I am proud, though, that the *New York Times* has acknowledged my worth. Four years ago, in a Christmas day article my family framed, the reporter wrote, "The actual 'assistant president'. . . is an official who has been in the White House since 1898 and knows more about its procedure than anyone else. He is Maurice C. Latta, now seventy-four and

known as 'Judge' Latta to the White House staff." In truth I know more about what is happening, and what did happen, than most of the presidents I served. That statement is for this memoir only.

I won't dwell on my years in the White House after Panama, but rather on four days in 1906, in and around the Canal Zone. For the public, I want to add to the historical record, which is silent on certain momentous events. For me and my family, I want to remember the turning point, when I came to realize both my limitations and my strengths. I am writing the tale of what I know, what I saw myself. If you wish, you can fill in gaps with stories you gather from the others present that November, the stories I couldn't see.

*William Loeb*

*Monday, October 15, 1906*

"I'm tired, Maurice. I followed that wild man to Yellowstone and Yosemite three years ago. Still haven't recovered. None of us could keep up with him." Mr. Loeb, Secretary to the President, was talking to me about Theodore Roosevelt's two-month long trip to the West. "Now he's sailing to Panama. He'll itch for another frenzied schedule. I can't do it this time. Here's the question. Are you ready for that kind of a trip? Interested in going in my place? I'm forty, you're thirty-six. Those four extra years make a difference, right?"

William Loeb sat three feet away from my face, at his desk in the White House. When he questioned me he leaned forward, putting his square jaw one foot from my weaker jaw. What answer did he expect? Modesty? Confidence?

"You surprise me, sir. I have never traveled beyond Oklahoma. I have never sailed, and I've never been responsible for a presidential trip. But I have watched you. I assisted you from afar when you traveled with the President. I will be honest, it would be a big step for me. I wouldn't want to disappoint."

Mr. Loeb sat back, slouched. I had disappointed him already.

"Sir, if you will walk me through the responsibilities, I would be honored to accompany the President."

I will never know if Mr. Loeb truly believed I could handle the job, or if he had no one else in reserve. He shook my hand, sealing the arrangement. A day later he called me back to his office for instructions.

“Above all, Maurice, keep to the schedule. I’ll help you prepare it. We start with essential meetings. Officials of Panama and representatives from other countries. Then we fill in as needed.” Mr. Loeb was in his element, flaunting his expertise. “Second, control the access of journalists. Give priority to Frederick Palmer, he’s a favorite of Teddy’s. And I’ve been asked to add in a local journalist named Herbert de Lisser. Limit access to those two. Manage the press like I do. Third, names. Keep on you, in your pocket, the identities of the people Teddy is to meet. Whisper him reminders. He’s smart, but that makes him seem even smarter. Fourth, keep notes. You’ll need them later for Teddy’s reports. Last, prioritize telegrams. The pundits are worried that the President, abroad for the first time, won’t be in charge of the business of the country. I’ve reminded them that telegrams will reach his ship and will reach Panama. Sort through dispatches when they arrive and make sure he deals with them.”

I feared Mr. Loeb would notice my twitching right leg. Instead, he looked down and hesitated. For more than a second.

“I need to be frank with you about another matter. There could be danger. Jimmy Sloan, the Secret Service agent who heads Teddy’s protection detail, he tells me he hears rumors of anarchist plots against the President. He has people checking ships arriving in Panama, looking for suspicious travelers. May not matter. Hunting for an assassin is like finding a needle in a haystack. And there’s more. Mrs. R. is frantic. Jimmy—fine to call him Jimmy—won’t talk to her. Teddy tells him not to. She tries to get information from me and I won’t talk to her either. She’ll see you as easy prey and try you too. A word to the wise—be wary of that elegant lady. She’s lived through three assassinations and she’s no fool.”

I could think of nothing to say. I was so anxious about my coming secretarial duties that I had forgotten about the President’s safety.

“Enough of the serious stuff,” Mr. Loeb said. Get yourself new clothing for the trip. Two suits and evening wear. Can’t have you looking like a farmer.” He must have seen me widen my eyes in a question.

“No extra allowance for that. Hope your Assistant Secretary’s salary will stretch.

## *Edith Roosevelt*

*November 1906*

Edith Kermit Carow Roosevelt married late, at age twenty-five, pleased to be Theodore's second wife. His first, empty-headed Alice Lee, had been prettier, but only her memory was competition. Society column reporters called Edith an elegant, good-looking woman. Even the carpers acknowledged that her sharp nose and chin didn't mar the impression. Those reporters never called her intelligent, but she knew she was that, and Theodore knew too. At age forty-five, after five children and two miscarriages, the last just three years earlier, she remained slender and attractive.

In the White House Edith stayed busy, watching over sons Ted, Kermit, Archibald, and Quentin, her daughter Ethel, and her rambunctious stepdaughter Alice. Thank goodness Alice had just married, even if it was to Nicholas Longworth III, a bald politician, much older than Alice, with a reputation as a playboy. The wedding nine months earlier had been the social event of the season in Washington. With that extravaganza over, Edith's burdens did not disappear, but she could begin to reorder them. The stepdaughter now moved from second place to third. Worries about Quentin, her youngest, and his mischievous antics rose to second.

Fear for Theodore remained first in Edith's list of worries. The year before, she convinced her husband to buy a rustic house, known as Pine Knot, in the Blue Ridge Mountains of Virginia. A private retreat. Almost private. Always watchful, she arranged for two Secret Service agents to protect the house every evening, without the President's knowledge.

Sounds. They drove her crazy. The pulsating wind and the rattle of cedar shingles at Pine Knot. The scraping sounds of old window frames and squeaky plumbing at the White House. With each sound Edith heard an alarm. She had trusted Theodore's first bodyguard, "Big Bill" Craig. In a carriage accident four years earlier Bill died and Theodore was injured. Now Jimmy Sloan oversaw protection. Jimmy was a good agent. Could even a good agent handle the task ahead? The trip to Panama would attract an international cast of cranks. Edith hoped they were cranks, not trained assassins. After each attempt on Theodore's life, a reporter invariably mentioned the statistics. Three of the last ten presidents had been assassinated, three in about forty years, all in her lifetime. She imagined these numbers branded on her forehead.

Edith needed to identify a member of the trip's entourage who might keep her informed about threats. Jimmy Sloan and his agents had pledged secrecy. Or they dismissed a woman's worries.

Thought her hysterical. They would be no help. And Theodore refused to acknowledge her fears, refused to listen. Thought she didn't notice he carried a pistol in his pocket when he mingled with crowds. She would think creatively. She would curry favor with someone else on the trip, someone with knowledge. Maybe that Assistant Secretary who was taking the place of Secretary Loeb. Maurice Latta. He might know and he might share. She would keep an eye out for him aboard ship.