

The Autobiography of Alice B Toklas, by Gertrude Stein

CHAPTER 1

BEFORE I CAME TO PARIS

I was born in San Francisco, California. I have in consequence always preferred living in a temperate climate but it is difficult, on the continent of Europe or even in America, to find a temperate climate and live in it. My mother's father was a pioneer, he came to California in '49, he married my grandmother who was very fond of music. She was a pupil of Clara Schumann's father. My mother was a quiet charming woman named Emilie.

My father came of polish patriotic stock. His grand-uncle raised a regiment for Napoleon and was its colonel. His father left his mother just after their marriage, to fight at the barricades in Paris, but his wife having cut off his supplies, he soon returned and led the life of a conservative well to do land owner.

I myself have had no liking for violence and have always enjoyed the pleasures of needlework and gardening. I am fond of paintings, furniture, tapestry, houses and flowers and even vegetables and fruit-trees. I like a view but I like to sit with my back turned to it.

I led in my childhood and youth the gently bred existence of my class and kind. I had some intellectual adventures at this period but very quiet ones. When I was about nineteen years of age I was a great admirer of Henry James. I felt that *The Awkward Age* would make a very remarkable play and I wrote to Henry James suggesting that I dramatise it. I had from him a delightful letter on the subject and then, when I felt my inadequacy, rather blushed for myself and did not keep the letter. Perhaps at that time I did not feel that I was justified in preserving it, at any rate it no longer exists.

Up to my twentieth year I was seriously interested in music. I studied and practised assiduously but shortly then it seemed futile, my mother had died and there was no unconquerable sadness, but there was no real interest that led me on. In the story *Ada* in *Geography and Plays* Gertrude Stein has given a very good description of me as I was at that time.

From then on for about six years I was well occupied. I led a pleasant life, I had many friends, much amusement many interests, my life was reasonably full and I enjoyed it but I was not very ardent in it. This brings me to the San Francisco fire which had as a consequence that the elder brother of Gertrude Stein

and his wife came back from Paris to San Francisco and this led to a complete change in my life.

I was at this time living with my father and brother. My father was a quiet man who took things quietly, although he felt them deeply. The first terrible morning of the San Francisco fire I woke him and told him, the city has been rocked by an earthquake and is now on fire. That will give us a black eye in the East, he replied turning and going to sleep again. I remember that once when my brother and a comrade had gone horse-back riding, one of the horses returned riderless to the hotel, the mother of the other boy began to make a terrible scene. Be calm madam, said my father, perhaps it is my son who has been killed. One of his axioms I always remember, if you must do a thing do it graciously. He also told me that a hostess should never apologise for any failure in her household arrangements, if there is a hostess there is insofar as there is a hostess no failure.

As I was saying we were all living comfortably together and there had been in my mind no active desire or thought of change. The disturbance of the routine of our lives by the fire followed by the coming of Gertrude Stein's older brother and his wife made the difference.

Mrs. Stein brought with her three little Matisse paintings, the first modern things to cross the Atlantic. I made her acquaintance at this time of general upset and she showed them to me, she also told me many stories of her life in Paris. Gradually I told my father that perhaps I would leave San Francisco. He was not disturbed by this, after all there was at that time a great deal of going and coming and there were many friends of mine going. Within a year I also had gone and I had come to Paris. There I went to see Mrs. Stein who had in the meantime returned to Paris, and there at her house I met Gertrude Stein. I was impressed by the coral brooch she wore and by her voice. I may say that only three times in my life have I met a genius and each time a bell within me rang and I was not mistaken, and I may say in each case it was before there was any general recognition of the quality of genius in them. The three geniuses of whom I wish to speak are Gertrude Stein, Pablo Picasso and Alfred Whitehead. I have met many important people, I have met several great people but I have only known three first class geniuses and in each case on sight within me something rang. In no one of the three cases have I been mistaken. In this way my new full life began.

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