

Adult Short Story Third Place

Gertrude Stein and the Cabinet of Curios

By A. Jo Procter, Chevy Chase

"If you begin at one place, you always end at another."

—Everybody's Autobiography

Longfellow's House sits stately and splendidly on Brattle Street in Cambridge, Massachusetts. When the poet lived there (1837-1882), he opened the front door to look across green meadows rolling down to the banks of the Charles River. Nearly 100 years later, when the writer Ms. Gertrude Stein visited the house, she walked up from the Charles River through a neighborhood grown over with small brick houses and fenced yards.

At that time, two old sisters managed Longfellow's House. Only the elder sister was allowed to open the front door to tourists. Sightseers were admitted between 10 a.m. and 4 p.m., Thursday through Sunday, but if the elder sister was ill, the younger sister was not allowed to open the door. Since the older woman was not sick the day Gertrude Stein came, the door was opened, and Gertrude walked in—a plump little body with a large head.

The sisters later remarked that she was not what they expected of the great woman writer.

On that day, both sisters wore brightly colored dresses and sensible shoes. They were very particular that day and on others. Visitors were not allowed to walk on the rugs but only on black rubber runners on top of the oriental carpets.

First, they had her sign the register. She wrote, "Gertrude Stein Paris, France formerly of Baltimore, Maryland."

No one would have known without seeing the signature on the register that she was THE Gertrude Stein, for she was a simple person and a stranger. She wore a brown corduroy jacket and skirt and a small crocheted straw hat and had on new brown shoes of which she was very fond.

Gertrude Stein beamed at the two women as they welcomed her into the hallway of Longfellow's House. Later, she wrote that the two were like birds: a magpie with a scolding voice and a chirping brown wren.

Days earlier, out in the garden of the Longfellow House, a child left her hair ribbon on the stone bench where Longfellow with his snow-white beard had walked majestically up and down before he wrote the poems "Evangeline" and "Hiawatha." The child and her family had been visiting Cambridge's literary spots, for the little girl's mother was a great reader.

When the child was there, the sisters put false wooden teeth they found in the bottom of a trunk into the dining room's curio cabinet. The sisters told the child that the false teeth belonged to General George Washington. The child believed the sisters.

That was before Gertrude Stein visited the Longfellow House, but then she did.

"Come in," the older sister welcomed Gertrude. "Do come in. Do."

Gertrude replied, "My friend Alice B. Toklas and I were in Cambridge overnight, and I spoke at Radcliffe College and the Signet Club at Harvard. It is funny about Cambridge. It is the one place where I recognize nothing. Of course, when I was at Radcliffe as a student, I was very busy. But today I have some time to myself because my friend Alice had a terrible toothache and has gone off to the dentist. Wouldn't it be nice, I thought to myself, as I am a literary expatriate if I go for a walk down Brattle Street, which they call the Street of the Poets in Cambridge, Massachusetts?"

She told them she knew this was just the right house, a House in a literary neighborhood, and the right house for a mystery.

"I like detective stories, and I have always been going to write one ... the only novels possible these days are detective stories where the only person of any importance is dead. I began writing something. I called it 'Blood on the Dining Room Floor,' " she said and added that she would like to see the dining room in this House because it was probably the right dining room, a mysterious dining room in the right House for her mystery.

That's what Gertrude Stein said to the two sisters. But they said they did not believe the House was mysterious. Instead, they told her about how Longfellow lived in the House when he was writing romantic legends and the House had quartered General George Washington during the Revolutionary War. It was not mysterious. It was a legendary house.

Gertrude turned her great brown eyes on the bird-like sisters fluttering about her. The sisters talked with their hands, moving them in flights and perchings in time to their little beak-like mouths.

Gertrude said that she'd come to see the House that Longfellow had lived in, and she'd forgotten about General Washington, but "all the men in America are such nice men; they always do everything they do."

As Gertrude would refer to them afterward, the bird sisters twittered and showed her into the library, pointing out the big chair where Longfellow had sat and read books. Then they went into the hall, which was between the library and the dining room, where Gertrude was delighted because she said it was the right dining room where the blood could be on the dining room floor.

It would be so in her mystery.

Twittering, the bird sisters told her there was something else they wanted her to see. The curio cabinet was in the dining room, which wasn't very mysterious outside, except it was locked. The older sister produced the key from her apron pocket as she wanted to show Gertrude Stein something very curious which was in the curio cabinet. The cabinet's door was locked, so Maude put the key in the lock, turned it, and swung the door open.

But she did not pull out either of the two beautiful blue and gold cups and saucers from Napoleon's dinner service or the letter signed by George Washington. Instead, she pulled out the set of wooden teeth.

"These wooden teeth belonged to General George Washington," she said. "In his day, the springs on either side of the teeth often locked in an open position, and he could not close his mouth." Gertrude laughed because she did not believe the teeth belonged to George Washington, the father of our country.

"I did not really believe it," Gertrude said later, telling the story to her friend Alice. "I rarely believe anything because, at the time of believing, I am not really there to believe."

Instead, she said, "I am sorry, but I do not feel at all like being inside today," and thanked the sisters as she made her way out on the street and then through the neighborhood of little houses down to the Charles River.

Later, Gertrude was sitting on the bank of the Charles River near the sedge grasses with her friend Alice B. Toklas, as Gertrude told Alice the story of her visit to Longfellow's house. Gertrude said that, of course, she knew it was false—that the false wooden teeth were George Washington's.

Therefore, it certainly isn't correct what Alice B. Toklas once said about Gertrude: "that she did not look facts in the face" for she Gertrude Stein had looked the false *false teeth* in the face and knew they were a falsehood.

"Now you know it, you know it as well as I know it," Ms. Gertrude Stein said triumphantly.

The End

George Washington had several sets of false teeth, but they were not made of wood. One set is in the Baltimore College of Dental Surgery, one set in possession of Joseph R. Greenwood of New York, and another set at Mount Vernon (Courtesy of the Smithsonian Institution).