

THE STRANGE WORLD OF WILLIE SEABROOK



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SPURL EDITIONS

CHAPTER ONE

I've never really understood what Gertrude Stein meant by calling us "the lost generation." She said a lot of things that were true, no doubt, but it is hard to think of her in the role of Delphic Oracle, as some did, or even as a very profound philosopher. When we visited her at Belley, France, she seemed to be an extremely practical, intelligent, literary woman, fully aware of her own importance and also of the value of success. She could be as easily dazzled by a celebrity as anyone else, and from the company she kept one suspected that she would have nothing to do with the *really* lost.

However, no matter what the term "lost generation" meant, I guess I was part of it. I left my own country in April, 1926, and, except for periods when I returned to sanity and New York, I lived in France, on and off, until 1934. I was not an expatriate, though, and my reasons for living abroad had nothing to do with those set forth in a manifesto that explained why artists and writers could not create in the United States. I could write any-

where, and I firmly believed that the United States was the most wonderful place in the world. I set sail on that April day because I had earned and saved up enough money to pay my passage on the *De Grasse* and wanted to see Paris – and also because I was completely, unreasonably, idiotically in love – and, as the song goes, my love was there!

During those years abroad with Willie Seabrook, I met and became friends with many members of the “lost generation.” Now that I have come to rest after the turbulent years, I would like to tell about some of those people, the lost and the not lost, as I remember them – and before I forget. It may turn out to be a patchwork quilt. It may show a pattern, I hope, like those wonderful quilts in museums. The pattern, come to think of it, may only be “my life with Willie.” But, then, that was as much a part of the scene as anything else.

Perhaps the first prominent author I met in Paris was Ford Madox Ford. It was not long after I arrived, and Willie and I were walking in the Luxembourg Gardens. The trees were awakening and the daffodils and hyacinths were out in the formal gardens before the Palace. We watched the children sail toy boats in the pond, and we stopped to admire the statues of the Queens of France and the Medici Fountain where, a long time later, I was to sit and watch the gold and russet leaves of autumn fall, with my tears.

We left the gardens and walked to the rue de Vaugirard. We entered the courtyard of what had once been a private mansion in a day when homes were about as intimate as castles, and we climbed three flights of stone stairs with indentations made by

centuries of human footsteps.

I don't remember how we got into the apartment; perhaps a maid let us in, though I doubt it, because Ford was always too poor to hire servants. But I do remember walking into a small, dark stuffy room, untidy and filled with books and papers, and seeing Ford, massive and uncomfortable-looking, seated in an armchair that was too small for him. Before him was a small, inlaid antique table on which, with his hamlike hands, he was playing solitaire with the smallest deck of cards I had ever seen.

During the conversation I gathered that he was in the thinking and planning stage of a new book. He explained the game of solitaire by saying that while he kept his hands occupied, and the top of his brain, his mind could dwell on the subject of his book serenely and without interruption.

It was difficult to understand what Ford was saying unless you knew him well and heard him daily. It was not only his British accent that made things difficult for American ears; it was also a slight impairment due to a wound to his jaw he had received in the First World War. If one listened carefully, the words that came were brilliant. He was an accomplished raconteur, who told not always the truth but something much more interesting and amusing.

We remained not more than half an hour, I think. It was long enough for me to perceive that there was no love lost between Ford Madox Ford and Willie. Ford had a deep-rooted contempt for popular success, and Willie's *Adventures in Arabia* and *The Magic Island* had both been best sellers. Willie admired Ford as a novelist and critic, but, sensing his contempt, he built up a wall

of his own that manifested itself in an amused disdain for Ford's "artiness."

Somehow, in spite of all that, we maintained a friendship with Ford, and in odd ways our paths often crossed, over there in France and when we came back to the United States.

Ford's ex-wife was Stella Bowen, an Englishwoman and a painter, and one of the finest women I've ever met. Stella lived in a large studio apartment with their little daughter, Julie, a strangely quiet child who, at an early age, had asked that she be allowed to become a Roman Catholic. Julie had been raised in the shadow of the church of St. Sulpice; there seemed to be no other explanation for her sudden request. Ford and Stella had respected Julie's wishes and did what they could to help her become a good little Catholic. Whenever her mother gave a party – which was fairly frequent, because Stella liked people, and her parties would often include such disparities as Edith Sitwell and Willie Seabrook – Julie remained in her narrow ascetic room, studying her catechism and the Lives of the Saints. And almost everyone in the artistic and literary world of Paris in the middle 1920's had attended Julie's First Communion.

Stella also had a studio in the South of France that she used very rarely and often lent to Ford. When Willie told her he was looking for a place in the Midi, Stella Bowen, with typical generosity, offered us hers.

2 bis Quai du Parti. Toulon. Var. France. That was our address for seven years, more or less. The core of my life, really. The best and the worst years, and surely the most exciting.

The studio was on the second floor of a warehouse on the Toulon waterfront. Beneath us, on the ground floor, was a furniture maker who filled the atmosphere with the smell of glue and wood shavings from eight in the morning until five-thirty every weekday afternoon. Then he would lock up and leave the whole empty building to us. The top floor belonged to Othon Friesz, a landscape painter who as far as I knew was never in residence. However, we would refer to him when people wanted to know how we managed to live in such an unlikely place. We could always say, "Our studio belonged to Stella Bowen, and Othon Friesz paints there." That seemed to give it some sort of cachet, because it *was* a crazy place to live in – which is why we loved it, I guess. It was, in a way, what the beatnik of today might call a pad, but we were not beatniks in any sense. Willie admired success and was a dyed-in-the-wool Republican, and among his dearest friends in France was Princess Murat and the Honorable Daisy Fellowes and a wonderful old aristocrat with the beautiful name of Tranchant de Lunel.

It is impossible not to "drop names" in writing all this, because part of the excitement of living with Willie was the people we met, at the top and the bottom. He had no use for anything at the middle. In the middle were solid respectable citizens who slept in safe beds. None of them would have slept on the dirty floor of a crowded third-class compartment on a night trip from Paris to Arles, as Willie did, and none of them would have slept the night through on the icy sands of the Sahara Desert, as I did. At least, that's what Willie thought about the Middle Class, which he dismissed as if it were non-existent.



The room we lived in on the Quai du Parti was very long and fairly wide, with one enormous window at the end overlooking the *Rade*, a basin where a large part of the French fleet was anchored. The floor of our studio was of paving brick, unevenly laid. We cleaned it at intervals by strewing moist tea leaves on the ground and sweeping them and litters of dust up into a bin with a bundle of twigs like the besoms witches go riding about on.

There was no running water and no electricity or gas. For light we had an acetylene lamp suspended from the ceiling, and for cooking a primus stove that Willie had used on his first African trip, when he gathered the material for *Jungle Ways*. With unusual patience he had shown me how to light it, but it scared me to death every time I did. First you poured kerosene into a cup that surrounded the wick. Then you lit the kerosene with a match, and while it was blazing you pumped a lever like mad and suddenly there would be an explosion – and then there was calm, and the wick was lit, and you could cook whatever you wanted without danger. Sometimes, when we grew tired of the rich food served in the restaurants, I would boil up a few fresh vegetables and we would dine, with relief, on them. But it was Willie who used the stove to make morning coffee. He would always bring me a cup, sometimes with a flower in the saucer. The fact that I usually got the coffee at five a.m., before he went up to the studio he later rented on the third floor, didn't seem important. Taking a lot of other things into consideration, I appreciated the thoughtfulness.

Our furnishings were of the simplest, and mostly as Stella

Bowen had left them. There was a large double couch in the upper corner to the left of the window, and a long refectory table made of planks on trestles on the other side of the room. There was a round table in the middle of the brick floor, and against one wall was a pot-bellied stove in which we burned fagots of wood during the cold damp months of December and January.

At the lower end was a dry sink with a bowl, a pitcher, and a slop jar. For many years this was the only bathroom we had. I would go down twice a day with an enormous tin pitcher to a sort of fountain that trickled out of the wall of one of the buildings that lined the Quai du Parti. I would enjoy waiting in a queue with the women of the *quartier*, who were good-natured and joked with us – and about us – and accepted us as good neighbors. They thought we made books for a living (that is, actually bound them and sold them), and that was a trade, and so we were proper and honest working people like themselves.

The fetching of water was romantic, but there was another chore which presented more of a problem, and that was the emptying of the slop jar! The *Rade* was filled with pleasure craft as well as the French navy, and all their refuse, naturally, was pumped out into the already dark and oily waters of the port, although there was a city ordinance to the effect that nothing was to be thrown into the water.

The people of Toulon were an independent lot when I knew them. They were not to be intimidated by a little thing like a city ordinance. We had seen them dumping whatever they chose into the harbor – but discreetly, after dark. And so Willie and I did as the Romans did. When night had come on, with its velvety

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I tried to keep things running smoothly, while knowing that in the barn studio some rather nice girl had been persuaded to let herself be hung by a chain from the ceiling until she was so tired she hardly knew what she was doing or saying, and might possibly “go through that wall” into a psychedelic state. . . . There were new methods of inflicting pain or fatigue that Willie had read about or created in his queer mind and that he tried to tell me about if I let him. But the whole thing now made me ill, nervously and physically, especially when I had to receive friends or acquaintances who called while the sessions were going on elsewhere.

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