

THREE LIVES

Three Lives

*Stories of The Good Anna, Melanctha
and The Gentle Lena*

GERTRUDE STEIN



RENARD PRESS

RENARD PRESS LTD

Kemp House
152–160 City Road
London EC1V 2NX
United Kingdom
info@renardpress.com
020 8050 2928

www.renardpress.com

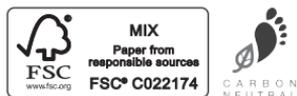
Three Lives first published in 1809

This edition first published by Renard Press Ltd in 2022

Edited text, Notes and Extra Material © Renard Press Ltd, 2022

Cover design by Will Dady

Printed in the United Kingdom by Severn



ISBN: 978-1-913724-71-9

9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

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CONTENTS

<i>Three Lives</i>	7
The Good Anna	9
PART I	9
PART II	20
PART III	64
Melanctha	69
The Gentle Lena	193
Note on the Text	227
Notes	227
Extra Material	229

THREE LIVES

*Donc je suis malheureux et ce
n'est ni ma faute ni celle de la vie.*

JULES LAFORGUE*

THE GOOD ANNA

PART I

THE TRADESMEN of Bridgepoint learned to dread the sound of 'Miss Mathilda', for with that name the good Anna always conquered.

The strictest of the one-price stores found that they could give things for a little less when the good Anna had fully said that 'Miss Mathilda' could not pay so much and that she could buy it cheaper 'by Lindheims.'

Lindheims was Anna's favourite store, for there they had bargain days, when flour and sugar were sold for a quarter of a cent less for a pound, and there the heads of the departments were all her friends and always managed to give her the bargain prices, even on other days.

Anna led an arduous and troubled life.

Anna managed the whole little house for Miss Mathilda. It was a funny little house, one of a whole row of all the same kind that made a close pile like a row of dominoes that a child knocks over, for they were built along a street which at this point came down a steep hill. They were funny little houses, two storeys high, with red-brick fronts and long white steps.

This one little house was always very full with Miss Mathilda, an under-servant, stray dogs and cats and Anna's voice that scolded, managed, grumbled all day long.

‘Sallie! Can’t I leave you alone a minute but you must run to the door to see the butcher boy come down the street? And there is Miss Mathilda calling for her shoes. Can I do everything while you go around always thinking about nothing at all? If I ain’t after you every minute you would be forgetting all the time, and I take all this pains, and when you come to me you was as ragged as a buzzard and as dirty as a dog. Go and find Miss Mathilda her shoes where you put them this morning.’

‘Peter!’ – her voice rose higher – ‘Peter!’ Peter was the youngest and the favourite dog – ‘Peter, if you don’t leave Baby alone,’ – Baby was an old, blind terrier that Anna had loved for many years – ‘Peter, if you don’t leave Baby alone, I take a rawhide to you, you bad dog.’

The good Anna had high ideals for canine chastity and discipline. The three regular dogs, the three that always lived with Anna, Peter and old Baby and the fluffy little Rags, who was always jumping up into the air just to show that he was happy, together with the transients, the many stray ones that Anna always kept until she found them homes, were all under strict orders never to be bad one with the other.

A sad disgrace did once happen in the family. A little transient terrier for whom Anna had found a home suddenly produced a crop of pups. The new owners were certain that this Foxy had known no dog since she was in their care. The good Anna held to it stoutly that her Peter and her Rags were guiltless, and she made her statement with so much heat that Foxy’s owners were at last convinced that these results were due to their neglect.

‘You bad dog,’ Anna said to Peter that night, ‘you bad dog.’

‘Peter was the father of those pups,’ the good Anna explained to Miss Mathilda, ‘and they look just like him, too, and poor little Foxy, they were so big that she could hardly have them, but Miss Mathilda, I would never let those people know that Peter was so bad.’

Periods of evil thinking came very regularly to Peter and to Rags and to the visitors within their gates. At such times Anna

would be very busy and scold hard, and then too she always took great care to seclude the bad dogs from each other whenever she had to leave the house. Sometimes, just to see how good it was that she had made them, Anna would leave the room a little while and leave them all together, and then she would suddenly come back. Back would slink all the wicked-minded dogs at the sound of her hand upon the knob, and then they would sit desolate in their corners like a lot of disappointed children whose stolen sugar has been taken from them.

Innocent blind old Baby was the only one who preserved the dignity becoming in a dog.

You see that Anna led an arduous and troubled life.

The good Anna was a small, spare, german woman, at this time about forty years of age. Her face was worn, her cheeks were thin, her mouth drawn and firm and her light blue eyes were very bright. Sometimes they were full of lightning and sometimes full of humour, but they were always sharp and clear.

Her voice was a pleasant one when she told the histories of bad Peter and of Baby and of little Rags. Her voice was a high and piercing one when she called to the teamsters* and to the other wicked men, what she wanted that should come to them when she saw them beat a horse or kick a dog. She did not belong to any society that could stop them and she told them so most frankly, but her strained voice and her glittering eyes, and her queer, piercing german english first made them afraid and then ashamed. They all knew, too, that all the policemen on the beat were her friends. These always respected and obeyed Miss Annie, as they called her, and promptly attended to all of her complaints.

For five years Anna managed the little house for Miss Mathilda. In these five years there were four different under-servants.

The one that came first was a pretty, cheerful irish girl. Anna took her with a doubting mind. Lizzie was an obedient, happy servant, and Anna began to have a little faith. This was not for long. The pretty, cheerful Lizzie disappeared one day without her notice and with all her baggage and returned no more.

This pretty, cheerful Lizzie was succeeded by a melancholy Molly.

Molly was born in America, of German parents. All her people had been long dead or gone away. Molly had always been alone. She was a tall, dark, sallow, thin-haired creature, and she was always troubled with a cough, and she had a bad temper, and always said ugly dreadful swear words.

Anna found all this very hard to bear, but she kept Molly a long time out of kindness. The kitchen was constantly a battleground. Anna scolded and Molly swore strange oaths, and then Miss Mathilda would shut her door hard to show that she could hear it all.

At last Anna had to give it up. 'Please Miss Mathilda, won't you speak to Molly,' Anna said. 'I can't do a thing with her. I scold her and she don't seem to hear, and then she swears so that she scares me. She loves you Miss Mathilda, and you scold her please once.'

'But Anna,' cried poor Miss Mathilda, 'I don't want to,' and that large, cheerful, but faint-hearted woman looked all aghast at such a prospect. 'But you must, please Miss Mathilda!' Anna said.

Miss Mathilda never wanted to do any scolding. 'But you must, please Miss Mathilda,' Anna said.

Miss Mathilda every day put off the scolding, hoping always that Anna would learn to manage Molly better. It never did get better and at last Miss Mathilda saw that the scolding simply had to be.

It was agreed between the good Anna and her Miss Mathilda that Anna should be away when Molly would be scolded. The next evening that it was Anna's evening out, Miss Mathilda faced her task and went down into the kitchen.

Molly was sitting in the little kitchen, leaning her elbows on the table. She was a tall, thin, sallow girl, aged twenty-three, by nature slatternly and careless but trained by Anna into superficial neatness. Her drab striped cotton dress and grey-black checked apron increased the length and sadness of her melancholy figure. 'Oh, Lord!' groaned Miss Mathilda to herself as she approached her.

‘Molly, I want to speak to you about your behaviour to Anna!’ Here Molly dropped her head still lower on her arms and began to cry.

‘Oh! Oh!’ groaned Miss Mathilda.

‘It’s all Miss Annie’s fault, all of it,’ Molly said at last, in a trembling voice. ‘I do my best.’

‘I know Anna is often hard to please,’ began Miss Mathilda, with a twinge of mischief, and then she sobered herself to her task, ‘but you must remember, Molly, she means it for your good and she is really very kind to you.’

‘I don’t want her kindness,’ Molly cried. ‘I wish you would tell me what to do, Miss Mathilda, and then I would be all right. I hate Miss Annie.’

‘This will never do Molly,’ Miss Mathilda said sternly, in her deepest, firmest tones. ‘Anna is the head of the kitchen and you must either obey her or leave.’

‘I don’t want to leave you,’ whimpered melancholy Molly. ‘Well Molly then try and do better,’ answered Miss Mathilda, keeping a good stern front, and backing quickly from the kitchen.

‘Oh! Oh!’ groaned Miss Mathilda, as she went back up the stairs.

Miss Mathilda’s attempt to make peace between the constantly contending women in the kitchen had no real effect. They were very soon as bitter as before.

At last it was decided that Molly was to go away. Molly went away to work in a factory in the town, and she went to live with an old woman in the slums, a very bad old woman, Anna said.

Anna was never easy in her mind about the fate of Molly. Sometimes she would see or hear of her. Molly was not well, her cough was worse and the old woman really was a bad one.

After a year of this unwholesome life, Molly was completely broken down. Anna then again took her in charge. She brought her from her work and from the woman where she lived, and put her in a hospital to stay till she was well. She found a place for her as nursemaid to a little girl out in the country, and Molly was at last established and content.

Molly had had, at first, no regular successor. In a few months it was going to be the summer and Miss Mathilda would be gone away, and old Katy would do very well to come in every day and help Anna with her work.

Old Katy was a heavy, ugly, short and rough old german woman, with a strange distorted german-english all her own. Anna was worn out now with her attempt to make the younger generation do all that it should and rough old Katy* never answered back, and never wanted her own way. No scolding or abuse could make its mark on her uncouth and aged peasant hide. She said her ‘Yes, Miss Annie,’ when an answer had to come, and that was always all that she could say.

‘Old Katy is just a rough old woman, Miss Mathilda,’ Anna said, ‘but I think I keep her here with me. She can work and she don’t give me trouble like I had with Molly all the time.’

Anna always had a humorous sense from this old Katy’s twisted peasant english, from the roughness on her tongue of buzzing Ss and from the queer ways of her brutish servile humour. Anna could not let old Katy serve at table – old Katy was too coarsely made from natural earth for that – and so Anna had all this to do herself and that she never liked, but even then this simple rough old creature was pleasanter to her than any of the upstart young.

Life went on very smoothly now in these few months before the summer came. Miss Mathilda every summer went away across the ocean to be gone for several months. When she went away this summer old Katy was so sorry, and on the day that Miss Mathilda went, old Katy cried hard for many hours. An earthy, uncouth, servile peasant creature old Katy surely was. She stood there on the white stone steps of the little red-brick house, with her bony, square dull head with its thin, tanned, toughened skin and its sparse and kinky grizzled hair, and her strong, squat figure a little overmade on the right side, clothed in her blue striped cotton dress, all clean and always washed but rough and harsh to see – and she stayed there on the steps till Anna brought her in, blubbering, her apron to her face and making queer guttural broken moans.

When Miss Mathilda early in the fall came to her house again old Katy was not there.

'I never thought old Katy would act so Miss Mathilda,' Anna said, 'when she was so sorry when you went away, and I gave her full wages all the summer, but they are all alike Miss Mathilda, there isn't one of them that's fit to trust. You know how Katy said she liked you, Miss Mathilda, and went on about it when you went away and then she was so good and worked all right until the middle of the summer, when I got sick, and then she went away and left me all alone and took a place out in the country, where they gave her some more money. She didn't say a word, Miss Mathilda, she just went off and left me there alone when I was sick after that awful hot summer that we had, and after all we done for her when she had no place to go, and all summer I gave her better things to eat than I had for myself. Miss Mathilda, there isn't one of them has any sense of what's the right way for a girl to do, not one of them.'

Old Katy was never heard from any more.

No under-servant was decided upon now for several months. Many came and many went, and none of them would do. At last Anna heard of Sallie.

Sallie was the oldest girl in a family of eleven and Sallie was just sixteen years old. From Sallie down they came always littler and littler in her family, and all of them were always out at work excepting only the few littlest of them all.

Sallie was a pretty blonde and smiling german girl, and stupid and a little silly. The littler they came in her family the brighter they all were. The brightest of them all was a little girl of ten. She did a good day's work washing dishes for a man and wife in a saloon, and she earned a fair day's wage, and then there was one littler still. She only worked for half the day. She did the housework for a bachelor doctor. She did it all, all of the housework and received each week her eight cents for her wage. Anna was always indignant when she told that story.

'I think he ought to give her ten cents Miss Mathilda anyway. Eight cents is so mean when she does all his work and she is such a bright little thing too, not stupid like our Sallie. Sallie would never learn to do a thing if I didn't scold her all the time, but Sallie is a good girl, and I take care and she will do all right.'

Sallie was a good, obedient german child. She never answered Anna back, no more did Peter, old Baby and little Rags and so though always Anna's voice was sharply raised in strong rebuke and worn expostulation, they were a happy family all there together in the kitchen.

Anna was a mother now to Sallie, a good incessant german mother who watched and scolded hard to keep the girl from any evil step. Sallie's temptations and transgressions were much like those of naughty Peter and jolly little Rags, and Anna took the same way to keep all three from doing what was bad.

Sallie's chief badness besides forgetting all the time and never washing her hands clean to serve at table was the butcher boy.

He was an unattractive youth enough, that butcher boy. Suspicion began to close in around Sallie that she spent the evenings when Anna was away in company with this bad boy.

'Sallie is such a pretty girl, Miss Mathilda,' Anna said, 'and she is so dumb and silly, and she puts on that red waist, and she crinkles up her hair with irons so I have to laugh, and then I tell her if she only washed her hands clean it would be better than all that fixing all the time, but you can't do a thing with the young girls nowadays Miss Mathilda. Sallie is a good girl but I got to watch her all the time.'

Suspicion closed in around Sallie more and more that she spent Anna's evenings out with this boy sitting in the kitchen. One early morning Anna's voice was sharply raised.

'Sallie this ain't the same banana that I brought home yesterday, for Miss Mathilda, for her breakfast, and you was out early in the street this morning, what was you doing there?'

'Nothing, Miss Annie, I just went out to see, that's all and that's the same banana, 'deed it is Miss Annie.'