Biography of Gertrude Næsbein

About seventy years ago in Des Moines, Iowa, there was born to the Stantons a daughter whom they named Gertrude. When she was about three years old, her family joined the countless hundreds who went west in the gold rush of '48, and it was then that her remarkable life really started.

In a covered wagon they started out, knowing nothing of the dangers or hardships that awaited them. Nor for long were their lives in ignorance of these facts, however, for soon after getting out on the plains they found it necessary, at night to build huge bonfires over which constant watch had to be kept, to keep the wolves away. As many dangers had to be confronted by day as by night. Many times were they attacked by Indians, having to fight for their lives, and once, in order to save little Gertrude, she was hidden under the flap
One of the cross roads in a wagon, so she would not be found. Soon the family arrived in Denver, Colorado and here Gertrude's hard times were over.

She was the first white child that had ever been in that state, and she was made much of. Here, also, were found very many Indians, and of a much different type than those encountered in those old few days of hardship through which the family had just passed. These red men the little girl was a great novelty and the Indian chiefs with their squaws would come to the Stanton home to play with her. Soon the Stantons and the Indians were the best of friends and one day one of the chiefs came to Mrs. Stanton with a strange request: the Indians wanted to borrow Gertrude! Her mother consented to let her go. And the little girl was borne away with more pomp and ceremony.
than is accorded to many a princess to-day.
A few days later she was brought back, and
the poor Indians didn't know what to
make of it when Mrs. Stanton, upon looking
at her daughter, burst into uncontrollable
laughter. They had put Gertrude's legs
through the arms of a jacket! With
the miners Gertrude made friends as
easily as with the Indians, and many
were the gifts she received at Christmas
time, bright beaded articles from the
Indians, and nuggets of gold from the
miners.

Her childhood would have been a lonely
one, had she not peopled it with her own
imagination. In lieu of playmates, she
would take long walks in the fields
and woods, making friends of the trees
and flowers, finding happiness and
delights in a world full of wonder to her.

So was on one of these rambles that she
met a group of men, leading another man
with a rope around his neck. Evidently she ran home to her mother and told her she wanted to go to the lynching, as her mother said, 'just first come and have her hair curled, it would look nice.' After this ordeal was over, she ran out and whose she see but the man coming back from the lynching. When she tells the story now, she says that never to this day has she forgiven her mother for denying her the pleasure of seeing a man face.

Her mother had always nursed a desire for Gertude to become a pianist, but not as such Gertude. It was however, through this desire that her artistic abilities were first discovered. Her mother one day having told Gertude to practice her music lesson and hearing no sound, went to look for her and found her, not at the piano, but getting on the ground, drawing pictures of flowers, with a broken stick.
It was the influence of her intimacy with nature coming to the fore and it is to the influence of these years that we can trace that sense of leisure, that absence of conventionality and that freshness which pervades her work now.

Later, her childhood over, her family moved to the East and there she married. For years her life was devoted to her home, her husband and children. Always eager to express herself, to create, eager for knowledge, and thinking that painting was to be her medium, she availed herself gladly of the opportunity of studying paint India and for six years devoted herself and her time to it. Daily, rising early to attend to her household duties, she took her children to school, then went herself to Pratt Institute. Later still came the opportunity for further study in Paris, where she had taken her daughters that the elder might continue her musical
education.

It was during that period, that the tools from her trunks, one day, when rain kept them indoors, an old, unused, half-forgotten camera and began making studies. She was surprised her and the fascination of photography took hold of her. Gradually the cameras and brushes were laid aside and finally the camera no longer unused, ruled supreme. She had found her medium and realized the possibilities of photography as a means of artistic expression. Soon, however, she found she had no technical knowledge of the art, and realizing the necessity of this, she went to Germany, and apprenticed herself to a chemist and there obtained the training she needed.

Upon her return to America, her prints shown to a few artists roused much interest and enthusiasm and she was urged to open a studio.
Her first work was done at home, but she soon came to New York, and from the beginning, her success was assured. Only the photographers held aloof, laughing at what they called absurdities. That was many years ago. Today, they too, are her friends and admirers of her work, her influence everywhere evident among them. How widespread this influence is, it is difficult for those who have watched the whole movement of modern photography to understand. It is safe to say, however, that it has been one of the most potent factors in placing photography upon its present high plane. No other photographer has given us such pictures of motherhood, of childhood. They are intimate expressions of all that is best in a woman’s life, free of delictitious tendencies and love. The wife and mother has taken of her own life’s richness and has given it in again to her work.
One of her last and greatest pictures is that of Abraham Lincoln. It is a very unusual portrait of this great man, and it has an interesting history. A score or so of years ago, a son of Mrs. Kuehne, while dismantling a house in New York, found a number of photographs in an abandoned trunk. They were mostly of the Civil War period, of the visiting card size, popular at that time, and many of them were portraits of Union soldiers, privates and officers, taken by Brady, a well-known Washington photographer. Among these was a picture of President Lincoln. It was apparently a reproduction of a favorite photograph, printed by some special process, but without the name of the original photographs or the printer of the reproduction. On the back of this portrait was a penciled inscription:

Lincoln the President
he gave to me.
Some private soldier, had it been assured, asked Mr. Lincoln for one of his photographs while the President was reviewing the Union troops during the war. This picture had been carefully treasured by the unknown soldier for many years, but finally fell into the hands of Mrs. Käsebier, who, with rare skill, made an enlargement of a portion of the photograph. This reproduction has since been declared the most perfect and most wonderful likeness of Lincoln ever recorded and Gertrude Käsebier has had the honor bestowed upon her of having it hung in the Congressional Library at Washington. Still another honor came to her recently in her own city, when, in honor of Lincoln’s birthday, the entire window of John Wanamaker’s store, facing Broadway, was given over to this great portrait. Her circle of friends includes not only artists of the photographic field, but
artists of every kind. Lord Northcliffe, one of the great political factors in English history, often said that he considered Gertrude Käsebier's friendship one of the greatest things that ever entered his life. His letters to her are most interesting to read, letters in which he brought his problems to her, knowing that her help would be forthcoming whenever it was wanted.

A few years ago an English woman who was in New York, asked a friend of Mrs. Käsebier to introduce her to the personality which creates the pictures I have seen. Later, in London, she told this same lady that she had known in her time all the famous women and that now to her list of the very few really great she had added the name of Gertrude Käsebier—Photographer.

Another friendship, the value of which was reciprocated, was that of Rodin, who has entertained Mrs. Käsebier at his home.
many times. In her studio are many bronzes and paintings which Rodin has presented to her. To the ordinary person the paintings appear as nothing more than a few lines and some blots of watercolors. People look at Mrs. Käsebies in amazement when she tells them they are worth thousands of dollars a piece. To anyone, however, his bronzes would bring joy. They appear so real, so full of life and so graceful.

Not only has she friends abroad but here in America, she is one of the best loved women in the artist’s circle.

Brenda Putnam, the sculptress who has recently won such great fame with her work pays that without Mrs. Käsebies’ encouragement and friendship, she never could have given to the world what she has. One of the greatest, if not the greatest producer of artistic shows, Murray Anderson, boasts of his friendship with...
Mrs. Käsebier. Many a time she has helped him over rough spots from the time he was a small boy until this very day, he comes to her for advice, and receives it in the motherly fashion that is so characteristic of Mrs. Käsebier.

Many lesser artists value her friendship just as much as these famous people, for in a good many cases it is she who started them on their upward trail. When at an art exhibition she consents to act as a judge, those artists exhibiting, know that if their work is approved by her, their career is started. So great a value do they place upon her judgment, that last year when, due to a serious accident, as the result of which she was confined to her bed, she was unable to judge a collection of paintings, they were brought to her bedside, so that her judgment might be received.

Always she has stood for all that was best, for truth and beauty, and perhaps...
no greater tribute can be given her today than the often repeated words one hears in many a household, the world over: "Mrs. Käschiers photographs are my dearest treasures.

Above all else, she has sought to give to those she has photographed, the best of herself. Both as a photographer and as a woman, the world gives Gertrude Käschiers its warmest admiration and affection.