

~~Autobiography~~

Elizabeth O'Malley
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Biography of Gertrude Kasebier

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. Not for long were they left in ignorance of these facts however, for soon after getting out on the plains they found it necessary, at night, to build large 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

of one of the cross seats in a wagon, so she would not be found. Soon the family arrived in Denver, Colorado and here Gertrudes' 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 Indians, but of a ^{very} much different type ~~than~~ ^{from} those encountered in those awful days of hardship through which the family had just passed. To 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 prisoner 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
Sp. 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 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 delight in a world full of wonder to her. It was on one of these rambles that she met a group of men, leading another man

with a rope around his neck. Excitedly she ran home to her mother and told her she wanted to go to the lynching, so her mother said (delighted) but first come and have her hair curled, so she would look nice. After this ordeal was over she ran out and whom should she see but the men 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 hang.

Her mother had always nursed a desire for Gertrude to become a pianist, but not so with Gertrude. It was however, through this desire that her artistic abilities were first discovered. Her mother, one day having told Gertrude to practice her music lesson and hearing no sound, went to look for her and found her, not at the piano, but sitting 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 bigness, that absence of conventionality and that freshness which he 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 painting 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 she took from her trunk, one day, when rain kept them indoors, an old, unused, half forgotten camera and began making studies. The result surprised her and the fascination of photography took hold of her. Gradually, the canvases 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, full of delight, tenderness and love. The wife and mother has taken of her own life's richness and has given of it 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. Käsebier, 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 photographer or the printer of the reproduction. On the back of this portrait was a penciled inscription:

Lincklin the Presadent
he gieb to me.

Some private soldier, had, it is presumed, 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 Wanamakers 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 blotches of watercolors. People look at Mrs. Käsebier 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 artists circle.

Brenda Putnam, the sculptress who has recently won such great fame with her work says that without Mrs. Käsebier's 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. Käseher. Many a time she has helped him over rough spots ^{and} 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. Käseher.

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. Käsebie's photographs are my dearest treasures."

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