

Lowe file

7 Feb. 77  
(WRITTEN AT THE REQUEST  
OF ROBERT MIKKEL, CABOCHON)

KATE ARMOUR/LOWREY/REED

I only saw Kate here in the flesh twice, but she left an indelible print on my life. Which I believe was true also of every person who knew her.

As a young child, anticipation had built high when she was to visit our Ninette, Manitoba farm home, known as "Broadlands", for the first time. The legend - the writer of letters and sender of parcels - was actually coming in person! And we were not disappointed.

Being only fifteen years younger than my grandmother, her Aunt Fanny (Clench) Lowe, a close bond had always existed between them. She had been bridesmaid to her Aunt Fanny at her marriage in December, 1868.

I can see "Aunt" Kate still, sitting in Gran Lowe's rocker, (probably with fond memories of the aunt who had so often sat there) with we children gathered round while she explained that since she was considered as something of a Fairy Godmother in our eyes, she had not wanted to disappoint us by falling short of that image, so she had come decked in a long rope of amber beads and several other pieces of jewellery. Such adornment, I later learned, was quite out of keeping with her real character. I also learned years later that she was considered a Fairy Godmother by many others also.

It was her emerald ring which particularly fascinated me, not so much because of its appearance as by the delightful romance of the story behind it. It had been made especially for her as a gift from her first husband, Grosvenor Porter Lowrey, who had been patent lawyer to Thomas Alva Edison. A cabochon emerald was held in place, not by the conventional claws, but by tiny gold pansies - "Aunt" Kate's favorite flower.

The Reed's summer home in St. Andrews, N.B., opposite the Algonquin Hotel, with its shingle-thatch roof and lovely Norman tower was named "Pansy Patch" in honour of her favorite flower. She also is reputed to have had pansies embroidered on her gowns. Wherever she lived, mottoes were carved, and the gate at Pansy Patch bears this inscription:

"Pull the string and lift the latch.  
Friend, you are welcome at Pansy Patch."

It was on that visit to our Manitoba home that we were asked to drop the more heavy form of address of "Cousin Kate" in favour of "Aunt" Kate. I later learned that she was a courtesy aunt to many more besides ourselves.

"Aunt" Kate had earned her fairy godmother status through her strong affection for my grandmother and her admiration of my very courageous mother, whose problems she greatly lessened by collecting clothing outgrown by her friend's children, and promptly mailing it off to us. Those parcels meant Christmas repeated oft in the year. Mother usually left the excitement of opening them for us when we returned.

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from school. Oh! How many of those stumpy half-hitches and square knots our fingers undo! (For no one threw away a good core in those days - it was carefully wound on a ball for future use.) In fact, I tie parcels today in exactly the same way!

It also was on this visit that she told us of a delightful story of an attempt to convert her to spiritualism. Not a likely candidate for the occult, a special seance had been arranged for her. The medium asked if there was anyone with whom she wished to communicate, and she replied, "Yes. My brother Stuart." Presently the medium said, "Your brother 'Stoort' is here." "Oh, no he's not!" exclaimed "Aunt" Kate. "He would NEVER allow his name to be pronounced that way!" A bit ruffled but still polite, the medium asked whether there was anyone else with whom she wished to speak. "Aunt" Kate asked for her father - the signified Chief Justice of Ontario. Soon the medium came through with "Your father says, 'Dearie! I'm so glad to see you!'" "Aunt" Kate's reply, "Oh Father! How you have changed," broke up the seance.

When she visited us the second time, it was at Kayter Farm (the name a contraction of the names Kate and Hayter - a name perpetuated forever, I hope, in my brother's line of purebred Hereford cattle) at Wawanessa, Manitoba. I was old enough then to more fully appreciate her ~~uniqueness~~ uniqueness. And to better understand the many anecdotes already part of the legend.

Kate Reed was a magnificently handsome woman. She did not walk - she sailed. She must have dominated in every group, not from intent but by sheer vigour and dynamism of interest.

I can so easily picture the scene in the railway station in Winnipeg where she is said to have discovered a woman in tears. The woman with her children, was emigrating to her new home on the prairies and was to have been met in Winnipeg by her husband. He was not there, and her funds were exhausted. It took but a moment for "Aunt" Kate to sweep off the hat of the nearest man, pass it amongst the other travellers and dump the contents in the woman's lap - enough to see her through the crisis.

Without plumbing, it was customary for the farm hostess to act as chambermaid to the guest room. Not so with "Aunt" Kate! I shall never forget seeing her stride out into the yard, chamberpot in hand, to throw its contents in a wide arc over the flowers, because it was good for them!

She asked me to accompany her in a walk higher up the hill where a splendid view could be had. On glancing down at her legs, I was amused to see that she was wearing one silk and one lisle stocking! But I was not surprised, for this was part of the legend - a woman much above anything petty or small. And I believe that incident had a great bearing on my own emotional growth, helping to leave behind teenage self-consciousness.

Laughing at herself, she told me of an incident in her own girlhood which I love. She had been invited by Lord and Lady Aberdeen to



be a guest at Rideau Hall. Her first time away from home, she became ~~so~~ desperately homesick. So she wrote her mother to please write to Lasy Aberdeen that she must return home to Cobourg immediately. By the time her mother's letter reached Rideau Hall, the homesickness was past and she was having a glorious time! But she was "hoist on her own petard" and had dutifully, to return home. Without knowing it, she had taught me to understand homesickness - its acuteness, its lack of selectivity and its transience. In fact, so much of what she said and what she was, encouraged others to grow.

She told my mother once, that she had encouraged her own children to mentally stand themselves across the room and see themselves through the eyes of others. I think that this enabled me to be more objective about my own strengths and weaknesses. Without actually fingering a fault, she pointed a goal.

There was not much in the farmer's social sphere to help us maintain our family background. I well remember having letters corrected when there was a spelling or grammatical error. Softening the rebuke would be a newspaper clipping from the social pages with margin annotated, "These are your kin," thus planting the responsibility of living up to our heritage. Her criticism did not wound, for it pointed the avenue for growth at the same time that it pruned. I can well comprehend a comment by her nephew, Stuart Armour of Hamilton, made in a letter to me, "I received a great part of my non-scholastic education at the hands of Kate Reed."

Another story she told us on the visit to Kayter was of passing through Customs once at the border, where she was asked whether she had anything to declare. She replied that her luggage contained only clothing. On opening the bag, the Customs officer triumphantly came up with a bottle of whiskey. "And what article of clothing is this, May I ask?" he said. "Why, a nighcap, of course," quipped "Aunt" Kate.

"Uncle" Hayter loved puns, and the play upon words in a Limerick was very pleasing to his spouse. She regaled us at the dinner table with Limericks, a couple of which are still favorites:

1. There was a young fellow named Willie,  
Whose actions were exceedingly silly.  
He went to the ball, dressed in nothing at all,  
Intending to represent Chili!
2. There was an old man from Nantucket  
Who kept gold coins in a bucket.  
His daughter named Nan ran away with a man,  
And as for the bucket, Nantucket!

My dad told us that after the death of her first husband, Grosvenor Lowrey, "Aunt" Kate moved to Ottawa to be near her former suitor, Hayter Reed, now a widower. One day her son Jack was very insistent that he must see his mother right away. On being told that he could not - that she was engaged, he piped up, "Then I know whom she is engaged to - it's Hayter Reed!"



She once sent my mother a framed poem, entitled "The Ordinary Woman." One part I remember:

"Things she will bake may help to make,  
Saints and sages and statesmen too."

On the reverse she had written, "To Gertie - no ordinary woman!" My mother was quite amused at the somewhat left-handedness of the dedication after the complimentary vein of the poem, had she interpreted it literally.

The Reeds were responsible for sending my brother, Aubrey, to boarding school for several years. Looking back, I can see that it was those years at St. John's College, Winnipeg which helped shape the fine man he was. I suspect there were many more such beneficiaries who never knew about each other, for "Philanthropy" must have been Kate Reed's middle name, for which she sought no recognition.

Someone once rebuked her for allowing her generosity to be imposed upon. She thought a moment and then replied, "Yes. I know that I often am taken advantage of, but when I become so hard that I no longer can be imposed upon, it is time I died."

Her letters all show the haste with which they were written, for there would never be enough time for all the things Kate Reed could see to do. I'm told she often had several letters on the go at once, and did not necessarily finish them on the day begun. She used the numeral rather than the spelled word. And she always used the ampersand. And she ignored paragraphs. It also was her habit to write a birthday letter on the day of the birthday, so the person would know they had been thought about on their natal day itself.

Her sampler collection was the subject of an article in the Canadian Homes magazine. She herself did beautiful scenes with her needle. But her mending was atrocious! This, no doubt was due to the transitory usefulness of the task, and because it took her away from the ~~tasks~~ occupations which more fully utilized her talents.

When she died in London of typhoid fever contracted in France, her daughter Grace (Lowrey) Daly of Ottawa sent us the newspaper accounts with the marginal plea, "Write us, Gertie. We are Desolate!" Which is, I think, the best description of the gap her death left in the heart of every person whose life she had touched.

Her headstone in Mount Royal cemetery is a Georgian sundial inscribed with the words, "Time flies, you say? Alas! Time stays - 'tis we who go."

*Jessie J. Lowe*

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