AT THE FOOT OF THE RAINBOW

GENE STRATTON-PORTER

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GENE STRATTON-PORTER - A LITTLE STORY OF HER LIFE AND WORK

For several years Doubleday, Page & Company have been receiving repeated requests for information about the life and books of Gene Stratton-Porter. Her fascinating nature work with bird, flower, and moth, and the natural wonders of the Limberlost Swamp, made famous as the scene of her nature romances, all have stirred much curiosity among readers everywhere.

Mrs. Porter did not possess what has been called "an aptitude for personal publicity." Indeed, up to the present, she has discouraged quite successfully any attempt to stress the personal note. It is practically impossible, however, to do the kind of work she has done—to make genuine contributions to natural science by her wonderful field work among birds, insects, and flowers, and then, through her romances, to bring several hundred thousands of people to love and understand nature in a way they never did before—without arousing a legitimate interest in her own history, her ideals, her methods of work, and all that underlies the structure of her unusual achievement.

Her publishers have felt the pressure of this growing interest and it was at their request that she furnished the data for a biographical sketch that was to be written of her. But when this actually came to hand, the present compiler found that the author had told a story so much more interesting than anything he could write of her, that it became merely a question of how little need be added.

The following pages are therefore adapted from what might be styled the personal record of Gene Stratton-Porter. This will account for the very intimate picture of family life in the Middle West for some years following the Civil War.

Mark Stratton, the father of Gene Stratton-Porter, described his wife, at the time of their marriage, as a "ninety-pound bit of pink porcelain, pink as a wild rose, plump as a partridge, having a big rope of bright brown hair, never ill a day in her life, and bearing the loveliest name ever given a woman—Mary." He further added that "God fashioned her heart to be gracious, her body to be the mother of children, and as her especial gift of Grace, he put Flower Magic into her fingers." Mary Stratton was the mother of twelve lusty babies, all of whom she reared past eight years of age, losing two a little over that, through an attack of scarlet fever with whooping cough; too ugly a combination for even such a wonderful mother as she. With this brood on her hands she found time to keep an immaculate house, to set a table renowned in her part of the state, to entertain with unfailing hospitality all who came to her door, to beautify her home with such means as she could command, to embroider and fashion clothing by hand for her children; but her great gift was conceded by all to be the making of things to grow. At that she was wonderful. She started dainty little vines and climbing plants from tiny seeds she found in rice and coffee. Rooted things she soaked in water, rolled in fine sand, planted according to habit, and they almost never failed to justify her expectations. She even grew trees and shrubs from slips and cuttings no one else would have thought of trying to cultivate, her last resort being to cut a slip diagonally, insert the lower end in a small potato, and plant as if rooted. And it nearly always grew!

There is a shaft of white stone standing at her head in a cemetery that belonged to her on a corner of her husband's land; but to Mrs. Porter's mind her mother's real monument is a cedar of Lebanon which she set in the manner described above. The cedar tops the brow of a little hill crossing the grounds. She carried two slips from Ohio, where they were given to her by a man who had brought

the trees as tiny things from the holy Land. She planted both in this way, one in her dooryard and one in her cemetery. The tree on the hill stands thirty feet tall now, topping all others, and has a trunk two feet in circumference.

Mrs. Porter's mother was of Dutch extraction, and like all Dutch women she worked her special magic with bulbs, which she favoured above other flowers. Tulips, daffodils, star flowers, lilies, dahlias, little bright hyacinths, that she called "blue bells," she dearly loved. From these she distilled exquisite perfume by putting clusters, & time of perfect bloom, in bowls lined with freshly made, unsalted butter, covering them closely, and cutting the few drops of extract thus obtained with alcohol. "She could do more different things," says the author, "and finish them all in a greater degree of perfection than any other woman I have ever known. If I were limited to one adjective in describing her, 'capable' would be the word."

The author's father was descended from a long line of ancestors of British blood. He was named for, and traced his origin to, that first Mark Stratton who lived in New York, married the famous beauty, Anne Hutchinson, and settled on Stratton Island, afterward corrupted to Staten, according to family tradition. From that point back for generations across the sea he followed his line to the family of Strattons of which the Earl of Northbrooke is the present head. To his British traditions and the customs of his family, Mark Stratton clung with rigid tenacity, never swerving from his course a particle under the influence of environment or association. All his ideas were clear-cut; no man could influence him against his better judgment. He believed in God, in courtesy, in honour, and cleanliness, in beauty, and in education. He used to say that he would rather see a child of his the author of a book of which he could be proud, than on the throne of England, which was the strongest way he knew to express himself. His very first

earnings he spent for a book; when other men rested, he read; all his life he was a student of extraordinarily tenacious memory. He especially loved history: Rollands, Wilson's Outlines, Hume, Macauley, Gibbon, Prescott, and Bancroft, he could quote from all of them paragraphs at a time contrasting the views of different writers on a given event, and remembering dates with unfailing accuracy. "He could repeat the entire Bible," says Mrs. Stratton-Porter, "giving chapters and verses, save the books of Generations; these he said 'were a waste of gray matter to learn.' I never knew him to fail in telling where any verse quoted to him was to be found in the Bible." And she adds: "I was almost afraid to make these statements, although there are many living who can corroborate them, until John Muir published the story of his boyhood days, and in it I found the history of such rearing as was my father's, told of as the customary thing among the children of Muir's time; and I have referred many inquirers as to whether this feat were possible, to the Muir book."

All his life, with no thought of fatigue or of inconvenience to himself, Mark Stratton travelled miles uncounted to share what he had learned with those less fortunately situated, by delivering sermons, lectures, talks on civic improvement and politics. To him the love of God could be shown so genuinely in no other way as in the love of his fellowmen. He worshipped beauty: beautiful faces, souls, hearts, beautiful landscapes, trees, animals, flowers. He loved colour: rich, bright colour, and every variation down to the faintest shadings. He was especially fond of red, and the author carefully keeps a cardinal silk handkerchief that he was carrying when stricken with apoplexy at the age of seventy-eight. "It was so like him," she comments, "to have that scrap of vivid colour in his pocket. He never was too busy to fertilize a flower bed or to dig holes for the setting of a tree or bush. A word constantly on his lips was 'tidy.' It applied equally to a woman, a house, a field, or a barn lot.

He had a streak of genius in his make-up: the genius of large appreciation. Over inspired Biblical passages, over great books, over sunlit landscapes, over a white violet abloom in deep shade, over a heroic deed of man, I have seen his brow light up, his eyes shine."

Mrs. Porter tells us that her father was constantly reading aloud to his children and to visitors descriptions of the great deeds of men. Two "hair-raisers" she especially remembers with increased heart-beats to this day were the story of John Maynard, who piloted a burning boat to safety while he slowly roasted at the wheel. She says the old thrill comes back when she recalls the inflection of her father's voice as he would cry in imitation of the captain: "John Maynard!" and then give the reply. "Aye, aye, sir!" His other until it sank to a mere gasp: favourite was the story of Clemanthe, and her lover's immortal answer to her question: "Shall we meet again?"

To this mother at forty-six, and this father at fifty, each at intellectual top-notch, every faculty having been stirred for years by the dire stress of Civil War, and the period immediately following, the author was born. From childhood she recalls "thinking things which she felt should be saved," and frequently tugging at her mother's skirts and begging her to "set down" what the child considered stories and poems. Most of these were some big fact in nature that thrilled her, usually expressed in Biblical terms; for the Bible was read twice a day before the family and helpers, and an average of three services were attended on Sunday.

Mrs. Porter says that her first all-alone effort was printed in wabbly letters on the fly-leaf of an old grammar. It was entitled: "Ode to the Moon." "Not," she comments, "that I had an idea what an 'ode' was, other than that I had heard it discussed in the family together with different forms of poetic expression. The spelling must have been by proxy:

but I did know the words I used, what they meant, and the idea I was trying to convey.

"No other farm was ever quite so lovely as the one on which I was born after this father and mother had spent twenty-five years beautifying it," says the author. It was called "Hopewell" after the home of some of her father's British ancestors. The natural location was perfect, the land rolling and hilly, with several flowing springs and little streams crossing it in three directions, while plenty of forest still remained. The days of pioneer struggles were past. The roads were smooth and level as floors, the house and barn commodious; the family rode abroad in a double carriage trimmed in patent leather, drawn by a matched team of gray horses, and sometimes the father "speeded a little" for the delight of the children. "We had comfortable clothing," says Mrs. Porter, "and were getting our joy from life without that pinch of anxiety which must have existed in the beginning, although I know that father and mother always held steady, and took a large measure of joy from life in passing."

Her mother's health, which always had been perfect, broke about the time of the author's first remembrance due to typhoid fever contracted after nursing three of her children through it. She lived for several years, but with continual suffering, amounting at times to positive torture.

So it happened, that led by impulse and aided by an escape from the training given her sisters, instead of "sitting on a cushion and sewing a fine seam"—the threads of the fabric had to be counted and just so many allowed to each stitch!—this youngest child of a numerous household spent her waking hours with the wild. She followed her father and the boys afield, and when tired out slept on their coats in fence corners, often awaking with shy creatures peering into her face. She wandered where she pleased, amusing herself with birds, flowers, insects, and plays she invented. "By the day," writes the author, "I trotted from

one object which attracted me to another, singing a little song of made-up phrases about everything I saw while I waded catching fish, chasing butterflies over clover fields, or following a bird with a hair in its beak; much of the time I carried the inevitable baby for a woman-child, frequently improvised from an ear of corn in the silk, wrapped in catalpa leaf blankets."

She had a corner of the garden under a big Bartlett pear tree for her very own, and each spring she began by planting radishes and lettuce when the gardening was done; and before these had time to sprout she set the same beds full of spring flowers, and so followed out the season. She made special pets of the birds, locating nest after nest, and immediately projecting herself into the daily life of the occupants. "No one," she says, "ever taught me more than that the birds were useful, a gift of God for our protection from insect pests on fruit and crops; and a gift of Grace in their beauty and music, things to be rigidly protected. From this cue I evolved the idea myself that I must be extremely careful, for had not my father tied a 'kerchief over my mouth when he lifted me for a peep into the nest of the humming-bird, and did he not walk softly and whisper when he approached the spot? So I stepped lightly, made no noise, and watched until I knew what a mother bird fed her young before I began dropping bugs, worms, crumbs, and fruit into little red mouths that opened at my tap on the nest quite as readily as at the touch of the feet of the mother bird."

In the nature of this child of the out-of-doors there ran a fibre of care for wild things. It was instinct with her to go slowly, to touch lightly, to deal lovingly with every living thing: flower, moth, bird, or animal. She never gathered great handfuls of frail wild flowers, carried them an hour and threw them away. If she picked any, she took only a few, mostly to lay on her mother's pillow—for she had a habit of drawing comfort from a cinnamon pink or a trillium

laid where its delicate fragrance reached her with every breath. "I am quite sure," Mrs. Porter writes, "that I never in my life, in picking flowers, dragged up the plant by the roots, as I frequently saw other people do. I was taught from infancy to CUT a bloom I wanted. My regular habit was to lift one plant of each kind, especially if it were a species new to me, and set it in my wild-flower garden."

To the birds and flowers the child added moths and butterflies, because she saw them so frequently, the brilliance of colour in yard and garden attracting more than could be found elsewhere. So she grew with the wild, loving, studying, giving all her time. "I fed butterflies sweetened water and rose leaves inside the screen of a cellar window," Mrs. Porter tells us; "doctored all the sick and wounded birds and animals the men brought me from afield; made pets of the baby squirrels and rabbits they carried in for my amusement; collected wild flowers; and as I grew older, gathered arrow points and goose quills for sale in Fort Wayne. So I had the first money I ever earned."

Her father and mother had strong artistic tendencies, although they would have scoffed at the idea themselves, yet the manner in which they laid off their fields, the home they built, the growing things they preserved, the way they planted, the life they led, all go to prove exactly that thing. Their bush—and vine-covered fences crept around the acres they owned in a strip of gaudy colour; their orchard lay in a valley, a square of apple trees in the centre widely bordered by peach, so that it appeared at bloom time like a great pink-bordered white blanket on the face of earth. Swale they might have drained, and would not, made sheets of blue flag, marigold and buttercups. From the home you could not look in any direction without seeing a picture of beauty.

"Last spring," the author writes in a recent letter, "I went back with my mind fully made up to buy that land at any reasonable price, restore it to the exact condition in which I

knew it as a child, and finish my life there. I found that the house had been burned, killing all the big trees set by my mother's hands immediately surrounding it. The hills were shorn and ploughed down, filling and obliterating the creeks and springs. Most of the forest had been cut, and stood in corn. My old catalpa in the fence corner beside the road and the Bartlett pear under which I had my wild-flower garden were all that was left of the dooryard, while a few gnarled apple trees remained of the orchard, which had been reset in another place. The garden had been moved, also the lanes; the one creek remaining out of three crossed the meadow at the foot of the orchard. It flowed a sickly current over a dredged bed between bare, straight banks. The whole place seemed worse than a dilapidated graveyard to me. All my love and ten times the money I had at command never could have put back the face of nature as I knew it on that land."

As a child the author had very few books, only three of her own outside of school books. "The markets did not afford the miracles common with the children of today," she adds. "Books are now so numerous, so cheap, and so bewildering in colour and make-up, that I sometimes think our children are losing their perspective and caring for none of them as I loved my few plain little ones filled with short story and poem, almost no illustration. I had a treasure house in the school books of my elders, especially the McGuffey series of Readers from One to Six. For pictures I was driven to the Bible, dictionary, historical works read by my father, agricultural papers, and medical books about cattle and sheep.

"Near the time of my mother's passing we moved from Hopewell to the city of Wabash in order that she might have constant medical attention, and the younger children better opportunities for schooling. Here we had magazines and more books in which I was interested. The one volume in which my heart was enwrapt was a collection of

masterpieces of fiction belonging to my eldest sister. It contained 'Paul and Virginia,' 'Undine,' 'Picciola,' 'The Vicar of Wakefield,' 'Pilgrim's Progress,' and several others I soon learned by heart, and the reading and rereading of those exquisitely expressed and conceived stories may have done much in forming high conceptions of what really constitutes literature and in furthering the lofty ideals instilled by my parents. One of these stories formed the basis of my first publicly recognized literary effort."

Reared by people who constantly pointed out every natural beauty, using it wherever possible to drive home a precept, the child lived out-of-doors with the wild almost entirely. If she reported promptly three times a day when the bell rang at meal time, with enough clothing to constitute a decent covering, nothing more was asked until the Sabbath. To be taken from such freedom, her feet shod, her body restricted by as much clothing as ever had been worn on Sunday, shut up in a schoolroom, and set to droning over books, most of which she detested, was the worst punishment ever inflicted upon her she declares. She hated mathematics in any form and spent all her time on natural science, language, and literature. "Friday afternoon," writes Mrs. Porter, "was always taken up with an exercise called 'rhetoricals,' a misnomer as a rule, but let that pass. Each week pupils of one of the four years furnished entertainment for the assembled high school and faculty. Our subjects were always assigned, and we cordially disliked them. This particular day I was to have a paper on 'Mathematical Law.'

"I put off the work until my paper had been called for several times, and so came to Thursday night with excuses and not a line. I was told to bring my work the next morning without fail. I went home in hot anger. Why in all this beautiful world, would they not allow me to do something I could do, and let any one of four members of my class who revelled in mathematics do my subject? That

evening I was distracted. 'I can't do a paper on mathematics, and I won't!' I said stoutly; 'but I'll do such a paper on a subject I can write about as will open their foolish eyes and make them see how wrong they are.'"

Before me on the table lay the book I loved, the most wonderful story in which was 'Picciola' by Saintine. Instantly I began to write. Breathlessly I wrote for hours. I exceeded our limit ten times over. The poor Italian Count, the victim of political offences, shut by Napoleon from the wonderful grounds, mansion, and life that were his, restricted to the bare prison walls of Fenestrella, deprived of books and writing material, his one interest in life became a sprout of green, sprung, no doubt, from a seed dropped by a passing bird, between the stone flagging of the prison yard before his window. With him I had watched over it through all the years since I first had access to the book; with him I had prayed for it. I had broken into a cold sweat of fear when the jailer first menaced it; I had hated the wind that bent it roughly, and implored the sun. I had sung a paean of joy at its budding, and worshipped in awe before its thirty perfect blossoms. The Count had named it 'Picciola'—the little one—to me also it was a personal possession. That night we lived the life of our 'little one' over again, the Count and I, and never were our anxieties and our joys more poignant.

"Next morning," says Mrs. Porter, "I dared my crowd to see how long they could remain on the grounds, and yet reach the assembly room before the last toll of the bell. This scheme worked. Coming in so late the principal opened exercises without remembering my paper. Again, at noon, I was as late as I dared be, and I escaped until near the close of the exercises, through which I sat in cold fear. When my name was reached at last the principal looked at me inquiringly and then announced my inspiring mathematical subject. I arose, walked to the front, and made my best bow. Then I said: 'I waited until yesterday

because I knew absolutely nothing about my subject'—the audience laughed—'and I could find nothing either here or in the library at home, so last night I reviewed Saintine's masterpiece, "Picciola."'

"Then instantly I began to read. I was almost paralyzed at my audacity, and with each word I expected to hear a terse little interruption. Imagine my amazement when I heard at the end of the first page: 'Wait a minute!' Of course I waited, and the principal left the room. A moment later she reappeared accompanied by the superintendent of the city schools. 'Begin again,' she said. 'Take your time.'

"I was too amazed to speak. Then thought came in a rush. My paper was good. It was as good as I had believed it. It was better than I had known. I did go on! We took that assembly room and the corps of teachers into our confidence, the Count and I, and told them all that was in our hearts about a little flower that sprang between the paving stones of a prison yard. The Count and I were free spirits. From the book I had learned that. He got into political trouble through it, and I had got into mathematical trouble, and we told our troubles. One instant the room was in laughter, the next the boys bowed their heads, and the girls who had forgotten their handkerchiefs cried in their aprons. For almost sixteen big foolscap pages I held them, and I was eager to go on and tell them more about it when I reached the last line. Never again was a subject forced upon me."

After this incident of her schooldays, what had been inclination before was aroused to determination and the child neglected her lessons to write. A volume of crude verse fashioned after the metre of Meredith's "Lucile," a romantic book in rhyme, and two novels were the fruits of this youthful ardour. Through the sickness and death of a sister, the author missed the last three months of school, but, she remarks, "unlike my schoolmates, I studied harder after leaving school than ever before and in a manner that

did me real good. The most that can be said of what education I have is that it is the very best kind in the world for me; the only possible kind that would not ruin a person of my inclinations. The others of my family had been to college; I always have been too thankful for words that circumstances intervened which saved my brain from being run through a groove in company with dozens of others of widely different tastes and mentality. What small measure of success I have had has come through preserving my individual point of view, method of expression, and following in after life the Spartan regulations of my girlhood home. Whatever I have been able to do, has been done through the line of education my father saw fit to give me, and through his and my mother's methods of rearing me.

"My mother went out too soon to know, and my father never saw one of the books; but he knew I was boiling and bubbling like a yeast jar in July over some literary work, and if I timidly slipped to him with a composition, or a faulty poem, he saw good in it, and made suggestions for its betterment. When I wanted to express something in colour, he went to an artist, sketched a design for an easel, personally superintended the carpenter who built it, and provided tuition. On that same easel I painted the water colours for 'Moths of the Limberlost,' and one of the most poignant regrets of my life is that he was not there to see them, and to know that the easel which he built through his faith in me was finally used in illustrating a book.

"If I thought it was music through which I could express myself, he paid for lessons and detected hidden ability that should be developed. Through the days of struggle he stood fast; firm in his belief in me. He was half the battle. It was he who demanded a physical standard that developed strength to endure the rigours of scientific field and darkroom work, and the building of ten books in ten years, five of which were on nature subjects, having my own

illustrations, and five novels, literally teeming with natural history, true to nature. It was he who demanded of me from birth the finishing of any task I attempted and who taught me to cultivate patience to watch and wait, even years, if necessary, to find and secure material I wanted. It was he who daily lived before me the life of exactly such a man as I portrayed in 'The Harvester,' and who constantly used every atom of brain and body power to help and to encourage all men to do the same."

Marriage, a home of her own, and a daughter for a time filled the author's hands, but never her whole heart and brain. The book fever lay dormant a while, and then it became a compelling influence. It dominated the life she lived, the cabin she designed for their home, and the books she read. When her daughter was old enough to go to school, Mrs. Porter's time came. Speaking of this period, she says: "I could not afford a maid, but I was very strong, vital to the marrow, and I knew how to manage life to make it meet my needs, thanks to even the small amount I had seen of my mother. I kept a cabin of fourteen rooms, and kept it immaculate. I made most of my daughter's clothes, I kept a conservatory in which there bloomed from three to six hundred bulbs every winter, tended a house of canaries and linnets, and cooked and washed dishes besides three times a day. In my spare time (mark the word, there was time to spare else the books never would have been written and the pictures made) I mastered photography to such a degree that the manufacturers of one of our finest brands of print paper once sent the manager of their factory to me to learn how I handled it. He frankly said that they could obtain no such results with it as I did. He wanted to see my darkroom, examine my paraphernalia, and have me tell him exactly how I worked. As I was using the family bathroom for a darkroom and washing negatives and prints on turkey platters in the kitchen, I was rather put to it when it came to giving an exhibition. It was scarcely my fault if men