

## *Harriet Maxwell Converse*

Mrs. Harriet Maxwell Converse, an adopted member and honorary chief of the New York State Iroquois Indians, the only woman who has ever held this unique position.

There are two kinds of happiness — the happiness of the heart and the happiness of the mind. And the greater of these is the happiness of the heart, which is love. It can be manifested in its supremest sense only between one man and one woman. Some women there are who go through the world without having fully lived, because they have never found

this, its pearl of greatest price. Others there are who, thinking they have found it, see the gem which they have treasured lose its lustre and turn to a mere worthless bauble in the casket of their affections. And this is the greatest anguish.

But there are women—glad and joyous women—to whom this unspeakable happiness is given to have and to hold so long as life lasts, and even, I believe, beyond the dark river of death. I thank God that I belong to these fortunate ones. My husband was my lover always. And we were comrades and chums besides. Wherever he went, I went. Our pleasures were always shared. I hunted and fished with him and played billiards with him. Whatever interested me



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also interested him. My devotion to the Indians he warmly seconded, and together we have spent many a care-free holiday on the reservations, among these people of my adoption.

My happiest day was the day I became the sweetheart of the man whom I married. But I cannot tell when that day was, for our romance goes back almost as far as I can remember. We were child-lovers from the time that I was five years old, and I was a bride at fourteen. Of that happiness I cannot speak further. It is a sacred thing.

The happiness of the mind finds expression in the event which causes us the greatest pride. This happiest day came to me when, on September 18th, 1891, I was made a chief of the New York State Iroquois Indians, in the Seneca tribe. I am the only woman ever so honored. Ga-ie-wa-noh, they have called me, "she who watches over her people." The name was given me for the work which I have been enabled to do in watching over the Indians' legislative interests at Albany. I love these people as if they were of my own blood. My grandfather they also took among them; Red Jacket, of the Senecas, adopting him in 1790 as his brother. Nothing in the world am I more proud of than the tie that binds me to the Indian. It is more to me than the family crest and old baronial castle in Scotland, where the Maxwells are descended from the first Lord Chamberlain of that country.

[Since granting the foregoing interview, Mrs. Converse has passed into the Great Beyond, to join the husband who was her devoted lover of a lifetime. They were not long separated. His death occurred on September 5th and hers on November 18th, and under exactly similar circumstances.

On an evening in October I sat with her among her Indian curios, in the little room which was her home, and she was telling me, "It was right in the doorway here that my dearly beloved husband dropped dead two weeks since. It was a blow that came without the slightest premonition. Now I do not know how I am to live alone. We have been all the world to each other."

In the same room Mrs. Converse herself was found dead a little more than two months later, and the physicians called it apoplexy, in medical terms, but in reality she died from a broken heart.

Six nations of Indians mourn the loss of her—their great White Chief. She had devoted to their interests her life as well as her fortune, the latter having been left her by her father, Congressman Maxwell. She was born sixty-eight years ago at Elmira, her grandfather having owned nearly all of the land on which the city now stands. He was an Indian trader, whose upright dealings with the red men endeared him to them, and finally led to

his adoption into the tribe of Red Jacket. His and his granddaughter were later similarly adopted. In 1891, Mrs. Converse was made a chief of the Nations, because of her successful effort in denouncing the Whipple bill, aimed at curtailing their rights.

Her marriage to Franklin Converse occurred in 1849. They eventually came to Mott Haven, New York, to live. John G. Whittier was their intimate friend, and encouraged Mrs. Converse in her poetical work. She wrote under the *noms de plume* "Musidora" and "Salome." She was also a journalist, and at the time of her death was a writer for the *New York Sun*. She was known throughout the country as a lecturer and the best authority on Indian subjects. She knew the Indians as well as any other living white man or woman has ever known them. She dwelt with them on their reservation for months at a time. New York State now at Albany the greater part of her collection of Indian relics—the most complete in existence.]



Grace Van St