



American Queen: The Rise and Fall of Kate Chase Sprague--Civil War "'Belle of the North'" and Gilded Age Woman of Scandal

By John Oller

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Had *People* magazine been around during the Civil War and after, Kate Chase would have made its “Most Beautiful” and “Most Intriguing” lists every year. The charismatic daughter of Salmon P. Chase, Lincoln’s treasury secretary, Kate Chase enjoyed unprecedented political power for a woman. As her widowed father’s hostess, she set up a rival “court” against Mary Lincoln in hopes of making her father president and herself his First Lady. To facilitate that goal, she married one of the richest men in the country, the handsome “boy governor” of Rhode Island, in the social event of the Civil War. She moved easily between the worlds of high fashion, adorning herself in the most regal Parisian gowns, and politics, managing her father’s presidential campaigns. “No Queen has ever reigned under the Stars and Stripes,” one newspaper would write, “but this remarkable woman came closer to being a Queen than any American woman has.”

But when William Sprague turned out to be less of a prince as a husband, Kate found comfort in the arms of a powerful married senator. The ensuing sex scandal ended her virtual royalty; after the marriage crumbled and the money disappeared, she was left only with her children and her ever-proud bearing. She became a social outcast and died in poverty, yet in her final years she would find both greater authenticity and the inner peace that had always eluded her.

Kate Chase’s dramatic story is one of ambition and tragedy, set against the seductive allure of the Civil War and Gilded Age, involving some of the most famous personalities in American history. In this beautifully written and meticulously researched biography, drawing on much unpublished material, John Oller captures the extraordinary life of a woman who was a century ahead of her time.



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