



Maud Hart and Delos Wheeler
Lovelace Family Papers.

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Maud Palmer Hart,

905 West 25th Street,

Minneapolis, Minnesota.

Rose of the Wilderness

By Maud Palmer Hart.

Rose crept cautiously out of the back end of the covered wagon, with a battered and well nigh toothless comb in her hand and a fresh but ragged towel slung over her shoulder. She slid softly to the ground and stood there, blinking a little at the glory of the morning. The birds made a joyous clamor; dawn streaked the sky with splendid color; dew brightened the green of the overhanging live oak trees, the encompassing shrubs, the sparse grass. It was all in such riotous contrast to the covered wagon, from which she had just emerged, to the closeness, the dimness and her father's heavy breathing. Rose moved quietly, for it was very early and her father still asleep.

She walked slowly down the gentle slope. The camping ground was a little valley, hardly more than a hollow, swung like a hammock between two tiers of foothills. There are countless tiers of foothills and countless hidden valleys between the blue of the Pacific and the blue of

those jagged mountains which barricade the West. A little stream trickled with mid-August languor through a narrow channel in the wide and sun parched bed that in winter time it flooded. It caught its quota of gorgeous color from the flushed sky above it and trembled like a rosy ribbon on the bosom of the valley.

Rose sat down on the bank and attacked with the unworthy comb the soft mass of golden brown hair which rippled to her waist. She arranged it Marguerite wise, though I must confess that she had never heard of Marguerite. She washed her hands and face in the stream and rubbed the cheeks to a glow with the tattered towel. Her waving hair was golden brown, her liquid eyes were golden brown, her skin had been tanned by the sun till it was a soft golden brown also. Her smooth young cheeks were pink and her tender mouth a vivid crimson. Her clean calico dress which had once been red had faded pleasantly.

Having spread the towel on the grass to dry and tossed the comb to the center of it to keep it from blowing away, she yawned and stretched her arms above her head and set about her task of making fire. She had collected the dried roots the night before, and a little fire was soon crackling merrily. The heat was grateful, for the chill of early morning still hung upon the world,

and presently the cheerful smell of coffee drifted forth.

A stomping and champing arose among the mules which were tethered near by. Rose, who was kneeling beside the fire, looked up to speak to them. She discovered that their peaceful grazing had been disturbed by a small dog who now came trotting toward her with that indescribable air of efficiency that only terriers have. He paused at her feet, cocked an eager head, fixed her with anxious brown eyes and barked sharply. Then he dashed back in the direction from which he had come. He looked around to see whether she was following him and, upon discovering that she was not, he stopped and barked again. Rose was conversant with the ways of dogs.

"Yes suh," she called out pleasantly, shifting the coffee pot to a place of safety, and sprang to her feet.

He led her up the extremely steep and rocky path, and along the rolling sandy crest of hill. There vegetation was scanty and progress easy. The fresh wind of morning ruffled her hair and made sails of her skirts. She hurried after her guide. At last he made a spurt, barking excitedly. She broke into a run. A man was lying, face down, beside a great gray boulder.

Rose slipped to the ground beside him. He was slim and young. Gently and fearlessly, she slid her hands un-

derneath his shoulders. He stirred and muttered at her touch. She spoke to him quickly, but he answered with an incoherent mumble. The little dog stood over them, rigid but alert. The man turned to his side with a restless jerk. His hair was tumbled, his cheeks were flushed, his eyes were bright with fever. He had slender sensitive features and his ~~tann~~ hands, though tanned, were delicate city hands. They were knotted about a crumpled newspaper.

With a little croon of pity, Rose put her arms around him and helped him to his feet. He reeled and leaned against her heavily.

"I'm all right. Never mind me," he said dazedly.

"You come this way," she coaxed. She spoke with the soft drawl of a Texan.

They set out for the camp. Rose supported him, and their steps were slow. The dog whisked ahead of them along the windy summit and adown the rugged path. Little tender exclamations broke from her as she helped him over the rocks. He was hardly more than a boy. Through his thin shirt, she could feel his burning skin. He was still clutching the newspaper.

Her father had not yet awakened. She rummaged stealthily in the covered wagon and dragged forth a worn blanket and a soft old pillow or two. These she spread for her charge in an open space where the grass grew thick.

He sank down quite exhausted, and she sat beside him for a moment. She pushed the disordered hair from his forehead and covered his hot hands with her cool ones. There was, in spite of her youth, a curious motherliness about her, about her intent face and watchful leaning attitude. Presently, she jumped up, snatched a small bucket and ran down to the spring. She returned with a brimming bucketful of clear cold water. She lifted his head and gave him a drink and then wet her handkerchief to bathe his face and hands. His hands relaxed, and the newspaper to which he had been clinging tumbled to the ground.

It fell open. Rose found herself staring down at the picture of a girl. In spite of the coarse texture of the paper and the crude outlines of the print, she could see that it was a very pretty girl. Fair hair, she had, and softly slender shoulders and a gown that was modishly quaint. Rose looked at the gown, and her face grew wistful. She lived in another world from that of the girl in the picture. But she had longed for a gown with a little pointed bodice and a skirt absurdly wide!

The headlines announced that a wedding had been solemnized. Several columns amplified this information. It conveyed little to Rose that the affair had occurred at St. Thomas'. She did not even know that the names mentioned were of the beau monde. But she caught her breath as she read of the tall white candles at the altar, of the flower bound crooks that the bridesmaids had carried, of the lace

in the veil that had shimmered over the bride. She looked across the little stream through a sudden blur of tears. She loved the sweet silly things that all girls love, and she had never had any of them.

The man at her side tossed uneasily. Almost abstractedly, she dipped her handkerchief into the water. Then the insistence of his babble recalled him to her. She bent down and continued her task, compassion triumphing over all other emotions in her expressive face. He sighed at her soothing touch and lay quiet.

She began to wonder about him. She felt sure that he was from some Eastern city. She suspected that he had been made an exile by that malady which banishes so many to the deserts and the mountains of the West. He was alone, or the dog would have sought out his companions. He had been out all night, and at that altitude even August nights are very cold. Sick, lonely, unhappy! She looked down at him. He was resting with one arm flung up above his head in a boyish posture. There were pathetic downward lines about his mouth.

And the girl had married! Rose picked up the paper again. The girl had married! Had she ever loved him? What poor sort of thing had her love been? It was a New York paper and dated in June. It must have been very much delayed if it had just reached him. Or perhaps he had only stumbled upon it. Vaguely she sensed the misery it had brought him,

the anguish that had possessed him when he struck out from his cabin, the heart sickness that had filled him as he wandered through the night. She felt a deep thankfulness that she had found him.

The radiance of the sky had faded, and early sunshine glanced across the water. He was sleeping now and she left him, after smoothing his pillow and placing the paper by his side. The little dog, curled up at his feet, watched her with bright vigilant eyes. She walked slowly back to the fire. The neglected coffee pot was gurgling suggestively. She foraged in an extemporized cupboard and brought forth tin cups and spoons and a can of condensed milk. When the coffee was poured, she moved toward the covered wagon.

"Wake up, dear. Here's your coffee," she said in the benevolent tone one uses to a child.

"I'm awake," replied a sulky voice. "I didn't think you were ever coming."

"Well, here I am at last," she returned with unruffled sweetness, handing him a cup. "I've been mighty busy this morning."

"What is it this time? A lame coyote or a bird with a broken wing?" queried her father, elaborately polite.

Rose laughed, leaning up against the wheel, enjoying her coffee leisurely.

"Neither one. A young man. I followed his dog up yon-

der and found him. He was in a fever, and I brought him down here."

"We'll have to be moving on today," said her father, fidgeting.

"I reckon that it won't make any difference to anybody if we never reach San Diego," she contradicted good naturedly. "Besides, father, you're too kind to leave him if he's sick."

"I'll take a look at him," replied her father grudgingly.

He finished his coffee in silence. Rose took the empty cups back to the improvised kitchen. He emerged from the wagon shortly and went about the primitive chores, while she began preparations for breakfast. He was past middle age, a tall stooped man with a shambling gait. He had shifty eyes, and his grizzly beard did not conceal the weakness of his mouth and chin.

After they had eaten, he allowed her to take him down to where the young man lay. He eyed him in unfriendly fashion.

"I'm so glad he's sleeping," said Rose in a hushed voice. "I reckon he'll wake up feeling better."

She gave the dog some scraps that she had saved for him. Her father turned away without comment. Rose tiptoed after him, her finger at her lips.

The young man slept fitfully during the morning, soundly throughout the afternoon. At intervals, Rose stole

down to look at him. She moved his blanket into the shade, and he roused and asked for water.

The day was intensely hot. The air quivered dizzyingly. The merciless sun beat down on the dusty trees, the scorched grass, the chokingly dry sand. A stifling silence hung over everything, and lassitude enveloped them all. The dog lay with his tongue hanging out. The mules gathered beneath the listless trees.

But at last the cool shadows unrolled, and a fresh breeze from the Pacific crept in. Even the blades of grass were subtly revived. Rose built up a fire and cooked supper. Coffee, red beans and bread, her father consumed with relish.

In the sweet evening, she went down to her invalid. She bore a cup of tea, and a slice of toast which represented an undue amount of labor. She found him awake, staring thoughtfully into the branches of the live oak tree above him.

"You have been very kind to me," he said, when he saw her.

"I haven't done much," she answered seriously.

"A fever always makes a perfect fool of me," he observed, ponderously strategic.

"You've been sleeping all day," she responded innocently. "Can you eat something now?"

He sat up and took the cup and plate. She held a pillow against the tree trunk and he leaned back on it weakly.

She sank to the ground opposite him and drew her knees into her arms.

"That's a mighty good dog of yours," she began sociably. "Early this morning, he came and found me and took me to where you were."

"Did he?" cried the man, his thin face lighting up. "How did you happen to be in this valley?"

"We're camping here, my father and I. We've come through through from San Anton'. We're on our way to San Diego."

"Will you be here long?" he inquired pleasantly.

"I don't know. We never know. We're in no particular hurry. We won't stay there when we get there. My father doesn't like to stay long in one place. We've done a heap of traveling with that wagon and those mules," she remarked reminiscently, nodding in their direction.

He turned his head. His eyes fell on the newspaper. She saw him wince sharply.

"You live in these parts?" she went on quickly.

"Yes," he replied, turning slowly back to her. "My shack is just over the hill."

The suffering in his eyes made her throat tighten. She bent toward him impulsively.

"We're going to be friends, you and I," she said, "and we haven't much time, so we'd better begin right away."

He glanced up in surprise. The face between the heavy

braids of hair was very earnest.

"Why do you want to be friends?" he asked without smiling.

"So that you'll take coffee with us tomorrow morning! So that you'll let me play with your dog! So that we can talk and talk and talk!"

Her peculiarly sweet smile broke across her face. She flung out a sun browned hand. He caught it, laughing.

"My name's Rose," she offered.

"Mine's Mark," he reciprocated.

"Done!" she declared.

She took his empty plate and cup and put them down in the grass. She locked her arms about her knees again and fell silent. One by one, the stars came out. Dusk closed in around them. The cry of a coyote thrilled through the stillness. The very sharing of the awe, the mystery and the beauty of it seemed to draw them together.

"I came out here for my lungs," he said in a low voice. "They were just touched - but I had to come to save them. I've had a devil of a time. I drank some bad water. That sent me into typhoid. I've just been up from that a day or so. I'm alone. I couldn't go where there were people to be sorry for me. But to be alone in these mountains - at night - is terrible." His voice sank.

"You'll be going back soon," answered Rose after a moment.

"There's nothing to go back for now," he said, lower still.

The paper lay in the grass, a square of ghostly white. Rose took it into her hands.

"May I put this in the fire? You must forget about it - and about her."

"Oh - you know!" he exclaimed with something like relief. He hurried on. "I was too ill to open my mail until yesterday - and then I found that. I was still shaky, I guess - it sort of sent me off my head." He paused. "We were to have been married in June," he said.

They were silent again. At length she rose, extending helping hands to him. They walked toward the leaping camp fire. The figure of her father, bent over his pipe, was silhouetted against it. Just as they reached the circle of fireshine, she looked up at her companion.

"You're not alone in the mountains now," she said.

She introduced him to her father who responded civilly. She and her father walked over to his shack with him, slowly, through the whispering night. By the light of his wavering candle, she inspected the comfortless little room where he lived, her manner quaintly capable. Then she gave him her hand with her friendly smile, and they all spoke cheerful goodnights, and he promised to come to breakfast in the morning.

At the instant of offering to be his friend, Rose had

made a resolution. She had determined to stay for a few days in the valley, long enough to help him over his first bitterness. That it might be difficult to persuade her father to such a course, she was aware. But he was, as she dimly realized, essentially weak, and on the one or two occasions in the past when her convictions had forced her to oppose him he had yielded abjectly before her calm insistence. As a rule, she was a very docile daughter, and he was, though she did not know it, a supremely selfish father. He had always claimed her every thought and action, all the love of her big heart. By choosing to lead a wandering existence, he had shut her off from all other companionships. She had never been allowed a friend, not even a dog. Her wistful curiosity as to her mother had never been gratified. He was fiercely jealous of the woman who had given her life that Rose might live. And Rose had lavished on him all the wealth of her love, all the selfless devotion with which her nature was so richly imbued. But Mark's great need of her had made a deep appeal. The misery in his eyes, the cynical twist of his young mouth, the piteous gauntness of him had stirred her and shaken her. She felt a longing, a yearning, that came from the very depths of her, to make him well, to make him happy, to serve him. She knew that she would not leave him alone in the wilderness, to fight his great fight all alone. She knew, even before she had obtained her father's querulous consent to a prolongation of their stay.

That same night he had hinted warily of his intention

to break camp the following day. Rose had objected with a grave frankness which disarmed him.

"I don't want to go tomorrow. There's no reason why we should. And there's a mighty good reason why we shouldn't. Mark has had typhoid and is still weak. You know, father, that he should be looked after and have the right things to eat. I reckon that we're not mean enough to go off and leave him."

And he had admitted, reluctantly, that they were not.

So they stayed on. Mark's delight at their nearness and neighborliness was more than touching. He seemed to have a horror of being alone and hardly spent a waking ~~hour~~ moment away from them. He and Rose drank their early coffee together, always on the sandy bank of the little stream, where they could behold the miracle of dawn. And till late at night they lingered at the camp fire, watching the fantastic flames and their more fantastic shadows, lifting their eyes above the blackness of the encircling mountains to the impenetrable immensities of sky. Often in the pleasant coolness of late afternoon, they rambled over the hills, lazily, resting often, that Mark might not go beyond his strength. They climbed above the slopes where the hardy oaks and manzanitas, the garish wild flowers and the thin grass of the dry season tried vainly to produce an illusion of verdancy. They loved better the frank bareness of the heights - the rainbow sands, the

pale velvet sage, the silver rocks. They even loved the wind that sometimes shook her hair free of its braids and whipped it out like a glad banner. But at twilight time the wind was still and the whole world held its breath at the mad loveliness of the color flooded West. They ransacked his cabin too, held a joyous housecleaning. With the bare boards scrubbed white and masses of genial yellow daisies in the corners and his best beloved books in an orderly row on the table, it had a very different atmosphere. And always the little dog tagged at their heels, a bit pompous at having brought it all about.

From the very beginning, they felt not the slightest restraint with each other. The out of doors sweeps away distinctions. She was sweet and fine, in spite of poverty and neglect. He was natural and loveable, although he had been reared in an artificial aristocracy. His whole hearted enjoyment of her company, his simple courtesy and unobtrusive thoughtfulness, his pathetic mental and physical dependence upon her grew more dear to her with every hour.

It was with a terrible sinking of the heart that she discovered, upon coming into camp one evening, the articles of their meagre household equipment gone from their accustomed places and the mules hitched to the covered wagon. Mark had taken supper with them and afterwards gone with her to watch the sunset from a rock that they had made their own. Her father had been sullen all day and, filled with a vague uneasiness, she had sent Mark home and returned to the valley alone. Her father was busy stamping out the remains of their fire. He

did not look up as she approached him, and she stood and watched him without speaking.

"I've had enough of this," he said suddenly, wheeling upon her.

"I am sorry," she said simply, her steady eyes on his.

"Jump in!" he commanded, his voice strangely hoarse.

"We have only an hour of daylight left. I want to make La Mesa!"

"I'll go and say goodbye to Mark," she replied, turning.

"You'll not say goodbye to Mark," he cut in roughly, catching her by the wrists.

"Father!" she cried. Her voice was vibrant. He loosened his grasp, his face flushing.

"I'll be back immediately," she said, trying desperately to control her voice and walked swiftly toward the ragged path.

When she was out of his sight, she broke into a run. The twilight hush was on everything. Her own flying footsteps sounded curiously remote. Mark was standing in the doorway of his shack. She stopped before him, panting.

"We're going - tonight - now - " she began. Her voice broke in a sob.

And then suddenly she was in his arms. They held each other close without words. Her tears wet his cheek, and their hearts pounded together.

"Oh Rose, Rose," he said, at last, "I can't ask you to stay. But I want you to know that that other girl never was and never could be what you are and always will be in my life. I love you."

She lifted her face.

"To stay would be - the greatest happiness - in the world," she answered, "but my father is old - and sick - and he hates you."

"It doesn't matter. I couldn't let you stay. I - "

"You couldn't help it," she interrupted.

One of her hands stole up to his hair, slid down to encircle his neck. She looked up at him with shining eyes and spoke in a half whisper.

"Oh Mark! We would be so happy! I would make you strong again - strong and glad. We'd have little white curtains at the windows - and beds of flowers all about the house - and you'd work in the fields, and I'd cook and sew for you."

After a moment, she added, "I must go, dear."

"This is goodbye," he said, and their lips met.

She tore away from him, ran blindly back the way she had come. In the woods it was already dark, and the great silence had fallen. She threw herself on the ground, buried her face in her arms. She was dumb in her pain like the night that she loved. Time passed, moments or hours she did not know. At last, she stumbled to her feet, groped her way to the path, into the little valley.

It was black night, and there were no stars. She could hear the mules stamping.

"Father!" she called.

He did not answer.

She felt her way to the wagon, clutched at the empty air within it.

"Father!" she cried in terror.

Her echo came back to her.

One eerie ember glowed where the fire had been. It was there that she had seen him last. She rushed toward it, her hands stretched out before her.

"Father!" her voice rang out.

Her foot encountered something!

She must have run for Mark. Afterwards she could only remember the thorns that had snatched at her and the sharp stones she had fallen upon. But she heard his agitated voice - "Rose! My darling! What is it?" and knew that she had gone to him. She must have dragged him back to the horror of the little valley, for presently there was a fire and Mark kneeling in the flickering light beside her father's body.

"Rose! Was it his heart? There is no mark of violence."

"Perhaps - he was always afraid - "

And that was all she knew.

When she awoke she was lying on a hard little cot in a room that the sunshine was flooding. It was a bare room, with walls of rough boards and a clump of gaudy yellow daisies in a corner. It was Mark's room! The events of the night before rushed into her mind, sickening her. She closed her eyes again, pressed her palms into them.

There was a square of white paper pinned to the door. It was covered with writing. At last she roused and saw it. She sprang up.

"Rose," it read, "I have gone to La Mesa. I will be

back with some people. Wait for us where you are, dear. Mark."

She put it in her bosom and passed out into the morning. The world was inundated with sunshine and bird music. She walked quietly toward the camp. She sank to the ground beside the body of her father. She lifted the blanket that Mark had spread over it, pressed her soft cheek to his cold one. There were tears in her eyes, but she was calm.

She sat for a long time, looking at him. Her thoughts travelled back down the years. They reached the mother that she had never known, lingered there. She wondered about her, as she had wondered so many times before. She longed for her with a new intensity.

She unbuttoned his coat and drew from his pocket his old portfolio. She had always thought that he carried there a few mementos of her mother. She wanted to secure them before the curious people came, and opened it hastily. There was only a letter, a rather worn looking letter, addressed simply "Rose" in her father's oddly elegant handwriting. She broke the seal with hurried fingers.

"If anything ever happens to me, you are to go back to your mother's people," he had written. "Your mother ran off with me when she was only eighteen and died when you were born. Her people are rich and will do much for you. I have hidden you all these years, for I was afraid they would take you away from me. They never thought I was of much account. There is money enough in the old strong box to get you to them." That was all. A strange name and an address in

Boston were appended.

She sat there in the sunshine with the letter in her hands. Her mother's people! Her heart went out to them across the miles. Queerly enough, the next thing she thought of was a dress. She saw herself in an artfully old-fashioned dress. The sheen of silks, the ripple of laces, the flash of jewels crowded into her fancy. And then she felt Mark's kiss again, and remembered.

The curious people came, Mark among them. There was a rusty little doctor who examined her father rather timidly and murmured that it had been the heart. There was a lank woman, the wife of the minister, who took grim possession of her. There were several other women, with sunburned faces and calico dresses, and a silent staring man or two. They were aliens, all of them, but over the mountains, beyond the deserts and the prairies, were her mother's people. Her own people!

They put the body of her father in the covered wagon, and Mark and another man went with it. She was helped into an antiquated phaeton that belonged to the minister's wife. The rest had rustic conveyances of one kind and another. They jogged out of the valley, across the gleaming golden fields, into a very hot and dusty road. Rose thought of Boston, of a stone house with cloudy curtains at the windows, like one she had once seen and admired in San Anton'.

They buried her father that afternoon, in a windy

church yard, with the same gaping people, and others, standing by. At sundown, she found herself in an upper room in the minister's house. Mark had disappeared, saying that he would see her in the morning. She was alone. She still held the old portfolio. She had clung to it all through the day. She took out the letter now, but she did not read it. She moved to the window and looked out.

It was a little mountain town and desolate enough in the gathering dusk. But children were playing in the streets, women chattering from the doorways and men swinging eagerly homeward. She saw the minister come up the walk, laggingly, for he was tired. She saw two shock headed children dash toward him and hug him about the knees, laughing uproariously.

She saw him swing them to his shoulders, laughing with them. They all disappeared within.

And in a swift vision she saw Mark. He was walking slowly through woods dim with twilight to a little shack. There were no inviting smoke wreaths curling from the chimney, no welcoming lights streaming from the windows, no arms outstretched. His words came back to her - "to be alone in these mountains - at night - is terrible." With a little sob, she tore the letter and flung it from the window.

She turned quickly about. She would go to him at once. She would fly to him through the night. She would never leave him again. Trembling, her breath coming fast, her heart throbbing wildly, she groped her way across the little room. And her hands found him! He was standing in the doorway!

"You can't send me away," she said in a shaking voice, holding to his arms with all her strength. "Nothing in the world can make me go."

"Thank God, I don't need to," he answered.

"What do you mean?" she asked, starting from him.

"I have just come from the doctor. He has examined me again. He says that - except for the weakness the typhoid left - I am well. Oh, Rose - Rose - "

His arms went round her.

Through the open window came the shouts of the children, but the shadowy little room was very quiet.

"Mark!" she whispered at last. "Oh, Mark dear! Marry me and take me home!"