

THE HUNDRED LEAF ROSE

by

Lydia Clara Dodimead Lucht

A soft May breeze ruffled the white curtains at the windows of a bedroom in a little Indiana town, that night, bringing the faint sweet scent of honeysuckle and a still sweeter scent of roses. To the watchers by the bed of the woman, who was lying there, and to the sick woman herself, the breeze was a breath of the outdoors dispelling the faint air of death that the room held.

Lying in that period of half-life, preceding a death from old age and a lingering disease, there had been days and nights when to the daughters and neighbors, taking their turn in caring for her, it seemed her spirit had surely left her body only to return and linger, as though held by invisible bonds that could not be broken. As the breeze came again and with it a clearer scent of roses, the woman stirred. For a moment her eyes opened and she looked out into the room, catching the gleam of the lamplight on a picture hanging opposite the bed.

It was an old Currier and Ives picture called "The Hundred Leaf Rose". To the family, it had always been Mother's Picture' and they knew she cherished it for some sentimental reason that none of them bothered to ask about and of which she never spoke. Now she was leaving it to their care, along with her cherished quilts and her starched aprons, without which she was never fully dressed, either for company or for work.

Now her mind was growing clearer and, although she seemed to be as before outwardly, her thoughts ran in a strange chain. She thought first of the roses blooming outside the window. They had always been her favorite flower and, in the many places she had lived, there had always been a spot for her roses. They were always sweetest to her, sweeter even than a first love.

Back over the years her mind tumbled, years filled with homemaking and keeping a family of four, born, raised and now grown. Yes, and one of them buried by the side of his father. Years of work, sickness and sometimes hardship, but softened too by their love for each other and the deep abiding faith in her Lord that was born and bred in her from a long-ago childhood and that had ever grown stronger through the years.

Victoria Lang was the youngest of six daughters, born to James and Lydia Lang. Never shortened to Vie or Vicky in that sober Scotch household, it was always Victoria. Saddened by the loss of their one son who died in infancy, James felt at first he could not bear to not have one to carry on his name. He raised his daughters strictly and properly, with the times, when girls must be obedient to their fathers in all things and later to their husbands. They were taught the art of housekeeping and to do it well, which was an art in those days as everything was done in the home, and were also given a fair education. There were family prayers, night and morning, the candlelight of early to bed and early to rise shining on six kneeling girls' hair, slickly combed and faces scrubbed, with the breakfast porridge bubbling on the kitchen stove and biscuits just out of the oven, prepared by each in their turn. Again at night, found candle light shining on their bowed heads with the knowledge of a day's work well done and asking their Father His blessing on the nights repose.

The Lord was James Lang's Shepherd' - no want did they know -he was prosperous, but a hard worker. The owner of a small coal mine in the early days of coal in Indiana he had a good living. His family was well-clothed and well fed and highly respected in their community. They were loved by their parents, although they were never shown it in any outward form.

Days went on. Victoria was sixteen with black hair in smooth braids and gray-blue eyes. She was small, delicately boned and neat as a pin. Deep in her heart, there was hidden a deep resentment that soon she would be of marriage age and that her father would probably pick her husband. Three of the sisters were married to men, partly of their choice, but, approved first by their father as

a suitable husband. From some ancestor, Victoria felt that somewhere there was a thrilling love story for her, not the dull prosaic love of the parents with never any show of affection. There were dreams in her eyes and heart, these days, as she went about her daily duties, but how she could ever make them come true was yet to be known.

The Civil War came and passed leaving small imprint on that family in their Indiana hills. James Lang was faintly in sympathy with the Confederacy and after the war and the death of Lincoln felt that the South was unjustly treated. Consequently, his family held themselves away from all political differences or opinions that were expressed or discussed. Then one day, there came into the community, a young man named William Davis, who claimed to be an agent from the South buying horses and mules for their Reconstruction work. Feeling that he was planning to make a lot of money off the Southerners and he had nothing to sell to him, James Lang looked with a feeling of disapproval upon him. However, he became a well-known and liked figure as he drove around the country. The Lang girls met him and saw him often at Singing School and in the homes of their friends.

He was young, handsome and quite a romantic figure in this small community and "cut quite a dash with the girls" - the favorite expression of that day. To Victoria, he became the embodiment of her secret dreams and to her he turned as though drawn by an inward attraction he could not deny. They met as often as possible, stolen moments here and there and letters were written to each other without her parent's knowledge. Victoria was swept away by the lovemaking of this stranger and first love, the sweetest of all, bloomed in her heart.

Knowing the day would soon come for his departure and that her father would never consent to her marriage with this stranger, nor to her going away with him, they decided to elope. The day was set and Victoria carefully packed and hid her steamer trunk out in the barn loft where Frank, her sweetheart, was to meet her the *next* morning and take her and her belongings with her to begin a new life. There was some sorrow in her heart at leaving this sheltered home of hers, for a life she knew not where might lead her, but she was so deeply in love that she did not care. This was a big step for a girl to make in these years of the 1860's, but she felt this was her choice and she had to do it for her own happiness. She was as sweet as the roses she loved, but as prickly as their thorns when her mind was made up to her wishes.

Surely Frank knew her this well, for one day he had brought her a picture, a new one by Currier and Ives, called the 'Hundred Leaf Rose'. "You are my rose, Vicky," he said, "you will bloom always in my heart." For Vicky she was to him, who loved laughter and life, not the staid Victoria.

But suddenly, the dream ended. Victoria was confronted by an angry father and a tearful mother, on that last morning as she descended the stairs, her eyes dancing with the light of her love and dreams and the knowledge of this new adventure soon to be entered. The little trunk at her father's feet was a mute witness against her, and although she did not know how her father found out about her elopement, she could not lie to him so told him the story. She was sent to her room and the door kept locked for that day and night. Then James Lang must have learned of William's departure or might have seen him and explained that his daughter would not and could not go on with this thing they had planned. Victoria never knew what happened. She was too proud to let her friends know of the incident by inquiring about him and his name was never mentioned again. But the tears and heartaches through the long days and nights of wondering and thinking of him with only the painted picture of roses he had given her and a few letters for comfort, brought a new sober look to Victoria's gray-blue eyes that never quite left her in after years.

The quiet woman on the bed breathed deeply of the breeze that now came steadily in the window

as though it gave her strength and almost smiled as her thoughts bridged the years of her marriage. It was a happy marriage and she had loved Charles, in spite of her vows to never love again. His family were early settlers of the county where they lived being her own county, too. His father had a large saw-mill and they were a prosperous, well-known and respectable people, but too, entirely different from her own in disposition. They were fun-loving, happy when all together and having a good time, always playing jokes on each other until there was never a dull moment. To this approved marriage, Victoria came, and was accepted as one of them, but her name was shorted to Vic and remained that to all of them.

Life had never been easy and wasn't in those days. She and Charles had little to start on for themselves and her children came soon after. When the second child was small, Victoria's health became so frail that the doctor recommended a change of climate to save her life, thinking a dry hot country would be the best for her. So they trekked to Kansas, in a covered wagon, taking only the bare necessities with them. Among their possessions were the tiny stove that could be taken out of the wagon and set up outside to cook their meals and heat the water for washing; the chest of drawers that she felt she had to have for their clothes wherever they were; the feather beds and a special wooden bowl, long and narrow, that Charles had hollowed out of a small log for her, which she used in her bread making, vegetable chopping and once, in an emergency, to bathe the baby. The precious picture was left behind with a sister for safekeeping as the needed space was valuable.

Their third child, Clara, was born there in Jewel City, Kansas in 1876, where they lived, at first, in a dug-out called a sod house. On the broad plains of that flat state, Victoria's very soul seemed to wither and die with homesickness for the rolling hills of her home country. Finally, she persuaded Charles to take her home, saying, "I know I'll die here, anyway, so take me back where I can at least be with my own people and there will be shade trees to bury me under." Then began the long trip back in 1881.

"I should have written a story of my life," the sick woman thought and a chuckle almost escaped her. Not for days had she been so restless, the watchers by her bed noticed.

To her grand-daughter, riding in cars, miles were but a matter of minutes or an hour or two, but what would they have thought of those long miles when the plod of the horses' feet checked the whole days travel in just a few miles and the weary children begged to be home. It was a hard, never to be forgotten trip. Mealtime along the road meant stopping to set out the little stove and cook nourishing meals for them all. Victoria, in spite of her ill-health, was still a person of precision. Washing and ironing must be done each Monday, although that took a day from the road. The clothes were ironed as carefully and folded, with sad-irons heated on the stove, as though she were in her own home. Her table was always nicely set, with tablecloth and silver, whether it might be beside a small creek for their water or near a friendly farm-house. All of it took hours from their return; nevertheless, it had to be done that way for her own satisfaction. There was a day, when far ahead on the flat road they saw a cloud of dust seemingly coming towards them, which presently could be seen to be a tribe of Indians. Victoria became panicky with fright and, pushing the children back into the wagon, said to Charles, "Oh, what will we do if they aren't friendly. You haven't any gun." He replied with his own accept-things-as-they-are-way "Well, Vie, if I had a gun, I couldn't shoot em all. Let's just pull up alongside the road and see what happens." Soon the entire tribe passed by, the braves raising their hands and saying "How!" as they passed.

Later that evening, they made their camp for the night by a farm house and the farmer who lived there came down and invited them to a barn dance they were having that night. Thinking the children would enjoy the music, Charles took the family on to the big barn, after an early supper,

leaving Victoria to wash the dishes and do her few chores. Just as she was clearing the table, she heard a peculiar stealthy noise in a nearby thicket and a great wave of fear came over her. Thinking of the meeting with the Indians that morning and remembering, too, stories of Indian massacres and uprisings not so far in the past, she saw all the dishes were off of the table, shook out the cloth, folded it away and left her dishes stacked in a pan to do while the fire was starting in the morning and the water was hot enough. That done, she hurriedly joined the family at the barn. The next morning, they were all up early and decided to drive a while before getting breakfast. Several miles were between them and their night's camp, when they were finally ready to eat. Great was her consternation to find she had shaken all their silver and eating utensils out in the cloth the night before. When she confessed to Charles what she had done and why, he further added to her chagrin by laughing about it and saying there was a cow tethered there. He had seen it when he had tethered his horses for the night.

It was a grand sight to them all, to finally cross the line to Indiana. Even the youngest sensed the excitement of the rest and all remembrance of the levels of her birth state was forgotten. The fields held the lushness of late June - wheat ripening, long rows of corn sowing green against the darker greens of the stretches of woods. Trumpet vines grew thick on the fences while Queen Anne's lace and sweet clover lined the narrow dusty roads. Best of all to Victoria, were the rolling hills of her ain contree and to them she lifted her eyes and heart in a prayer of gratitude for a safe return "To these hills, I will lift mine eyes, surely my strength cometh from there." Into the home yard they drove, with everyone anxiously awaiting their coming from that far journey, as it was then three long months. True to her own ideas of proper dress, Victoria had insisted they all stop about two hours from home and all be bathed and dressed in their best starched bib and tucker. The horses were curried and they drove in with a flourish, not showing the strain or dust of the drive.

Strangely enough, her strength did return and she was better than she had been for years. They moved to a small town in a nearby county where Charles worked in a pumping station. Here, he and another man, William Needhammer by name, operated the station and became great friends. Will, as they soon called him, had only lived here a few years. He had moved, following the death of his wife, to be near a sister as he had three small children, who were now motherless.

Victoria felt so sorry for the man and his family in their loss and often had them over for meals and tried to do all she could to help him, too. She had a girlhood friend, back in the home community, who had never married. As time passed and his grief was lighter, she decided to turn matchmaker, feeling they were both find people who would be happy together. She introduced them by letter and they both seemed to be interested and carried on a correspondence which developed into meetings and later a marriage, which was a very happy one. Victoria was more than pleased over this, as she and her friend were neighbors and Will was more than happy, too, as his new wife was a good mother to his children. They spent many happy times together and made plans together for everything they did.

Only two short years and the friend and mother died in childbirth, the baby only living a short time after its mother. Heart-broken, the man took his children and moved back to his sister's and once again, Victoria doubly saddened by his loss and the loss of her friend, tried to do all she could for the family.

The days passed; full of housework, for housekeeping was no easy matter in those days. Victoria now had four children, the youngest a year old and she had few idle minutes. One evening, Charles came home from work and told her Will was very sick with pneumonia and had been off for a few days from work, but he had only heard that evening that Will was seriously ill. Victoria hurried the children to bed after supper and went to the sisters to see what she could do, as nursing

then meant the neighbors going in to help out. They were very glad to have her stay the night as the sick man was only rational part of the time and the doctor had told them he saw no hope for his recovery. Knowing somehow that there was little chance for him, he had called his sister to the bedside that evening. He asked her to go over his trunk and take out his important personal papers and take care of them, but to clear and burn all letters and what else she might find.

Just before daybreak, while he was sleeping, Victoria and the sister went into the next room to do as he wished. Into a pile went his papers to keep, but there were several packages of old letters. As Victoria placed them into a basket, her eyes suddenly caught the address, on one package, in her own handwriting. As Will had been a very poor scribe, he had often come over for Vic to help him write his letters to Nancy, his second wife. Thinking these were a package of those letters, she looked through them, only to find they were addressed to Frank Davis and one of them contained her own girlhood picture that she had sent to Frank, her old sweetheart, while he was living in a nearby town. Turning to the other woman, she said that here was a package of letters that belonged to someone else, not Will, although she didn't tell her why she was so curious as to how they came into his possession. The sister smiled and told her that her brother had made a trip up to Indiana from the South where they lived to buy cattle, just after the war and had traveled under this assumed name of Frank Davis. They never knew why.

Speechless with surprise, Victoria sat there, the ashes of an old dream crumbling about her. How the years have changed us not to have seen some slight resemblance, but the twenty odd years between and his growth of a beard, which was the style then, had brought no remembrance to her mind of her old love. If he remembered her, he had given no sign of the fact. How full her life must be now, that somewhere in the heart beat of memory, even the tones of his voice were forgotten. But the questions must remain unanswered until she might have more time to think them all over.

But they always remained unanswered, as from the other episode in her life when he entered for a short time and was gone. After the letters were burned and taken care of, a turn for the better came and the sick man recovered. As soon as he became well enough, he went away to recuperate. On his return, he packed his family up and moved away with never a word of good-by to them or any of his friends. Shortly after, the sister's family moved too, so Charles and Victoria never found out where any of them had gone. Charles was deeply hurt at his friends neglect in not telling them he was leaving and Victoria wondered what happened this time. Did he know she had helped go through the letters or why he had acted so strangely? It was so similar to the other time, but how different she herself felt. No longer a heartbroken girl, but a mature woman with a life full to the brim with living. So she put it all away in her mind to only think of now and then.

Now, she of the time-dimmed eyes, thought to herself, that soon, how soon, would all her questions be answered. Maybe Charlie and Will are somewhere together now waiting for me and can tell me all about it. She could almost hear them laughing together, as they used to do, and saying, "Come on, Vie, we are waiting for you." And would this time, Will call her Vicky, that name that no-one else had ever called her? Nearer they came and nearer, until suddenly, so anxious she became to see them that she half-raised herself from the bed and answered clear and strong, "Wait a minute, Charlie, till I get my hair combed and a clean apron on! Is Nancy there with you?" Then all past and present faded away from her in the reality of their presence and the joy of reunion.

"A rose to the living is more, than numberless wreathes to the dead", the minister's voice began over the now quiet body and folded hands, in the corner of the same room where she had lain sick so long. Knowing her love for roses, the room was abloom with baskets and jars of them; brought

from the neighbors' gardens and a large spray hung over the foot of the casket. Now the minister's voice flowed on into "Victoria Lang White was born——— and passed to rest ———" and the 'Hundred Leaf Rose' bloomed on in its faded frame.

(This is our heritage. These lives which we remember. These few keepsakes: a quilt, a shawl, a wooden bowl, a pin and a faded picture, which we keep. May we pass on as rich a heritage in good living, courage and faith to those after us as these mementos always bring to our minds of the loved ones - not lost-but gone before.)

This is a foolish little song of love and roses,
Yet my heart catches, yet my heart falls
As if tired of seeking through rough darkened places
I came on bright windows, warm lit walls,
As if known hands leaned out to draw me in.
And harsh winds quieted, waves checked their foam
And voices cried "Child, child where have you been?
Oh, we have waited, oh, you have come home. (Author Unknown)

Note: I have the original Currier and Ives print of the Hundred Leaf Rose, but sadly mom had it rolled up in her cedar chest and it has missing pieces. The lithograph is numbered 564 and the colors are faded, but appear to have been white, pink, and red. I just found a lithograph of "Hundred Leaf Rose 564" in an old print shop in New York City and purchased it. The colors are different (red, pink and yellow), but Currier and Ives lithographs were colored by different artists and they used colors of their choice. The lithographs are rare and there is little likelihood of finding one with identical colors.