

**THE LURE OF THE
DESERT LAND, AND
OTHER POEMS**

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The Lure of the Desert Land, and Other Poems by Mrs. Harr Wagner (Madge Morris)

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MRS. HARR WAGNER (MADGE MORRIS)

**THE LURE OF THE
DESERT LAND, AND
OTHER POEMS**

TO VINU
CALIFORNIA



Where a thousand thousand desert miles
All silent round you lie—

Photo taken of author at the time of writing poem "To the Colorado Desert."

The
Lure of the Desert Land
and Other Poems

BY
MADGE MORRIS
(Mrs. Harr Wagner)



Library of
CALIFORNIA

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Dedicated to Herr Wagner

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MADGE MORRIS WAGNER

JOAQUIN MILLER'S TRIBUTE TO THE AUTHOR

"And some Orient dawn had found me
Kneeling at the house of fame."

Fame found Madge Morris Wagner in the blazing Colorado desert, her fingers on the pulse of Nature. Or, at least, thither sent Lippincotts of Philadelphia to find her and persuade her to speak through them to the world. And this is what she said, like all who are truly great teachers, making a text of the place and the time:

TO THE COLORADO DESERT

Thou brown, bare-breasted, voiceless mystery,
Hot sphinx of nature, cactus, crowned, what hast thou
done?

Unclothed and mute as when the groans of chaos
turned

Thy naked burning bosom to the sun.

The mountain silences have speech, the rivers sing.

Thou answerest never unto anything.

Pink-throated lizards pant in thy slim shade;

The horned toad runs rustling in the heat;

The shadowy gray coyote, born afraid,

Steals to some brackish spring and laps, and prowls

Away; and howls, and howls and howls and howls,

Until the solitude is shaken with an added loneliness.

Thy sharp mescal shoots up a giant stalk,

Its century of yearning, to the sunburnt skies,

And drips rare honey from the lips

Of yellow waxen flowers, and dies.

Some lengthwise sun-dried shapes with feet and hands

And thirsty mouths pressed on the sweltering sands,

Mark here and there a gruesome graveless spot

Where some one drank thy scorching hotness, and is
not.

God must have made thee in his anger, and forgot.

Not since I can remember have I heard a voice so true as this. It is like the sublime and solemn bass of St. John. It is even John the Baptist crying in the wilderness.

Indeed, I doubt if you will find anything more terribly truthful and fearfully sublime this side of Job than this one lone, lorn cry from the desert. A photo-

graph, even were such a thing possible, could not be more ghastly and ghastly exact. It is true poetry, and therefore more really true than the ordinary forms of truth. For truth can only be told entirely by figures of speech—poetry. There are not words enough in all the languages of this world to tell even the simplest truth exactly, even if there were time enough in the world. We must depend upon figures of speech, as did the seers of the Orient, for the exact truth. But the figures must be true, stately, majestic, impressive. This is poetry; and true poetry is in this sense not only the highest form of truth, but it is the only real truth that is uttered. When the world comes to comprehend poetry it will have a great deal more truth, less quibbling about words, legal technicalities, legal lies.

Turn back and read this poem on the Colorado Desert again, please. You can read it with profit and a certain sort of solemn pleasure a dozen times. There are lines here that are texts, sermons.

"God must have made thee in his anger and forgot."

Madge Morris Wagner has been all her life with us out here on the great seabank I believe; I know her father, Morris Hilyard, was a Virginian. Maybe, she, too, was a Virginian. I neither know nor care. We fill our books up with the dates and places of birth, things that amount to nothing, and leave little room for deeds or utterances.

What will we do when we come to have 24,000 years of history and biography behind us? Why, we will say as the Chinese say, "this poet lived in a certain dynasty and said so and so." That is all.

So I shall proceed to say what this strange, strong woman of the desert has said from out her heart of hearts. For she is a woman, a very human, tender woman. And you will concede before you have done reading the little bits of her sweet soul which I am permitted to give you that it is great impertinence in me to say much when she is singing. And I want you to know that these next lines of hers are as exactly true in all respects as her lines on the Colorado desert. Her only little baby had gone away from her out from the one narrow room to beyond the darkness; but in

the next narrow room, a stronger woman nursed and rocked and cradled her stronger child, and kept rocking on her heart. And so there and then, out of the agony and desolation, she sang, as she sang only the other day from the desert.

I hear her rocking the baby—
Her room is just next to mine—
And I fancy I feel the dimpled arms
That round her neck entwine,
As she rocks, and rocks the baby,
In the room just next to mine.

I hear her rocking the baby
Each day when the twilight comes,
Oh! I know there's a world of blessing and love
In the "baby-bye" she hums.
I can see the restless fingers
Playing with "mamma's rings,"
And the sweet little smiling, pouting mouth,
That to hers in kissing clings,
As she rocks and sings to the baby,
And dreams as she rocks and sings.

I hear her rocking the baby,
Slower and slower now,
And I know she is leaving her good-night kiss
On its eyes, and cheeks and brow.
From her rocking, rocking, rocking!
I wonder would she start,
Could she know, through the wall between us,
She is rocking on my heart.
While my empty arms are aching
For a form they may not press
And my emptier heart is breaking
In its desolate loneliness,
I list to the rocking, rocking,
In the room just next to mine,
And breathe a prayer in silence
At a mother's broken shrine,
For the woman who rocks the baby
In the room just next to mine.