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THE LIFE OF MILLICENT ROGERS

*Cherie Burns*

FRONTISPIECE: Millicent as she was photographed in 1947 at Falcon's Lair, Rudolph Valentino's former villa in Benedict Canyon overlooking Beverly Hills, which she rented during her pursuit of Clark Gable in Hollywood. (*Archives of the Millicent Rogers Museum, Taos, New Mexico*)

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Design by Meryl Sussman Levavi

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Burns, Cherie.

Searching for beauty : the life of Millicent Rogers / Cherie Burns.—1st ed.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references.

ISBN 978-0-312-54724-0

- 1. Rogers, Millicent, d. 1953. 2. Upper class women—United States—Biography.
- 3. Heiresses—United States—Biography. 4. Socialites—United States—Biography.
- 5. Philanthropists—United States—Biography. 6. Models (Persons)—United States—Biography. 7. Art—Collectors and collecting—United States—Biography 8. Rogers, Millicent, d. 1953—Relations with men. 9. Taos (N.M.)—Biography. 10. Taos (N.M.)—Intellectual life—20th century. I. Title.

CT275.R763B87 2011

978.9'53054092—dc23

[B]

2011019821

First Edition: September 2011

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

C H A P T E R   O N E

# Farewell to an Heiress

JANUARY 1953

THE PROCESSION OF MOURNERS WOUND ALONG THE RUTTED unpaved road toward a weedy little graveyard next to Indian land. Behind it tolled the bells of Our Lady of Guadalupe Church in town; ahead of it rose Taos Mountain, the Sacred Mountain, all white with its peak hidden in the clouds. Brightly colored plastic flowers, indigenous to Spanish gravesites, bloomed from decorated crosses and gravestones in the high-desert resting place for local Spanish families and anglos. Millicent Rogers, in a manner as improbable yet fitting as so much of her unsettled life, was going home.

Taos, New Mexico, had long captivated artists, bohemians, scamps, and freethinking souls from elsewhere, who settled into its hive of quirky adobe houses at the feet of the Sangre de Cristo Mountains. Millicent Rogers had finally been one of them. She had been one of the most beautiful and richest women in America, perhaps the world. The toast of barons, industrialists, and royalty for almost five decades, she was known and admired in the fashion ateliers of Paris, London, and New York. Her face and fashions had appeared in *Vogue* and

*Harper's Bazaar* all her life. She had loved a constellation of spectacular men. Now that the grand arc of her life had come to an end she was laid, as she requested, with her head facing Taos Mountain, next to the pueblo village and Indian people whom she had fallen nearly desperately in love with during the last six years of her life.

One mourner, the critic and writer William Goyen, wrote of the day,

The ceremony was a dreadful small-town ceremony in the graveyard produced by the local funeral home.... A sort of Muzak chimed a mawkish hymn. We all gathered round while the priest said his words, and a brilliant game rooster suddenly leapt to a fence just to one side of the grave and crowed. When the brief ceremony was over, Benito, the young Indian who had been in love with Millicent—wild, with flowing black hair to his shoulders, and flowers in his hair, and bedecked with bracelets, necklaces, beads, and drunk—and who had been held back, sullen and grief-stricken until now, rushed from the background and broke through the crowd toward the grave, crying out. But he was caught and held back by other Indians.<sup>1</sup>

Goyen's cosmopolitan eye noted that the funeral was attended by "the rich and celebrated from various parts of the world." One English aristocrat, Dorothy Brett, got her car ahead of the hearse and out of grief or her own haphazard driving habit, zigzagged the whole procession along the road.

Millicent's three sons had come: the eldest, wearing a cutaway suit, was the product of her ill-fated elopement with an Austrian nobleman when she was twenty-one, the other two were sons from her second marriage to an Argentine aristocrat that had also ended in divorce. Millicent's mother, Mary Rogers, a dowager from the East Coast, had arrived after a three-day train trip in her own railroad car, a legacy from a life underwritten by an oil and railroad fortune that had also richly funded her daughter's stylish life. The funeral was postponed for

several days to allow for her arrival. Mary had quietly asserted that under these circumstances the rail companies could accommodate her request to make the trip without a train change, and they had.

There was a certain incongruity for the writer Goyen, and perhaps to others on the scene, that these people of pedigree and wealth were gathered together to say their good-byes to a high-flying daughter, mother, friend, and lover as she was lowered into such a humble gravesite. Yet she had toward the end of her life taken refuge, sought peace and beauty, in elemental things. Her quest had led her to Taos. Though true happiness seemed always to elude her, Millicent claimed to her youngest son in a letter months before her death, an event she felt approaching at age fifty, that she was finally at peace. It would offer some comfort to her survivors.

Her life, like her funeral, had been distinctive, even unpredictable. During her time in Taos, she had deliberately befriended the Indians from the pueblo and they came to her funeral in numbers unprecedented to mourn the death of an outsider. Draped in the colorful blankets that they wore against the cold in winter and for celebrations, they appeared to bid her safe journey to the afterlife and farewell, in a rainbow of reds, blues, and yellows, their shiny black hair drawn back into buns and plaits, their heads bowed. They stood respectfully in a riot of color against the wide, Western winter sky.

Millicent was dressed as finely in her mahogany coffin as she had been in life. She wore an Apache-style dress made for her by her designer friend and fashion legend Elsa Schiaparelli. A great silver concho belt was twined at her waist. The large, mostly turquoise, rings that she favored were on her hands and a fine Indian chief blanket was wrapped around her. There was a brief Catholic ceremony. In a late life conversion, Millicent had become a Catholic the week before her death. After Benito's display of grief, most of the mourners looked away or hurried to their cars to leave.

For almost no one who left the Sierra Vista Cemetery on that day, had Millicent Rogers truly been put to rest. Her life and image would be reflected for decades to come through her vast belongings,

words, old photographs, and history. She would be reinvented again and again by the fashion world, which she influenced in almost equal parts in life and after death. She cast a long shadow even from the grave on her family, and her three sons would variously strive to uphold, repudiate, and re-create her legend. With each subsequent year, her true self would seem to fade and grow faint, like a photograph exposed to the harsh New Mexican sun, while her heirs continued to retouch it. It would become more and more difficult to separate the truths of her life from the myth, especially because in life Millicent had been a restless soul, one who seldom stayed for long in one place. She was mistress of the grand gesture and exercised a practiced inscrutability, which no doubt accounted for much of her allure.

Her life arched over half a century of American history and across two continents. Born in the Edwardian era, she died just as the first signs of the upheaval of the sixties were visible on Taos's funky horizon. The beginning of her remarkable trajectory, like the origin of so many American sagas of the twentieth century, lay in the crystallization of wealth that produced great fortunes in the late 1800s. Her life and its trappings would have inspired an Edith Wharton heroine. With good looks, plenty of money, and a personal elegance that seemed to transcend both, she sampled life widely, but never fully invested. She was both a debutante and a flapper of the twenties, and she had no sooner come of age than she eloped with a titled European as the most daring daughters of great wealth did after the first World War. There were two more husbands and many more high-profile lovers as she lived the ex-patriot high life of Europe before World War II, and joined into the heady whirl of wartime Washington during the war. When the conflict ended, still recognized as a fashion trendsetter, she joined the new front of American glamour in Hollywood. There was a fling with the movie star Clark Gable, and then her constant quest for beauty in fashion, art, men—all the world around her—led her to Taos, where she found, finally, unexpected fulfillment. It was more than most women dream of, accomplished in five decades. Then at fifty she was dead.

# *Fortune and Family*

A GLAMOROUS LIFE OF TRAVEL, HIGH FASHION, AND SUPERSTAR SOCIAL STATUS like the one that Millicent Rogers led required a gusher of money in early twentieth century America. Wealth like that was not drawn from widely held corporations, but from privately won fortunes generated by hard-driven individuals who often had little or no formal training or background in their fields. Millicent Rogers' good fortunes sprang from such a man, her paternal grandfather, who in 1860 was a young grocery clerk contemplating a career in a dying industry, whaling.

Whaling was what most young men aspired to in Fairhaven, Massachusetts, across the harbor from New Bedford. But like his father who had given it a try before he decided to open a grocery store, Henry Huttleston Rogers didn't find whaling his calling. The low wages and three-year voyages had little appeal for "Hen" as the dark and slim young man was known around town. He worked in the family's Union Grocery store, carried newspapers, and delivered groceries with a horse and cart. There was little exceptional about him except for his occasional acting performances at Phoenix Hall,

the local theater. He had taken time out of high school after his sophomore year to apprentice himself to an architect, but much to his mother's relief, he returned to school. He didn't particularly like architecture, either. After graduation he worked as a railroad brakeman and baggageman, living at home with his family in order to save money. He had a sweetheart, Abigail Gifford, a classmate and fellow thespian who lived three blocks away, and marriage was the logical next step. But Hen had a restless streak.

Whalers, and those who depended on the whaling industry like the citizens of Fairhaven and New Bedford, had taken note with foreboding in 1854 when petroleum was discovered in western Pennsylvania. The first successful drilling rig was put into use in Titusville, Pennsylvania, in 1859, and within five years the output of one single well exceeded the cumulative oil output of Europe for the previous two hundred years. Kerosene, the principal product of petroleum and natural gas, would soon replace whale oil for lighting in North America.

Whaling had reached its peak in 1857, when Henry was seventeen. He'd heard townspeople, many of whom depended on whaling for their livelihood, talk about the new competition from Scandinavia. Some like Abigail's father, a whaler whose whaling crews and vessels were diverted to assist in blockading the Confederate coastal areas and ports during the Civil War, said that its best days were over. Whaling no longer looked like a good bet for an enterprising young man in New England. Henry, in one of the defining moments of his life (and to some degree, United States economic history), pooled his \$600 savings with his friend Charles Ellis and the two of them set out for western Pennsylvania.

Full of trepidation and enthusiasm, the young partners invested in a refinery and gave it a Native American name from home, Wamsutta. When Henry Rogers returned home a year later, the Wamsutta Oil Refinery had made them \$30,000, three times what an average three-year whaling voyage would earn back in Fairhaven or New Bedford. In short order he married Abbie Gifford and took her back to the oil fields of Pennsylvania. The future looked promising for the

young couple, though Abbie and her husband set up housekeeping in a one-room shack along Oil Creek to be near the Wamsutta Oil Refinery.

Things moved quickly for Ellis and Rogers. The challenges were often sudden and dramatic. They partnered with a man Ellis had sold whale oil to in Fairhaven, Charles Pratt, the owner of a paint and oil company. At first the going was rough and Ellis lost heart, but Rogers persevered. He went to see Pratt, and took responsibility for the debt that he and Ellis had incurred in their contract to provide crude oil to Pratt's business. It was a bold move, and Pratt was impressed enough with his young partner's grit to make Rogers foreman of his Brooklyn refinery. Rogers moved his wife and baby daughter to Brooklyn and in the next few years became indispensable to the Pratt operation. A hard and conscientious worker, Rogers often slept three hours a night rolled up in a blanket by the side of a still.<sup>1</sup> Abbie dutifully slipped in to the refinery to bring him his dinner. Their efforts were rewarded when Pratt made Henry the manager of Pratt's oil refinery. Soon he became a partner in the business.

Meanwhile, a young man in Cleveland, Ohio, was ambitiously learning the shipping business. John D. Rockefeller believed that the real money to be made from the oil industry would not be made from oil itself, but from hauling and refining it. By 1863 the first railroad was completed, reaching into the heart of the oil region, and refineries sprouted up alongside it almost overnight. The Atlantic and Great Western Railroad in Cleveland carried 115 million barrels of petroleum in 1863 and became the principal oil carrier in the country. Rockefeller had started a company, Clark and Rockefeller, with eighteen hundred dollars, a thousand of it borrowed from his father. Seeing the growth in oil, he put an additional four thousand dollars into the business, and never looked back.

An idea to make common cause between the producers of oil and its shippers was beginning to take shape in his mind. If a large refiner could provide a steady high volume of oil to the railroads for shipping, thought Rockefeller and his team, they could corner the market.

Secretly, Rockefeller and his partners convinced other large refiners to join him in a monopoly that would control the oil business in return for stock in the company. It was ruthless business. “... If you don’t sell your property to us, it will be valueless and those who refuse will be crushed,” John D. Rockefeller told his own brother, Frank.<sup>2</sup>

The Charles Pratt Company was one of the refineries that joined in Rockefeller’s clandestine plan to buy up as much of the local competition as possible before their coup was widely recognized. Pratt’s involvement was fortuitous for Henry Rogers, who had earlier been noted for his initial efforts *against* Rockefeller’s plan to control oil shipping rates. Rockefeller’s biographers Peter Collier and David Horowitz, note that Pratt brought to the merger “... the considerable daring of Henry H. Rogers.” Both sides operated expediently. Rockefeller saw a cunning and determined talent in the young Henry Rogers. Rogers had resisted Rockefeller’s steamrolling of the refiners, but he turned around when he and Charles Pratt extracted terms for their participation in a company that would guarantee them jobs and financial security. Pratt’s son became Secretary of Standard Oil and his father’s protégé, Rogers, was vice president by 1890.

The Standard Oil Company, as Rockefeller’s brainchild became, was the most spectacular success story in business history. It was indisputably the most powerful industrial organization in the nation, and the most visible symbol of growing American might abroad. But the “Standard Oil Gang,” as the group became known, was feared and admired. “There is no question about it but these men are smarter than I am a great deal... I never came in contact with any class of men as smart and able as they are in their business,” William Vanderbilt told a government investigation into railroad rates.<sup>3</sup> Rockefeller believed almost religiously in letting each executive do what he wanted to do and what he could do best. Rogers proved himself an able hatchet man and strategist. In 1899 he bought the Anaconda Copper Mining Company for \$39 million in a deal that required the seller to hold back the purchase check long enough to allow him to organize the Amalgamated Copper Company and transfer all the Anaconda

mines to it, issuing \$75 million worth of shares in the new corporation. He and his fellow executives borrowed money on these shares, offered the stock to the public, and pocketed \$36 million on no investment at all. Such lethal maneuvers earned Rogers the name “Hellhound of Wall Street.” He, like other robber barons, stonewalled investigations into the secretive dealings of The Standard Oil Trust. “Relentless, ravenous, ruthless as a shark, knowing no law of God or man in the execution of his purpose,” the author Thomas W. Lawson said of Rogers in his book *Frenzied Finance: The Crime of Amalgamated*, in 1905. Rogers proudly managed to outsmart the trustbusters of the day in order to keep the profits of Rockefeller’s monopoly for himself and other trustees of the company.

He had risen into the rarified society of millionaires who were not only rich enough to live well, but were a class of Americans unto themselves. They thrived on their own business matters and companionship. Walking down the streets in their top hats, chesterfield coats, and freshly shined shoes, they looked even a breed apart. The public both admired their acumen and reviled them for the ruthless tactics and exploitation of the market.

John D. Rockefeller was considered a single-focused business magnate with few other interests and friends outside of his work, but Henry Rogers was distinguished by his duality. The tabloid journalists called him the “Jekyll and Hyde of Wall Street”; on one hand a steely cold businessman, and on the other a generous family man, wit, and raconteur. He and Abbie had five daughters during the first ten years of their marriage, and the growing family continued to move to quarters appropriate to its size and growing wealth in America’s Gilded Age. They began on 26 East Fifty-seventh Street, but by the turn of the century had moved to a lavish townhouse at 3 East Eighty-first Street. Rogers also owned a building on East Fifty-seventh Street that served as a garage and stable for his collection of automobiles, horses, and carriages. In 1894 he began building an eighty-five-room mansion on Fourth Street in Fairhaven, where he and his family spent weekends and summers. The house was equipped with its own gas

and electric plant, stables, and greenhouses and gardens for Abbie's prized chrysanthemums.

Rogers played his dual role well. He went to church regularly, supported the arts, and was a member of half a dozen social clubs. He often visited his widowed mother in Fairhaven and kept up with old friends, who still called him Hen. He built the Rogers School, a gift to the Fairhaven community school, and put out the town's eyes with a costly Unitarian church and parsonage, in addition to a public library and town hall, the former designed in Italian Renaissance style with granite and terra-cotta, the interior decorated to rival a sumptuous Italian interior with carved scrolls, window pilasters, and copies of Italian bas-reliefs. His charity put him in touch with persons outside his own walk of life, and was responsible for a remarkable and enduring friendship with the writer Mark Twain. Twain had unwisely invested almost his entire worth in an unsuccessful enterprise to construct a typesetting machine—an endeavor that threatened to ruin him financially—until his newfound friend assumed some of his indebtedness and stepped in to rescue the business plan. “I owe more to Henry Rogers than to any other man whom I have known,” Twain wrote in a particular tribute to his friend some years later.<sup>4</sup> Twain, in turn, directed Rogers’ generosity to Helen Keller and Booker T. Washington. The bonds between Twain and Rogers went beyond financial expediency. Photos of them, two distinguished looking older men with fluffy white mustaches (Twain’s punctuated by a cigar), onboard Rogers’ steam yacht, *Kanawah*, attests to their friendship. Twain would outlive Rogers and remain a fast friend of Rogers’ only son, Henry Huttleston Rogers Jr., born in 1879.<sup>5</sup>

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