

KATE DOUGLAS WIGGIN

Rebecca
OF
SUNNYBROOK FARM



Illustration by Alice H. Hogan Text unchanged

Rebecca of Sunnybrook Farm

KATE DOUGLAS WIGGIN



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To My Mother

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Her eyes as stars of twilight fair,
Like twilights too her dusty hair,
But all things else about her drawn
From May-time and the cheerful dawn,
A dancing shape, an image gay,
To haunt, to startle, and way-lay.

—*Wordsworth*

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INTRODUCTION

Rebecca of Sunnybrook Farm is the fresh, delightful story of Rebecca Randall, a quaint little ten-year-old girl who, because of her family's straitened circumstances, is sent to live with her spinster aunts, Miranda and Jane. Although Rebecca at first is a trial, to Aunt Miranda at least, she finds a friend in Emma Jane Perkins and a hero-admirer in Mr. Adam Ladd, whom she calls "Mr. Aladdin." The book tells of her growing up and ends with her graduation from Wareham Academy in Maine, ready to become a teacher. The lasting popularity of the story is due largely to Rebecca Rowena, with a name straight out of *Ivanhoe*, and a wholesome charm, originality, and optimistic spirit which captivate the reader, just as they captivate all the characters in the book itself.

The descriptions of Rebecca are particularly mem-

orable, from the time we first see her, with her dress on hindside foremost because there were so many brothers and sisters to dress that she always "buttoned in front," until she stands, starry-eyed, at the threshold of womanhood.

Starry-eyed is the epithet that remains with us. For Rebecca's eyes were, like faith, "the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen."

"Under her delicately etched brows they glowed like two stars, their dancing lights half hidden in lustrous darkness. Their glance was eager and full of interest, yet never satisfied; their steadfast gaze was brilliant and mysterious, and had the effect of looking directly through the obvious to something beyond, in the object, in the landscape, in you. They had never been accounted for, Rebecca's eyes. The school teacher and the minister at Temperance had tried and failed; the young artist who came for the summer to sketch the red barn, the ruined mill, and the bridge ended by giving up all these local beauties and devoting himself to the face of a child,—a small, plain face, illuminated by a pair of eyes carrying such messages, such suggestions, such hints of sleeping power and insight, that one never tired of looking into their shining depths, nor of fancying that what one saw there was a reflection of one's own thought."

Aunt Jane said it more briefly. "You look for all the world," she told Rebecca wonderingly, "as if you did have a lamp burning inside you."

Often Rebecca's "beauty days" are unforgettable.

“Rebecca’s hair was loosened and falling over her forehead in ruffled waves; her eyes were brilliant, her cheeks crimson; there was a hint of everything in the girl’s face—of sensitiveness and delicacy as well as of ardor; there was the sweetness of the mayflower and the strength of the young oak.”

Rebecca’s actions are as engaging and as unpredictable as her looks. To punish herself for what she decided was selfishness, she throws her beloved parasol into the well. To help the poverty-ridden Simpson family, Rebecca, with Mary Jane, decides to sell soap from the Excelsior Soap Company and get a banquet lamp for the Simpsons. When she has done this, she feels a thrill of happiness every time she sees the glow of the incongruous lamp lightening the gloom of the Simpson farmhouse. When “Mr. Aladdin” buys three hundred cakes of soap from her and she falls off his porch in astonishment, we are as enchanted with her as is her newly found friend.

What Rebecca has to say is also memorable: “I’d like to eat color and drink it and sleep in it . . . I’d be a scarlet maple.”

One has the feeling that Rebecca was plucky and dauntless even at three. “I might be frightened,” she says. “But I’d be ashamed to run.”

And when disappointment threatens to spoil her plans for the future, she consoles herself: “To be alive makes up for everything; there ought to be fears in my heart, but there aren’t; something stronger sweeps them out like the wind.”

We are both amused and touched when she borrows the Simpson baby to stay at night because her aunts’

house was dull without babies. "At the farm there was always a nice fresh baby to cuddle," she explains. "There were too many, but that's not half as bad as none at all."

The other characters in the book come to life, too, almost as if at Rebecca's touch. Aunt Miranda, just, economical, industrious, church-going, with her sharp voice, knotty fingers, and straight, thin lips, had wanted Hannah, Rebecca's older and more docile sister, when it became obvious that she must help out Mrs. Randall by taking one of the children. Miranda was at first distrustful of Rebecca, the daughter of Lorenzo de Medici Randall, who had been a music teacher with long hair, white hands, and polished manners, and who had managed, not only to avoid making money but also to spend his wife's small fortune, die, and leave her with six children. But after Rebecca represented the Sawyer family at the Aid Society in church and invited Reverend and Mrs. Burch and their family to stay overnight, Miranda had become secretly proud of Rebecca, especially when Dean Milliken told her that Rebecca reminded him of Isaac Sawyer, Miranda's father. So, though not entirely changed, Miranda becomes less harsh and more hopeful, with Rebecca the secret core of her hope.

As for Aunt Jane, who had gone to a boarding school and who also had the "inestimable advantage of a sorrow" in her youthful love affair with Tom Carter, who had gone to war and died, life supplies a motive so long lacking. Jane, whose quiet voice and understanding eyes had encouraged Rebecca in the early difficult days, finds real happiness in her young niece.

All of her friends are affected by Rebecca. Emily Maxwell, her high-school English teacher, describes Rebecca as "a rare pearl." Uncle Jerry, the stagecoach driver, who delivered Rebecca to her aunts' home on the first day of the story, and Aunt Sarah Cobb, his wife, find their aging days brightened by Rebecca's presence, and, in turn, offer her strength in her one moment of weakness. And Adam Ladd is bewitched by Rebecca from the day when she sells him three hundred bars of soap to the day of her graduation from boarding school when he tells her, "I am glad I met the child, proud I knew the girl, longing to know the woman."

There are moments of suspense, of humor, and of sadness in the story, but it is the glowing humor, the human kindness, and the friendly charm of its heroine that has kept *Rebecca of Sunnybrook Farm* a classic and its heroine a national character since the book was first published in 1903. It is no mere truism to say that here is a book which every child and every grownup should read.

Kate Douglas Wiggin, its author, who was born in 1856 and died in 1923, was a widely popular American writer of children's books. Best known for *The Birds' Christmas Carol* and *Rebecca of Sunnybrook Farm*, she also wrote a sequel entitled *New Chronicles of Rebecca*. In 1910, *Rebecca of Sunnybrook Farm* was dramatized and presented on the stage with Mabel Taliafero, who was then a well-known actress, in the leading role.

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I — "We are Seven"

The old stage coach was rumbling along the dusty road that runs from Maplewood to Riverboro. The day was as warm as midsummer, though it was only the middle of May, and Mr. Jeremiah Cobb was favoring the horses as much as possible, yet never losing sight of the fact that he carried the mail. The hills were many, and the reins lay loosely in his hands as he lolled back in his seat and extended one foot and leg luxuriously over the dashboard. His brimmed hat of worn felt was well pulled over his eyes, and he revolved a quid of tobacco in his left cheek.

There was one passenger in the coach,—a small dark-haired person in a glossy buff calico dress. She was so slender and so stiffly starched that she slid from space to space on the leather cushions, though she braced herself against the middle seat with her feet and extended her cotton-gloved hands on each side, in order to maintain some sort of balance. Whenever the wheels sank farther than usual into a rut, or jolted suddenly over a stone, she bounded involuntarily into the air, came down again, pushed back her funny little straw hat, and picked up or settled more firmly a small pink sunshade, which seemed to be her chief responsibility,—unless we except a bead purse, into which she looked whenever the condition of the roads would permit, finding great apparent satisfaction in that its precious contents neither disappeared nor grew less. Mr. Cobb guessed nothing of these har-

assing details of travel, his business being to carry people to their destinations, not, necessarily, to make them comfortable on the way. Indeed he had forgotten the very existence of this one unnoteworthy little passenger.

When he was about to leave the post-office in Maplewood that morning, a woman had alighted from a wagon, and coming up to him, inquired whether this were the Riverboro stage, and if he were Mr. Cobb. Being answered in the affirmative, she nodded to a child who was eagerly waiting for the answer, and who ran towards her as if she feared to be a moment too late. The child might have been ten or eleven years old perhaps, but whatever the number of her summers, she had an air of being small for her age. Her mother helped her into the stage coach, deposited a bundle and a bouquet of lilacs beside her, superintended the "roping on" behind of an old hair trunk, and finally paid the fare, counting out the silver with great care.

"I want you should take her to my sisters' in Riverboro," she said. "Do you know Mirandy and Jane Sawyer? They live in the brick house."

Lord bless your soul, he knew 'em as well as if he'd made 'em!

"Well, she's going there, and they're expecting her. Will you keep an eye on her, please? If she can get out anywhere and get with folks, or get anybody in to keep her company, she'll do it. Good-by, Rebecca; try not to get into any mischief, and sit quiet, so you'll look neat an' nice when you get there. Don't be any trouble to Mr. Cobb.—You see, she's kind of excited.—We came on the cars from Temperance yesterday, slept all night at my cousin's, and drove from her house—eight miles it is—this morning."

"Good-by, mother, don't worry; you know it isn't as if I hadn't traveled before."

The woman gave a short sardonic laugh and said

in an explanatory way to Mr. Cobb, "She's been to Wareham and stayed over night; that isn't much to be journey-proud on!"

"It was *traveling*, mother," said the child eagerly and willfully. "It was leaving the farm, and putting up lunch in a basket, and a little riding and a little steam cars, and we carried our nightgowns."

"Don't tell the whole village about it, if we did," said the mother, interrupting the reminiscences of this experienced voyager. "Haven't I told you before," she whispered, in a last attempt at discipline, "that you shouldn't talk about nightgowns and stockings and—things like that, in a loud tone of voice, and especially when there's men folks round?"

"I know, mother, I know, and I won't. All I want to say is"—here Mr. Cobb gave a cluck, slapped the reins, and the horses started sedately on their daily task—"all I want to say is that it is a journey when"—the stage was really under way now and Rebecca had to put her head out of the window over the door in order to finish her sentence—"it is a journey when you carry a nightgown!"

The objectionable word, uttered in a high treble, floated back to the offended ears of Mrs. Randall, who watched the stage out of sight, gathered up her packages from the bench at the store door, and stepped into the wagon that had been standing at the hitching-post. As she turned the horse's head towards home she rose to her feet for a moment, and shading her eyes with her hand, looked at a cloud of dust in the dim distance.

"Mirandy'll have her hands full, I guess," she said to herself; "but I shouldn't wonder if it would be the making of Rebecca."

All this had been half an hour ago, and the sun, the heat, the dust, the contemplation of errands to be done in the great metropolis of Milltown, had lulled

Mr. Cobb's never active mind into complete oblivion as to his promise of keeping an eye on Rebecca.

Suddenly he heard a small voice above the rattle and rumble of the wheels and the creaking of the harness. At first he thought it was a cricket, a tree toad, or a bird, but having determined the direction from which it came, he turned his head over his shoulder and saw a small shape hanging as far out of the window as safety would allow. A long black braid of hair swung with the motion of the coach; the child held her hat in one hand and with the other made ineffectual attempts to stab the driver with her microscopic sunshade.

"Please let me speak!" she called.

Mr. Cobb drew up the horses obediently.

"Does it cost any more to ride up there with you?" she asked. "It's so slippery and shiny down here, and the stage is so much too big for me, that I rattle round in it till I'm most black and blue. And the windows are so small I can only see pieces of things, and I've most broken my neck stretching round to find out whether my trunk has fallen off the back. It's my mother's trunk, and she's very choice of it."

Mr. Cobb waited until this flow of conversation, or more properly speaking this flood of criticism, had ceased, and then said jocularly:—

"You can come up if you want to; there ain't no extry charge to sit side o' me." Whereupon he helped her out, "boosted" her up to the front seat, and resumed his own place.

Rebecca sat down carefully, smoothing her dress under her with painstaking precision, and putting her sunshade under its extended folds between the driver and herself. This done she pushed back her hat, pulled up her darned white cotton gloves, and said delightedly:—

"Oh! this is better! This is like traveling! I am a real