

ROSE: A WACASSET ROMANCE.

BY LULU WHEATON MITCHELL.

CHAPTER I.

I have a great deal of obstinacy about me, for a small and rather meek-appearing woman, but I never thought of opposing any of old Doctor Percival's orders. Dear me, no; not even when he insisted that I should go to Wacasset in May. I submitted as a matter of course, after the manner of Doctor Percival's patients in general, thought it was a month too early.

"You need toning up, Miss Sterling; need salt winds and salt water. Fidgeting and fussing over your aid society and your benevolent association and your soup kitchens has drawn too heavily on the vital forces. There's no sense in your wearing yourself out for an ungrateful set of shiftless people, with never a 'thank you' for your time and money and strength. But if you don't take proper care of yourself I won't be answerable for consequences this summer."

Here the good old doctor paused and frowned and tried to look very fierce. But nature had given him a pair of kindly blue eyes which frustrated such attempts at severity. Sharp eyes they were, to have detected threatening symptoms of which I myself was scarcely conscious. But I was weary and worn out after a hard and busy winter, and so it came to pass that instead of rebelling against Wacasset in May, I set to work packing my trunk with an actual feeling of relief. There were few passengers on the boat so early in the season, and when the bell was rung noisily and "Wacasset!" echoed through the salon, it seemed as if there was a good deal of ado being made over the one lady in gray who was getting off, after her one unpretentious trunk had been landed end over end, by a stout deck hand on the wharf.

There was nothing to stop for at Wacasset, and the *Twilight* moved away into the fog, taking her handful of passengers, whose faces, as long as any were distinguishable, seemed to express unbounded amazement that a well-dressed woman, evidently from civilized centres, should be getting off at that rude, thinly settled, little island, with a trunk.

At Wacasset, however, I had spent my summers for a number of years, with such regularity that I knew every family living in the rough cottages sprinkled among the rocky hills and along the shores,—father and son, most of them,—for it was fifteen years ago that I first climbed over these rocks and ran down these sloping hillsides with the light, tireless feet of twenty.

The sun of my life rose and set here. Yonder, in the bay, is the spot where the brave young fellow, whose wife I was to have been, went down beneath the sparkling waters. It is a subject I rarely mention, and I will not enlarge upon it in these pages. But knowing this you will understand better, perhaps, how it is that the unattractive little island is dear to me, and how summer after summer sees me here, a grave, middle-aged woman, rambling about with sketch-book or magazine, or sitting on the rocks chatting with the old light-house keeper, John Lancaster. He is a quiet, pleasant-spoken man, who keeps the lamps "trimmed and burning," and—he knew my Robert.

CHAPTER II.

Wacasset, I decide shortly, is little changed. The patches of verdure show a brighter green against the rocky background, and the sunshine lacks the fervency of July, as it shines upon me, or rather my light cotton umbrella top, as I stroll over the yellow sand.

Here and there a new baby's blinking eyes and tow head are exhibited for admiring inspection, and I have the privilege of naming the very last arrival, a

tiny morsel of humanity rolled in flannel and punching its fat hands into its eyes (after the manner of very young infants) the moment it is awakened by the sound of my voice addressing its mother.

"This makes the thirteenth, Mrs. Kent?"

I cannot help the surprised tone.

"The thirteenth, 'm." A baker's dozen, exactly. I won't say 's we wanted this one, but we'll find a way to take care of her. The other children are growing up fast. Ted and Jem go with their father, now, and Dolly and Emmie both have good places in the factory at Lowell."

The tired woman turned in bed restlessly, and I shook up her pillows and made her some fresh lemonade. The practice of the past winter stood me in good stead.

"And Rose would have it that nobody but you must name her, though we didn't look for you so early,—not for a month or two. Rose, she?"

But I interrupted:—

"Where is Rose? I want to see her. She is not away from home, surely?"

"I don't see 's we could let Rose go, she's that handy and helpful about,—always was. Hark! that sounds like her step, now; she's been to carry old Granny Hardy some curd cheese."

A tall, full-formed girl entered and set the pail she carried on a shelf, before she saw me.

"Rose! you look as fresh as the flower you are named for," I exclaimed, as with outstretched hands she stepped quickly toward me. "I have been sitting with your mother until you came. And you are well?—but there is no need of asking it—and happy?"

"Quite well, thank you, ma'am."

Rose's bright smile of greeting showed the even rows of white, sound teeth between her pretty lips. Her warm-hued, chestnut curls clung about the roundest, whitest neck in the world, and the hands she gave me in a close, friendly clasp, though brown as a berry, were as well formed as those of many a Boston belle. My bonny Rose! Memory carried me back to a day when Robert had lifted her to his shoulder and carried her so, as we walked up and down together in the twilight, she scattering, as we went, the loosening petals of a handful of late roses, upon our shoulders. He had been fond of the pretty child, and year after year as I had seen her pass through childhood to the ripe beauty of her twentieth year, she had grown into my heart with her winsome ways; she seemed to link me, as no other could, with the golden past.

Was I mistaken, or had a change come over Rose, which, in the first moment of meeting, I had overlooked? It seemed to me, as we sat in the sunny doorway, talking in low tones, that a shadow never seen before dwelt in those bright eyes, and the merry laugh rarely fell from her lips. I was an old friend,—she had told me last year that she had promised to marry Jack Lancaster, so I ventured to whisper, "What is it, Rose, that troubles you? If it is a lover's quarrel, they are more sweet than bitter in the end, as lovers say."

She looked up with "Haven't you heard?" and then a querulous voice sounded from the bed, and I had no more time to speak to her. I named the baby Austice, after my mother. A sweet, old-fashioned name,—it always reminds me of caraway.

CHAPTER III.

I have been sunning myself on the rocks a good hour. The tide is out, and I amuse myself by poking at some unhappy barnacles with the tip of my umbrella. There are all sorts of curious, sprawling things in the little shallow pools, getting as close in the shelter of their prison walls as circumstances and the awkwardness of their ungainly bodies will allow. All around float lovely seaweed fringes; I do not disenchant myself by removing any of it from its native element, but sit contentedly observing its

away beauty as it moves lazily with the motion of the water. The salt air has abundantly borne out Doctor Percival's anticipations. Already I feel new life in my veins. I am revolving in my mind a project of bringing home of my pale, peaked, little Boston waifs to Wacasset, when I hear a man's heavy step, and turn to behold my old friend, John Lancaster. It is the first time I have seen him since my arrival.

He gave a tug to his cap, and in response to my invitation, sits down near me, fingering his pipe.

"Well, John, still at your old post, I see," I said by way of preliminary, as John, sitting with his eyes turned toward the far horizon, did not seem ready with any remark.

"An' like to stay, Miss Grace, till one or the other o' us pegs out."

I looked at the staunch, weather-beaten light-house, standing like an impassive sentinel on the point beyond, and then at the keeper, grizzled and gray.

"You're thinkin' it's like to be me that tumbles first, Miss Grace. Your eyes tell what you're thinkin' about, same as they allus did."

"When Jack comes home from his trip and settles down into a landsman, he will be able to assist you. Those lamps, I know, make a great deal of work, and you are getting along in years, John, to be going up and down such steep flights of stairs every day. And the responsibility! think of it, in the terrible storms we have off the point."

I had been attending to my barnacles, and was not prepared for the change on the old man's face as I looked up, at these words spoken quietly, but with an effort.

"They haven't told you then—about—my—trouble?"

I saw it was indeed trouble. I shook my head, in silence.

The old keeper loosened his neck-handkerchief, and with his eyes fixed on one point afar out, told me regarding his trouble. It was about the only person in the world belonging to him,—his Jack.

I cannot write down the old man's story as he gave it, with choking pauses, broken words, and unfinished sentences, eloquent of his grief. The language was neither fine nor grammatical,—it might look poorly in print. You would not feel its pathos, for you did not sit beside the bowed figure of the roughly clothed, weather-beaten, old keeper, and feel your heart aching and your cheeks getting wet at the sound of his voice.

But briefly it was this:—

In one of the storms so prevalent there in late autumn, the boat Jack sailed in was driven on the rocks and went down in a terrible gale.

The Boston papers had given an account of the disaster, but I had seen no copy containing the names of the crew.

"There was no doubt that Jack had been aboard?" I ventured.

The old man shook his head; they had heard nothing since, not a word or "a bit o' writin'."

I said what I could of comfort, and came away, leaving the keeper sitting motionless in the bright sunshine, his eyes never wandering from that fixed, distant point.

"And oh, my poor Rose," I thought.

As I glanced up to the brow of the hill I saw Rose. She was not alone. Her companion was a gentleman of about thirty-five years of age. He wore brown whiskers, English cut, and his clothes fitted well.

CHAPTER IV.

The little Austice threw up space, and held out her fat arms knowingly whenever she saw me, which was not often of late, for the little house was overfull now that Dolly and Emmie were home for a holiday.

A vague, impalpable shadow had arisen between Rose and me, and though words never gave it substance, it was keenly felt.

Jack Lancaster had been always a great favorite of mine. I had been his trusted confidante, and felt (a foolish notion, possibly) as though responsible for Rose's constancy. So I felt vexed with Rose, that she should so soon be on with the new love, for Mr. Stanley Graham, her companion on the hill, was recognized now as "Rose Kent's city beau." Unjustly vexed, perhaps, for though Rose passively accepted his courteous attentions and companionship in her walks and rows, there was, at times, little of pleasure manifested in her sad eyes, and in her manner an entire absence of coquetish encouragement. Notwithstanding she was envied by every girl on the island, there was no assumption of such new dignity as would indicate the appreciation of her good fortune.

"She doesn't care two pins," was my indignant comment, and the shadow between us deepened. I went less and less frequently as days went by, and when I did stop a few moments, the terror of Mrs. Kent's monologues so jarred on my ears that the subsequent intervals between my calls were lengthened.

Yet I could scarcely bring myself to blame her. A hard-working, disappointed woman all her life, it was most natural that her motherly pride and ambition should desire this match for Rose, very strongly. Rose, too, saw, every hour in the day, innumerable ways in which this sacrifice of herself could brighten the dull horizon of the future for those dear ones in the poverty-pinched home.

Sheltered by high, semicircling rocks, I lounged one clear morning, on the yellow warm sands, just beyond the light-house point. I dreaded to open my magazine. Stanley Graham's bright cynical sketches therein had often proved amusing, but what if my beloved Wacasset was the theme this month of his ruthless pen, embellished, as I half suspected the article might be, with a pen-portrait of Rose, posed sensationally as "The Island Beauty?" The voice of the object of my meditation startled me. He and Rose were standing facing each other, near the water edge. Screened from their view by the high rocks, it seemed wiser to stay than go. He was paler, graver than usual. There had been something decisive between them. Rose kept her head bent down and away as they walked slowly up the sands toward my rocky nook.

"You are very good to ask me again, sir, when you know I can never care for any man as I did for—him," she said, without looking up. "They say some can love twice, but they're not such as me, sir," she continued in a low but earnest tone. "But if you feel the same, now you know how it is with me."

She hesitated, but raised her eyes bravely. He caught eagerly at the faint consent she gave.

"Rose, my own! Dearest! Am I selfish in being so glad? I found, in the few days I spent away from you last week, that my hopes of future happiness and content centred so entirely in you, that I cannot give you up. I wish, dear" (he presses the little brown hand tenderly), "that I could make you half understood how happy you have made me."

Not a suggestion of condescension in speech or tone, though he was so far above her in the social plane.

"He loves her truly," I said, relinquishing my prejudices as I caught a glimpse of his radiant face bent over Rose's lovely brown head. It was not his fault that he was not Jack.

CHAPTER V.

Rose came herself to tell me of her approaching wedding day. We sat in the bay-window of my little parlor, looking towards the sea. Old John walked slowly along the beach. Rose's eyes followed the old man's bent, mournful figure out of sight, and shortly after she laid her brown head down on my lap and cried as if her heart was indeed breaking. I stopped short in a little congratulatory speech I