LADDIN CLASSICS

Kate Douglas Wiggin

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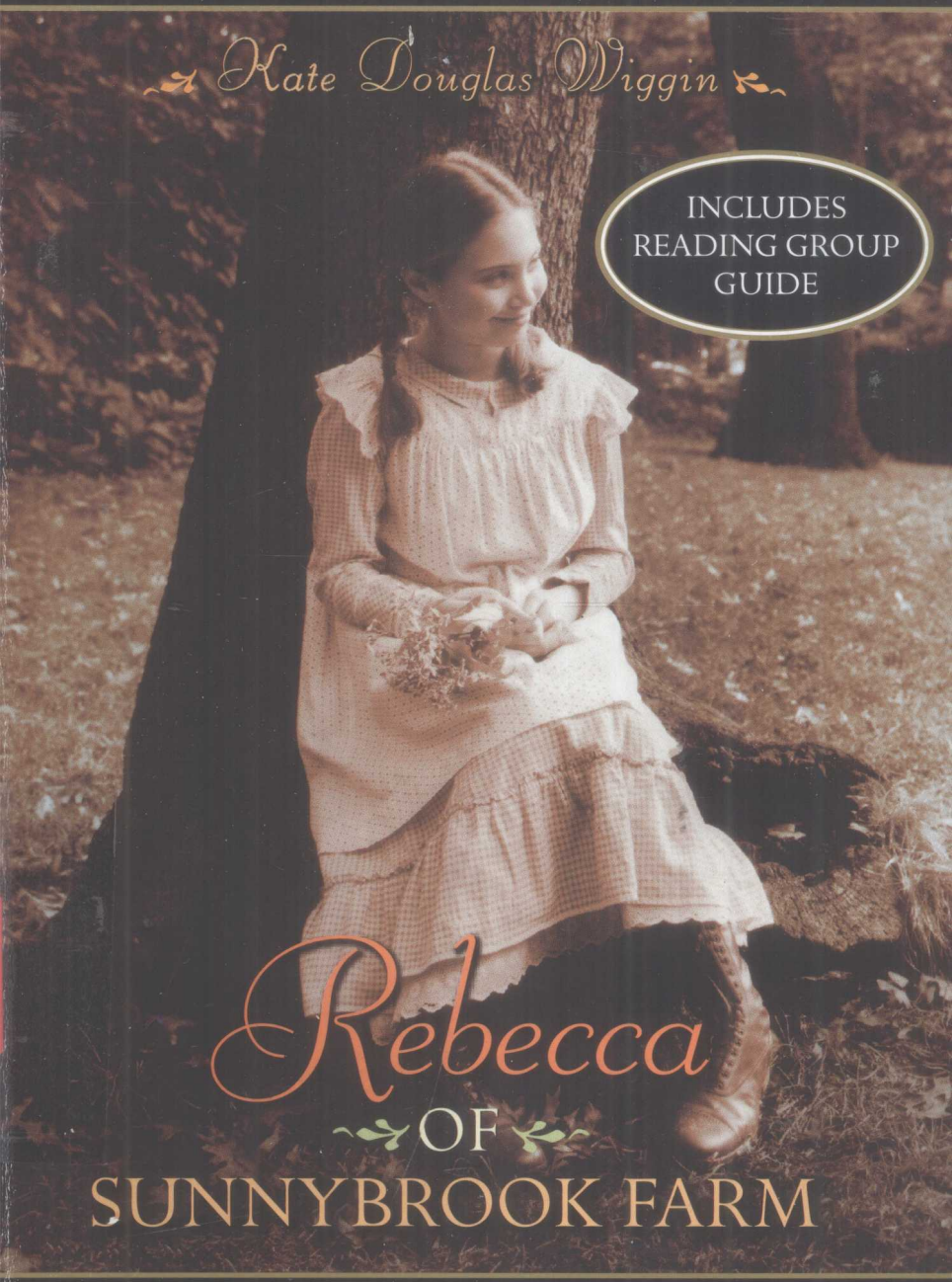

Rebecca OF SUNNYBROOK FARM

With a foreword by Newbery author Marion Dane Bauer

Rebecca OF SUNNYBROOK FARM

Kate Douglas Wiggin

ALADDIN CLASSICS
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Foreword

by Marion Dane Bauer

ONE HUNDRED YEARS AGO a girl named Rebecca was born. Created by Kate Douglas Wiggin, the successful and prolific author of children's books, travel books, plays, and sentimental adult novels, the vivacious girl with the luminous brown eyes became an instant favorite with her public. Even notable literary figure Mark Twain called the novel "beautiful and moving and satisfying." And Rebecca proved to have lasting power, too—*Rebecca of Sunnybrook Farm* is still being read today.

This fresh and original story set the mold for other writers and other stories yet to come, stories in which an "orphan" girl transforms the adults who accept her into their home with such stern charity. Some of the stories to follow were L. M. Montgomery's *Anne of Green Gables* (1908), Jean Webster's *Daddy Long Legs* (1912), and Eleanor H. Porter's *Pollyanna* (1913),

each one enormously popular in its time and each destined to become a children's classic.

Much of the appeal of such a story, to adult and children alike, in the early twentieth century lay, no doubt, in Rebecca herself and the very effective mix of realism and romanticism which combined to form her character. She is a thoroughly Victorian sentimentalist, rejoicing in nature and the simple fact of being alive in a way that would have done credit to Wordsworth. Describing the farm which she herself named Sunnybrook she says, "There's a brook, but not a common brook. It has young trees and baby bushes on each side of it, and it's a shallow, chattering little brook, with a white sandy bottom and lots of little shiny pebbles. Whenever there's a bit of sunshine the brook catches it, and it's always full of sparkles the livelong day."

As full of romantic sentiment as she was, Rebecca was also bound by a thoroughly Victorian sense of duty. She nursed her difficult aunt Miranda at the very point she had completed her education and was ready to launch a career. Then cared for her mother, who had fallen and seriously injured herself. And Rebecca refused to consider her duty-bound decision a sacrifice. Even when her mother bewailed the loss of all Rebecca had been preparing for, she replied, "'I look like a drudge . . . but I really am a princess.'"

The fact that Rebecca's honorable decision ultimately brought a solution for all of her and her family's problems did the cheerful story no harm, either. (Aunt Miranda dies and leaves the brick house to Rebecca, giving a place for her family, whose farm is about to be purchased by the railroad for an amount that will provide an annual income.) The early twentieth-century audience certainly believed in duty and expected women—and in particular young girls—to be a repository for all of the romantic values which the world of industry, it was thought, could not possibly honor. So Rebecca carried a large agenda, as did the heroines who followed her on the page.

But if the character of Rebecca spoke clearly to her time, what is the appeal of such a girl's story a century later? Certainly her world of duty and sometimes even her ecstatic appreciation of nature must seem strangely old-fashioned to contemporary readers. How many young women in today's world, having completed their education and been offered exciting and lucrative employment, would turn away all that they had worked toward to nurse an elderly aunt who never let one word of praise pass her lips? Or even a beloved mother? In few white middle-class families today would such a sacrifice be expected or even considered. And yet we are still compelled by the simple goodness that motivates

all of Rebecca's choices, even the ones early on that get her into trouble with her severe and duty-bound aunt Miranda: borrowing a neighbor's baby, inviting the missionary family to stay in the brick house overnight, wearing her new dress to the school program without permission.

There are, truth be told, aspects of the story that fail to fit today's mores in a less noble way. Certainly the acceptance of the missionaries' zeal in teaching "dark-skinned unbelievers" doesn't resonate well for most folks—even most Christians—at the beginning of the twenty-first century. And yet there can be great value in today's readers' experiencing the differences at either end of the spectrum—the noble impulse to self-sacrifice and the limited understanding of our place in relation to other cultures and races. As has so often been said, we cannot know who and where we are today unless we know who and where we came from.

All of Mrs. Wiggin's writing is strongly influenced by her literary hero, Charles Dickens. As a child she named her dog Pip, and all the creatures of the family farm were given the names of different Dickens characters. Even Mrs. Wiggin's sled was called the Artful Dodger. In fact as a girl she one time found herself seated next to Mr. Dickens on a train and proceeded to expound to him about his books, even upbraiding

him for the occasional long, boring passages he allowed into his stories. And Dickens's influence can be seen, for better and for worse, in all of Mrs. Wiggin's stories, in the array of solidly real people who inhabit them and in the sentimental young heroes in some, sickly in body but pure in soul, who are transported before the story's end. But when a reader comes to *Rebecca of Sunnybrook Farm*, many of the details of Mrs. Wiggin's own childhood can also be detected.

It is, perhaps, the influence of her own childhood, more than anything else, which gives *Rebecca of Sunnybrook Farm* its lasting power. Mrs. Wiggins did something unusual for its time in her presentation of her young heroine. She created a real girl who reveals a real child's experience, not a puppet manipulated by a nostalgic adult to demonstrate what childhood ought to be. For all of the quaintness of Rebecca's world to our eyes today, a quaintness that supplies, it must be admitted, much of the charm of this story, Rebecca herself is the true magic. In fact, she is as vibrantly alive today at age one hundred as she was when she was born in 1903.

And I suspect she will continue to live happily among us for many, many more years.

MARION DANE BAUER

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We Are Seven

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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 harassing 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-bye, 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-bye, 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