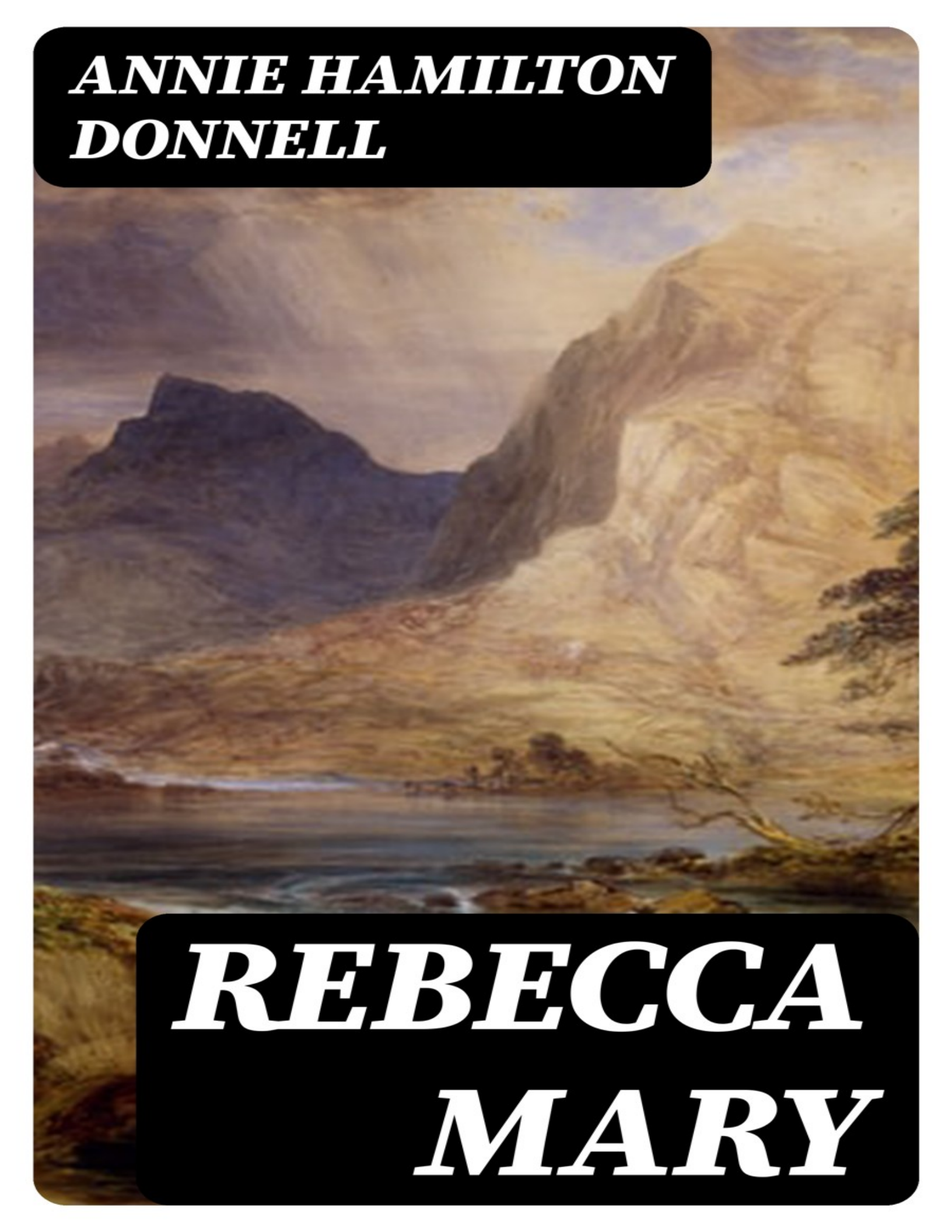


A Romantic-style landscape painting. In the foreground, a river flows through a lush, green valley. A waterfall cascades down a rocky cliff on the right side. The middle ground shows a wide, open valley with rolling hills and scattered trees. In the background, majestic mountains rise, with one prominent peak on the left and a larger, more rugged mountain on the right. The sky is filled with soft, white clouds, and the overall atmosphere is one of natural grandeur and beauty.

***ANNIE HAMILTON
DONNELL***

***REBECCA
MARY***

Annie Hamilton Donnell

Rebecca Mary

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DigiCat, 2022

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The Hundred and Oneth

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Rebecca Mary took another stitch. Then another. “Ninety-sevvun, ninety-eight,” she counted aloud, her little pointed face gravely intent. She waited the briefest possible space before she took ninety-nine. It was getting very close to the Time now. “At the hundred an' oneth,” Rebecca Mary whispered. “It's almost it.” Her breath came quicker under her tight little dress. Between her thin, light eyebrows a crease deepened anxiously.

“Ninety—n-i-n-e,” she counted, “one hun-der-ed”—it was so very close now! The next stitch would be the hundred and oneth. Rebecca Mary's face suddenly grew quite white.

“I'll wait a m-minute,” she decided; “I'm just a little scared. When you've been lookin' head to the hundred and oneth so LONG and you get the very next door to it, it scares you a little. I'll wait until—oh, until Thomas Jefferson crows, before I sew the hundred and oneth.”

Thomas Jefferson was prospecting under the currant bushes. Rebecca Mary could see him distinctly, even with her nearsighted little eyes, for Thomas Jefferson was snow-white. Once in a while he stalked dignifiedly out of the bushes and crowed. He might do it again any minute now.

The great sheet billowed and floated round Rebecca Mary, scarcely whiter than her face. She held her needle poised, waiting the signal of Thomas Jefferson. At any minute.... He was coming out now! A fleck of snow-white was pricking the green of the currant leaves.

“He's out. Any minute he'll begin to cr—” He was already beginning! The warning signals were out—chest expanding, neck elongating, and great white wing aflap.

“I'm just a little scared,” breathed the child in the foam of the sheet. Then Thomas Jefferson crowed.

“Hundred and one!” Rebecca Mary cried out, clearly, courage born within her at the crucial instant. The Time—the Time—had come. She had taken her last stitch.

“It's over,” she panted. “It always was a-coming, and it's come. I knew it would. When it's come, you don't feel quite so scared. I'm glad it's over.”

She folded up the great sheet carefully, making all the edges meet with painful precision. It took time. She had left the needle sticking in the unfinished seam—in the hundred-and-oneth stitch—and close beside it was a tiny dot of red to “keep the place.”

“Rebecca! Rebecca Mary!” Aunt Olivia always called like that. If there had been still another name—Rebecca Mary Something Else—she would have called: “Rebecca! Rebecca Mary! Rebecca Mary Something Else!”

“Yes'm; I'm here.”

“Where's 'here'?” sharply.

“HERE—the grape-arbor, I mean.”

“Have you got your sheet?”

“I—yes'm.”

“Is your stent 'most done?”

Rebecca Mary rose slowly to her reluctant little feet, and with the heavy sheet across her arm went to meet the sharp voice. At last the Time had come.

“Well?” Aunt Olivia was waiting for her answer. Rebecca Mary groaned. Aunt Olivia would not think it was “well.”

“Well, Rebecca Mary Plummer, you came to fetch my answer, did you? You got your stent 'most done?” Aunt Olivia's hands were extended for the folded sheet.

“I've got it DONE, Aunt 'Livia,” answered little Rebecca Mary, steadily. Her slender figure, in its quaint, scant dress, looked braced as if to meet a shock. But Rebecca Mary was terribly afraid.

“Every mite o' that seam? Then I guess you can't have done it very well; that's what I guess! If it ain't done well, you'll have to take it—”

“Wait—please, won't you wait, Aunt 'Livia? I've got to say something. I mean, I've got all the over-'n'-overing I'm ever going to do done. THAT'S what's done. The hundred-and-oneth stitch was my stent, and it's done. I'm not ever going to take the hundred and twoth. I've decided.”

Understanding filtered drop by drop into Aunt Olivia's bewildered brain. She gasped at the final drop.

“Not ever going to take another stitch?” she repeated, with a calmness that was awfuller than storm.

“No'm.”

“You've decided?”

“Yes'm.”

“May I ask when this—this state of mind began?”

Rebecca Mary girded herself afresh. She had such need of recruiting strength.

“It's been coming on,” she said. “I've felt it. I knew all the time it was a-coming—and then it came.”

It seemed to be all there. Why must she say any more? But still Aunt Olivia waited, and Rebecca Mary read grim displeasure in capitals across the gray field of her face. The little figure stiffened more and more.

"I've over-'n'-overed 'leven sheets," the steady little voice went on, because Aunt Olivia was waiting, and it must, "and you said I did 'em pretty well. I tried to. I was going to do the other one well, till you said there was going to be another dozen. I couldn't BEAR another dozen, Aunt Olivia, so I decided to stop. When Thomas Jefferson crowed I sewed the hundred-and-oneth stitch. That's all there's ever a-going to be."

Rebecca Mary stepped back a step or two, as if finishing a speech and retiring from her audience. There was even the effect of a bow in the sudden collapse of the stiff little body. It was Aunt Olivia's turn now to respond—and Aunt Olivia responded:

"You've had your say; now I'll have mine. Listen to me, Rebecca Mary Plummer! Here's this sheet, and here's this needle in it. When you get good and ready you can go on sewing. You won't have anything to eat till you do. I've got through."

The grim figure swept right-about face and tramped into the house as though to the battle-roll of drums. Rebecca Mary stayed behind, face to face with her fate.

"She's a Plummer, so it'll be SO," Rebecca Mary thought, with the dull little thud of a weight falling into her heart. Rebecca Mary was a Plummer too, but she did not think of that, unless the un-swerving determination in her stout little heart was the unconscious recognition of it.

“I wonder”—her gaze wandered out towards the currant-bushes and came to rest absently on Thomas Jefferson's big, white bulk—“I wonder if it hurts very much.” She meant, to starve. A long vista of food-less days opened before her, and in their contemplation the weight in her heart grew very heavy indeed.

“We were GOING to have layer-cake for supper. I'm VERY fond of layer-cake,” Rebecca Mary sighed, “I suppose, though, after a few weeks”—she shuddered—“I shall be glad to have ANYTHING—just common things, like crackers and skim-milk. Perhaps I shall want to eat a—horse. I've heard of folks—You get very unparticular when you're starving.”

It was five o'clock. They WERE going to have supper at half past. She could hear the tea things clinking in the house. She stole up to a window. There was Aunt Olivia setting the layer-cake on the table. It looked plump and rich, and it was sugared on top.

“There's strawberry jam in between it,” mused Rebecca Mary, regretfully. “I wish it was apple jelly. I could bear it better if it was apple jelly.” But it was jam. And there was honey, too, to eat with Aunt Olivia's little fluffy biscuits. How very fond Rebecca Mary was of honey!

Aunt Olivia stood in the kitchen doorway and rang the supper bell in long, steady clangs just as usual. But no one responded just as usual, and by the token she knew Rebecca Mary had not taken the other stitch that lay between her and supper.

“She's a Plummer,” sighed Aunt Olivia, inwardly, unrealizing her own Plummership, as little Rebecca Mary

had unrealized hers. Each recognized only the other's. The pity that both must be Plummers!

Rebecca Mary stayed out of doors until bedtime. She made but one confidant.

"I've done it, Thomas Jefferson," she said, sadly. "You ought to be sorry for me, because if you hadn't crowed I shouldn't have sewed the hundred and oneth. But you're not really to BLAME," she added, hastily, mindful of Thomas Jefferson's feelings. "I should have done it sometime if you hadn't crowed. I knew it was coming. I suppose now I shall have to starve. You'd think it was pretty hard to starve, I guess, Thomas Jefferson."

Thomas Jefferson made certain gloomy responses in his throat to the effect that he was always starving; that any contributions on the spot in the way of corn kernels, wheat grains, angleworms—any little delicacies of the kind—would be welcome. And Rebecca Mary, understanding, led the way to the corn bin. In the dark hours that followed, the intimacy between the great white rooster and the little white girl took on tenderer tones.

At breakfast next morning—at dinner time—at supper—Rebecca Mary absented herself from the house. Aunt Olivia set on the meals regularly and waited with tightening heartstrings. It did not seem to occur to her to eat her own portions. She tasted no morsel of all the dainties she got together wistfully. At nightfall the second day she began to feel real alarm. She put on her bonnet and went to the minister's. He was rather a new minister, and the Plummers had always required a good deal of time to make

acquaintance. But in the present stress of her need Aunt Olivia did not stop to think of that.

"You must come over and—and do something," she said, at the conclusion of her strange little story. "It seems to me it's time for the minister to step in."

"What can I do, Miss Plummer?" the embarrassed young man ejaculated, with a feeling of helplessness.

"Talk to her," groaned Aunt Olivia, in her agony. "Tell her what her duty is. Rebecca Mary might listen to the minister. All she's got to do is to take just one stitch to show her submission. It won't take but an instant. I've got supper all out on the kitchen table—I don't care if it's ten o'clock at night!"

"It isn't a case for the minister. It's a case for the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children!" fumed the minister's kind little wife inwardly. And she stole away in the twilight to deal with little Rebecca Mary herself. She came back to the minister by and by, red-eyed and fierce.

"You needn't go over; I've been. It won't do any good, Robert. That poor, stiff-willed, set little thing is starving by inches!"

"I think her aunt is, too!"

"Well, perhaps—I can't help it, Robert, perhaps the—aunt—ought—to."

"My dear!—Felicia!"

"I told you I couldn't help it. She is so hungry, Robert! If you had seen her—What do you think she was doing when I got there?"

"Crying?"

“Crying! She was laughing. / cried. She sat there under some grapevines watching a great white rooster eat his supper. His name, I think, is Thomas Jefferson.”

“Yes, Thomas Jefferson,” agreed the minister, with the assurance of acquaintance. For Thomas Jefferson was one of his parishioners.

“Well, she was laughing at him in the shakiest, hungriest little voice you ever heard. 'Is it good?' she says. 'It LOOKS good.' He was eating raw corn. 'If I could, I'd eat supper with you when you're VERY hungry, you don't mind eating things raw.' Then she saw me.”

“Well?”

“Well, I coaxed her, Robert. It didn't do any good. Tomorrow somebody must go there and interfere.”

“She must be a remarkably strange child,” the minister mused. He was thinking of the holding-out powers of the three children he had a half-ownership in.

“I don't think Rebecca Mary IS a child, Robert. She must be fifty years old, at the least. She and her aunt are about the same age. Perhaps if her mother had lived, or she hadn't made so many sheets, or learned to knit and darn and cook —” The minister's kind little wife finished out her sentence with a sigh. She took up a little garment in dire straits to be mended. It suggested things to the minister.

“Can Rhoda darn?”

“RHODA!”

“Or make sheets and bread and things?”

“Robert, don't you feel well? Where is the pain?” But the laugh in the pleasant blue eyes died out suddenly. Little