

# Martha

By Mrs. Murray Hickson

## I

FROM the first day that she came to Underwood Terrace Martha interested me. She arrived, I remember, one dull November afternoon. I saw her pass down the street, peering, in a short-sighted fashion, at the numbers over the doors. She carried a large bonnet-box in one hand and a neat brown paper parcel in the other. She had no umbrella, and the rain dripped from the limp brim of her large straw hat. Her skirt, shabby and worn, had slipped from her overladen fingers and dragged upon the muddy pavement. I don't know why I noticed her, but, as I glanced up from my book, my eyes fell upon her forlorn little figure, and I felt that sudden, curious sensation of pity which sometimes, we don't know why, takes us by the throat and shakes us out of our egotism and self-reflection. Very possibly my first interest in her was merely a matter of mood. Perhaps, had I been happier myself, I should not have taken much notice of her; but my own concerns appeared, just then, so dull and grey that it was a relief to turn from them to the contemplation of somebody else's. For the present, however, the little figure in the draggled black frock

frock wandered down the street, and I, returning to my book, lost sight and thought of her.

In the drawing-room, before dinner, Mrs. Norris explained to me that, in consideration of the arrival of a new boarder, she had engaged a girl as a sort of "understudy" for the other servants, and to work between them in the capacity of general help and factotum. The girl was young, she came from Surrey, and her name was Martha. Mrs. Norris hoped that she would turn out well, but the training of young girls was always an experiment; she had known few who repaid the trouble expended upon them. This much she told me—the rest I supplied for myself. Help, in our overworked household, was imperatively needed, and a girl from the country (despite the drawbacks of her ignorance and lack of training) would cost little to keep and less in wages. In fact, properly managed, she should prove a good investment.

Late that evening I met a quaint little figure upon the stairs, and instantly recognised the limp, broad-brimmed hat, and the shabby jacket, frayed at collar and at cuffs. Our new maid-servant and the girl who had that afternoon attracted my attention in the street represented the same identity. She drew aside to let me pass, shrinking timidly against the wall; but, by a sudden impulse, I stopped and spoke to her. The gas-light fell on the glasses of her spectacles, so that I could not catch the expression of her large, short-sighted eyes; but I saw that the eyelids were red and swollen and I guessed that she had been crying.

"So you found the house after all," I said. "You must have got very wet out there in the rain."

"Yes, m'm," she answered, and saluted me with a quick, bobbing curtsy. She expressed no curiosity as to how I came to know that she had at first been unable, in the driving mist, to discover number 127. To girls of her class, knowledge on every subject, whether

whether important or trivial, appears, in a lady, as a matter of course. I looked at her again, and it struck me that, in the house, she should wear a cap and apron. But her dress remained unchanged since the afternoon.

"You are not going out now?" I said, "so late? And it is still raining. Listen, you can hear it on the skylight."

She listened obediently. The rain, blown by a gusty wind, pattered upon the big skylight in the roof. Martha glanced at me from behind her spectacles.

"Yes, m'm, but the mistress told me to post this letter. After that I may go to bed."

She held a fat, square envelope in her ungloved fingers, and I knew, without looking at it, that it contained the usual daily letter from Amy Norris to her lover. I moved impatiently. Why could not the girl have written earlier in the afternoon?—this going out to catch the late post was an old grievance with the servants, and now I supposed both of them would thrust the distasteful duty upon Martha.

"But do you know the way?" I asked.

"Yes, thank you, m'm," she answered, and slipped down the stairs away from me.

Before I went to bed that night I ventured on a sketchy remonstrance with Amy Norris upon this subject of the late post.

"The girl is young, and evidently country-bred," I concluded. "Don't you think it's a pity to send her out so late into the streets? Could we not all get our letters ready for the last post before dinner?"

Amy looked at me in amazement. She was good-hearted enough, but perfectly stolid and unapproachable when such small matters as this were in question, and consideration for servants was quite beyond her comprehension.

"The

“The pillar-box is only three or four minutes’ walk from here,” she said. “Besides, one can’t plan things out like that, beforehand—it would be a perfect nuisance. It won’t do the girl any harm ; Eliza always used to go.”

Eliza was a former servant. She was pretty and feather-brained, and when she left our house some few months earlier, Mrs. Norris had refused to give her a character. The reason, no doubt, was unanswerable, but the fault had appeared to me to lie with the mistress as much as with the maid.

I thought of Eliza, looked at Amy’s plump, satisfied countenance and laughed a little by way of reply. Long experience had taught me that argument and explanation here—in Mrs. Norris’ boarding-house—were entirely useless weapons.

As I was preparing for bed, I wondered idly if Martha had found her way safely back, and where she was to sleep. I knew there was only one room available for the servants, and I supposed that she was to share it with the cook and the housemaid. The child interested me ; there was about her an unconscious earnestness which appealed to me. Her face was stamped with that expression, at once piteous and irritating, which is the result of a slow but conscientious nature striving its utmost to keep level with the demands made upon it by quicker minds. This first night away from home and in the midst of new surroundings would be very trying for the girl. My thoughts dwelt on her for a brief space and then, turning inevitably towards my own affairs, they dropped her out of their consideration. Presently, I lit a candle and went up to the box-room, where, amongst other things, I had stored away several books, one of which I particularly wanted to read. The box-room was at the top of the house, and was reached by a short staircase, so steep as to be almost a ladder. From the top of this ladder, which was of bare deal, uncarpeted, you stepped directly

directly into the box-room itself, on one side of which was a dark recess holding a large cistern for water. To-night as I came to the foot of the stairs, I could hear the water gurgling through the pipes into the great tank, and caught an intermittent sound of rain upon the window in the sloping roof. A light shone from the top of the staircase; evidently somebody was there before me, and I blew out my candle ere climbing the ladder. It was late, the house was very still, and I wondered who had thus invaded my territory, for, as my bedroom was small, I kept many things stowed away in my big travelling trunk, and I often came up here to fetch what, at the moment, I required. When my eyes were level with the floor of the box-room I stopped suddenly, and I understood. The room had been turned into a bedchamber. Trunks and portmanteaus were piled along one side of the wall, and a small—very small—truckle bedstead stood underneath the skylight. One chair and a broken-down chest of drawers completed the furniture. A small square of looking-glass cracked across one corner, hung upon the wall. Martha herself knelt beside the bed, her face hidden in the pillow. Her loosened hair—crisp, and bright chestnut in colour—streamed over her coarse white night-gown; her bare feet, as she knelt, were thrust out from beneath the hem. I stood a moment, and then, for the girl had neither heard nor seen me, crept cautiously down the steep stairs back to the landing below. I would go without my book to-night, for Martha was saying her prayers, and, to judge by the convulsive movement of her shoulders, Martha was also crying.

## II

A week later our new lady-boarder arrived, and a very fine lady she was. We, the older occupants of the establishment, shrank into

into insignificance beside her ; her gowns were so smart, and her requirements were so many. Now came the time of Martha's trial, and, poor child, a severe ordeal it proved to be. She was called upon, without any previous training, and with no help beyond her own native wits, to wait at the dinner-table. I must say that Martha's wits (being, though tenacious, somewhat slow) at times failed her ; but, on the whole, it seemed to me that she did very well indeed, especially as Mrs. Norris, during the dinner hour, confiscated her spectacles, so that she was obliged to find her way about the room in that semi-mist which blurs the vision of very short-sighted people. Her appearance, however, as her mistress justly observed, was enormously improved thereby ; and her eyes, albeit often red and swollen with much weeping, were so well-shaped and charmingly fringed with long lashes that one could hardly regret the absence of the ugly, though useful, glasses. Poor little Martha ! She used to hand the dishes, I remember, with awkward haste and alacrity, born of an earnest desire to give satisfaction and to succeed. Her cheeks were flushed, her small hands a trifle tremulous ; her hair—usually dragged back from her forehead and twisted into a tight knot behind—had become, by this time in the evening, slightly loosened : here and there a stray curl crept above her brow. She was still very shabby ; and in consequence of much hard work and little leisure, her hands, I noticed, had lost their first appearance of cleanliness, and become permanently roughened and begrimed. But, in spite of this, I began to look upon Martha as quite a pretty girl.

She did not have a particularly good time of it, I am afraid ; she was far too sweet-tempered and anxious to conciliate everybody. Most of the hard words of the household, and a good deal of its concentrated ill-temper, fell to her share, and was borne by  
her

her with uncomplaining patience. Now and again—for Martha was occasionally both slow and uncomprehending—I myself felt tempted to speak sharply to her; but something in the expression of her earnest little face, some unconscious pathos in her personality, restrained me. Gradually, as the weeks passed, I found myself more and more interested in her—once or twice almost painfully so.

One day in particular, I remember, things had gone awry with Martha from morning until night. She let fall, and smashed to atoms, a vegetable dish which she was handing to her mistress at luncheon. Mrs. Norris was, naturally, much annoyed, and the poor girl went through the rest of her duties with burning cheeks, and an increased clumsiness of manner. Afterwards I heard one of the other servants scolding her about a fire which had been allowed to die out, and, later in the evening, I found her in the hall, undergoing a severe reprimand from Amy Norris, whose nightly letter she had dropped into the mud on her way to the post.

“It isn’t only that,” said Amy, with concentrated scorn and annoyance. “Though such stupidity is bad enough, goodness knows. But she must needs bring the letter back again, to show to me—as if that would do any good! And now she’s missed the post from the pillar-box. Isn’t it inconceivable?”

As the last few words were addressed to me, I nodded in reply. It certainly did appear inconceivable—I should have posted the letter and said nothing about it.

Amy rubbed the envelope vigorously with her handkerchief.

“I thought, Miss, I’d better tell you about it, I thought perhaps you’d like to write it over again,” said Martha, submissively.

“You thought—you thought—you’ve no business to think,” snapped

snapped Amy. She turned into the dining-room to re-write the address. The front door was open, and the gas-light from the hall streamed out into the night. The steps were shining with wet ; because of the fog, one could hardly see beyond them. The street, at this time, was almost deserted, but the throb and roar of a big London thoroughfare close at hand came to us through the darkness.

I looked at Martha, who stood waiting beside me. She was pale, and I noticed that she shifted wearily from one foot to the other as though too tired to rest her weight upon either. Before, however, I had time to say more than a hasty word to her, Amy came back with the letter.

"You must go to the Post-office now," she said. "Be quick, Martha, don't lose a moment."

The girl ran hastily down the steps, and Amy shut the door behind her,

"Stupid little thing," she said vexedly. "She seems always to be doing something idiotic. I really don't see how we are to keep her."

I should like to have represented the matter from my point of view, but upon other people's affairs, silence is presumably golden ; therefore I held my peace.

Martha's cup had been so full all day that, when she came to my room with hot water at bed-time, a kindly word or two overcame her completely. She set down the hot water can, and mopped her streaming eyes with a crumpled pocket-handkerchief. I waited till her sobs became less suffocating. Presently she stammered an excuse and an explanation. The mistress, it appeared, had called her into her room half an hour earlier, and, complaining that her only black gown was too shabby for daily wear, had commanded her to buy another with the least possible delay.



delay. Also the broken vegetable dish must be made good out of her next month's wages.

"I can't do it, m'm, indeed I can't," she said, breathlessly; "I don't have but seven pound a year; and I've got to help mother all I can. Father died just before I came here, and mother has four children besides me to look after; she's not strong either, isn't mother."

"Your frock *is* shabby, Martha," I said severely; "it's shiny at the seams and frayed at the hem. As for the vegetable dish—well, you break a lot of things, you know, and Mrs. Norris is not rich enough to replace them."

Martha sniffed sadly.

"But white caps and aprons do run into money," she remarked, with apparent irrelevance, and turned towards the door to depart. Her head drooped disconsolately, her tired feet dragged as she walked.

"Martha," said I, "stop a minute, and come here."

She came back at once, standing before me with tear-stained cheeks; her breath, like that of a grieving child, caught now and again in a vagrant, shivering sob.

I meant to give myself the luxury of a kindness, and Martha the pleasure of a new gown.

"The vegetable dish," said I, "you must replace yourself; but the frock I will give to you. I will buy the stuff, and we must find somebody who can make it up for you nicely. But, if I do this, you must promise me to be very careful in future, and to break no more dishes."

For a minute the girl made no reply, then the ready tears brimmed again into her eyes.

"Oh! m'm, you are good—you are good," she said eagerly. "And I will try; that I will. But I'm that stupid, I never seem able to do right."

“Well, don’t cry—you’ve cried enough to-day. Go to bed, now, and have a good night ; it’s long past eleven. By the way, don’t I hear you up very early in the morning ? ”

Martha’s room was over mine.

“Yes m’m. Now it’s so cold I get up at a quarter to six to make tea for the other servants. They like a cup in bed in the mornings.”

She said it in all simplicity, and I made no comment upon the communication. If it had been my own house . . . . But it wasn’t, and I had no excuse for interference.

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I bought Martha a thick stuff gown—and she needed it. Winter, which set in late that year, made up for its loitering by an intense severity. I could barely keep myself warm, even with the help of a big fire in my bedroom ; Martha’s little chamber next to the great water-cistern must have been bitterly cold. It contained no fireplace, and Mrs. Norris, whose fear of fire amounted to a craze, would not allow the use of a gas-stove. In all weathers, at all hours, Martha ran the errands of the household. She was up early, she went to bed late ; how, when she got there, she contrived to sleep at all, is a mystery to me, save that youth and hopefulness are potent to achieve miracles. The bitter cold froze our tempers below zero ; we were fractious and difficult to please, and Martha, as usual, bore the brunt of everybody’s dissatisfaction ; yet, in spite of her difficult lot, the girl seemed to expand and flourish. She looked very neat in her new frock, and I noticed that her hair was arranged more loosely, so that the fluffy little curls about her forehead showed to advantage. This was the result of a chance remark of mine—whether wise or not I am now uncertain. When, at last, winter left us, and the streets of London broke into an epidemic of violets and of primroses, Martha had grown into a positively pretty girl.

I had

I had a chat with her one morning in April, and I learnt the reason of her altered looks. Martha had got a "young man"—a young man who, she believed, really cared for her, and wished to marry her. Meantime they intended "to keep company" together. All this she confided to me shyly, with many blushes, and I—whom love and youth seemed alike to have deserted—I sighed a little as I listened to her.

Perhaps because I envied her somewhat, perhaps because (now that the girl was comparatively happy) she no longer appealed to my warmest sympathies, I did not, from this time, take so keen an interest in her. And for this I have many times, especially since my own life warmed under a new sunshine, reproached myself.

Martha was much happier than she had been, but Martha would have been glad of a little sympathy from me all the same. She had grown accustomed to my interest in her; but now, I fear, she looked for it in vain. She used sometimes to linger beside the door when she came into my bedroom, and once, looking up quickly, I caught a wistful expression on her face which it hurts me now to remember. But there was much to occupy me just then, and Martha had her lover; I did not consider that she needed me.

I wonder how far, and how often, we are responsible for the misfortunes of those who live under the same roof, and yet are not upon the same level, with ourselves. I wonder how often a frank word of warning, of sympathy, or of advice would save our servant girls from the miserable marriages, or the still more cruel abandonments, which so frequently become their portion. I don't know. Perhaps no one of us can stand between another and her fate; perhaps a hundred impalpable differences of thought, custom, and education build a wall between us and our servants,  
which

which only a very rare love and sympathy can overclimb. I can't be sure ; but—be that as it may—I never think of Martha, and of Martha's patient service and uncomplaining diligence, without a pang of self-reproach. I was old enough to be her mother, and, since her mistress would not dream of doing so, I ought to have kept an eye upon her. But I grew accustomed to her coming and going ; to her anxious, flushed little face as she handed the dishes at meal times ; to the sound of her heavy feet as, when everyone else had gone to bed, she climbed the carpetless ladder to her attic under the roof, and I forgot how eagerly, in so dreary a life, she must welcome a little freedom and a little love.

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I was away for some time in the early summer, and, on my return, I found that Martha's place was filled by a stranger. I made instant inquiries. Mrs. Norris answered, with full information. Amy drew herself up in prim and conscious rectitude. She was to be married in the autumn, and could afford to look with severity upon the frailty of a servant maid.

Martha, it appeared, had got herself into trouble. Martha, like Eliza, had been dismissed at once, without a character. She and her meagre baggage—the same bonnet-box with which she had arrived, and a rather larger brown-paper parcel—had been turned out of the house at an hour's notice. She had begged for my address, but that, in order to save me from annoyance, had been withheld from her.

I said very little—what was the use?—but I found out the name of the Surrey village from which she had come to us, and I went down there in the course of the week. My memory of the girl, as so often happens, was more pathetic than her actual presence had been. I felt uneasy until I could get news of her.

It

It was June weather in the heart of Surrey—that still June weather which is the essence of an English summer. The lanes were sweet with dog-roses ; the vines on Martha's cottage home were already covered with many small bunches of quaint green fruit. The air was soft and full of perfume ; the tiny garden was ablaze with old-fashioned flowers.

Martha's mother was at home—a tall, frail woman, aged prematurely by poverty and the stress of early motherhood. She received me, wondering ; but, when I explained my errand, she burst into sudden tears. I do not know whether grief or anger held the uppermost place in her heart ; certainly it never occurred to her that she was to blame for sending her girl, unprepared, into a world of danger and temptation.

She could give me no news of her daughter—there was no news to give. Martha had never come home ; her mother evidently did not expect her to do so. She had stepped over the threshold of 127 Underwood Terrace, and had disappeared into that outside world which, to such as she, shows little of mercy, and even less of sympathy and comprehension.

Her mother hardly desires to see her again ; and I—though I do not forget her—I recall her only as a pathetic memory which, each year, grows less and less distinct.