



The Victorians

The Maid's story: Martha's duties

By Gordon Lamont

Martha: I'm Martha Tibbot from Eastonhope village, except I'm not, well not any more. Now I'm Martha Tibbot from the Big House. I'm twelve years old and I'm a maid...well, I'm learning to be a maid. But there's so much to do and learn and understand. I don't know if I'll ever get it all right...

This morning, for example, I was just taking the sheets upstairs when I met one of her ladyship's children.

Er, good morning, Miss.

Victoria: You're new aren't you?

Martha: Yes, miss.

Victoria: Well - aren't you supposed to curtsy?

Martha: Oh, yes, sorry miss.

Victoria: Curtsey, and not speak unless you're spoken too.

Martha: You see what I mean. We servants have to know our place and that is well below even a child of the family, like little Victoria...

Victoria: You can speak now, silly, because I've spoken to you.





- Martha: Yes, Miss; sorry, miss.
- Victoria: Run along then.
- Martha: My cheeks reddened as I hurried up the stairs. For a second I saw myself as I used to be, running free in the meadows where I grew up. I felt as if my maid's dress and apron and cap were like a prisoner's uniform and that I had to follow orders that I didn't understand, minute after minute, hour after hour, day after long weary day...
- Mrs. Arnett: Never let your voice be heard by the ladies and gentlemen of the household unless they have spoken directly to you.
- Martha: Mrs Arnett, the housekeeper had told me the rules on my first day at the big house...
- Mrs. Arnett: When you meet a member of the household as you are going about your duties, always 'give room' - that is, get quickly out of the way and don't look directly at them and try to make yourself invisible.
- Martha: There was so much to take in and as I was standing on the stairs trying to make sense of it all I had a bit of a shock.
- Mrs. Arnett: Martha Tibbot, what are you doing dallying on the stairs?
- Martha: Oh, Mrs Arnett, I'm sorry I just...





- Mrs. Arnett: Dawdling won't get the job done and I must tell you I've known girls lose their position through idleness alone. Now get those sheets upstairs... then you must help Sally with the laundry...then I want you to clean the grates and make up the fires...
- Martha: I know that I am very lucky to have a job at the big house. I don't earn much money, it's true; about £10 a year. But I do have all my food and shelter provided as well as my uniform. The work is hard: I start at six in the morning and often don't finish until after ten at night. But if I am careful and do well, I could have a job for my whole life...
- Martha: Later I went downstairs to help Sally with the laundry. She gave me what for as usual.
- Sally: No need to put on that face just 'cos you're working with a scullery maid. I'm older than you, I been here longer than you and I could teach you a thing or two.
- Martha: Yes, Sally, I'm sure you can. Here let me help you with that...
- Sally: Now look what you've done you stupid girl.
- Martha: I had reached over to pick up a bundle of sheets and something had fallen out of them. It was a mirror that you held in your hand, or at least her ladyship did. No servant would own such a beautiful thing. But now it was smashed in pieces on the floor. Then I suddenly thought...
- Martha: That shouldn't be down here.





- Sally: Int nothing to do with me. You must have brought it down, stolen it from her ladyship's room. I'm telling on you, you thief.
- Martha: But I haven't been in her ladyship's room.
- Sally: Mrs. Arnett, Mrs Arnett!
- Martha: My mind was in a whirl. I didn't steal the mirror but what if Mrs. Arnett thought that I did. I would lose my position and, being known as a thief, I would never get another one. Mrs Arnett soon called us both into the kitchen.
- Sally: ...and she told lies and she's always treating me like she knows better but she's only a stupid country girl Mrs. Arnett...
- Mrs. Arnett: That's enough! I have heard your tale and it is clear to me that one of you stole the mirror. Now this is a very serious matter. You will certainly lose your job and you may go to the sessions at Ludbury.
- Martha: The court!
- Mrs. Arnett: Yes, Martha, the court. Last month a maid your age was sent to jail for two weeks for stealing a facecloth from her mistress.
- Martha: But if I went to the sessions, I'd never work again.
- Mrs. Arnett: You are right to be worried, Martha.
- Sally: Send her to the judge, Mrs Arnett.





- Mrs. Arnett: Martha, I saw you dawdling this morning on the stairway and I'm afraid that I have also received a complaint from her ladyship who says that you have been talking to her daughter, Victoria. This will not do. Have I not told you the rules by which we live in this house?
- Martha: Yes, Mrs Arnett.
- Sally: You're in trouble Martha!
- Mrs. Arnett: Wait, Sally. Bad as Martha's behaviour has been, she was on the east stairs this morning...and so she would not have had time to get to her Ladyship's rooms to steal the mirror. Whereas you, Sally...
- Sally: It's nothing to her Ladyship, I bet she won't even miss it. You stopped my wages when Martha ruined her apron and I need that money to get home and see my dad, he's all on his own and...
- Mrs. Arnett: That is enough Sally. You are dismissed from service; any wages owing to you will go towards paying for the broken mirror.
- Sally: It's not fair, Mrs. Arnett, I was only trying to save up. Mrs Arnett, have a heart.
- Martha: And that was that. Sally's life as a servant was over. I don't know what happened to her after that, but I know that I never saw her again. When I think of Sally and how nearly that could have been me, dismissed with little hope of ever working again, then a shiver runs down my spine...and I'm thankful for my position here at the Manor.

