

The Victorians

The Maid's story: Christmas for servants

By Gordon Lamont

Martha:

I'm Martha Tibbot – twelve years old - and a maid here at the Manor House. I want to tell you about my first Christmas in service. The house was so festive and the pies and jellies and puddings in the kitchen – I'd never seen such food. But the truth was I missed my family terribly. I felt I should be with them at Christmas time, not beating carpets and scrubbing floors and helping in the kitchen and the like. But there was no chance of that, because as Mrs Arnett, the housekeeper, told me -

Mrs. Arnett:

Now Martha, it is Christmas in five days time and as the festival falls on a Monday this year and the family are entertaining a large party of friends, there will be no half-day holiday on Sunday – you will be expected to work to look after the guests.

Martha:

But can't I go and see my family, Mrs. Arnett? 'Tis only four miles walk and I can be there and back in three hours – I could go straight after church...

Mrs. Arnett:

Your duty Martha is to the family here, not your family in Eastonhope.

Martha:

Well...they could visit me then?

Mrs. Arnett:

I'm sorry, Martha, I know it is hard for you but you know that servants are not allowed visitors.





Martha:

Yes, Mrs. Arnett.

So there I was, on Christmas day, wringing out damp clothes with the mangle because Lord somebody or other spilled wine all down them. And I did so want to see my family... Then, about nine o'clock on Christmas night, just as I thought I was finished for the day, I got a message to go upstairs to see Mrs. Arnett.

Mrs Arnett, you wanted to...

Mrs. Arnett:

Shhh! Quietly girl. I called you up here to have a look – look peep through the door.

Martha:

I almost forgot my moodiness when I looked through the door that evening. I saw the grand upstairs party. The gentlemen dressed so smartly and the ladies glittering in silks and satins, with sparkling jewels, and a small band of musicians. But...

Mrs. Arnett:

Whatever is the matter girl?

Martha:

I'm sorry, Mrs. Arnett, it's just that I miss my Ma and Pa.

Mrs. Arnett:

You poor child. Come on, come downstairs with me. We'll find a way to cheer you up...

Martha:

Downstairs we servants were having our own party with more food than I had ever seen at home in Eastonhope. Arthur the footman was playing the fiddle and everyone was enjoying the food and the music. Some were even dancing. And then - there was a loud knock on the door.





- Mr. Jones: Who on earth can that be? Not St. Nicklaus himself surely!
- Mrs. Arnett: It'll be a delivery I've arranged, Mr Jones.
- Mr. Jones: A delivery on Christmas day, Mrs Arnett?
- Mrs. Arnett: Certainly. It's a repair to some lace that I sent out to the village.
- Martha: The mention of lace made me feel worse than ever, for my Ma took in lace work when she could.
- Mr. Jones: This is most irregular, Mrs. Arnett, but perhaps you'd best open the door.
- Martha: I couldn't help but notice that although Mr. Jones looked stern there was a kind of twinkle in his eye.
- Mrs Arnett: Come in, you're most welcome.
- Mr Jones: It must be a very heavy piece of lace Mrs. Arnett to require one, two, three, four, people to carry it!
- Martha: Ma! Pa!
- There they all were – my whole family – here to visit on Christmas night. And I could tell by the twinkle in his eye that Mr. Jones knew all about this plan.
- Mr Jones: Well, now they are here Mrs. Arnett, we surely can't send them away again on Christmas night without looking after them first.





Martha:

Oh I'm so happy to see you all!

Suddenly I felt full of life and full of the joy of the festival. It was so wonderful to see my whole family on Christmas night. Life as a maid certainly has its ups and downs but this Christmas had turned around in an instant and I knew that it would be one that I'd never forget.

