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Mary Reilly

VALERIE MARTIN

Mary Reilly

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Love

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The Consolation of Nature

The Great Divorce

Italian Fever

Salvation



VALERIE MARTIN

Mary Reilly

Valerie Martin is the author of six novels and two collections of short fiction, including *The Great Divorce*, *Italian Fever*, and a biography of St. Francis, *Salvation*. She resides in upstate New York.



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VALERIE MARTIN

Vintage Contemporaries

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*I*t wasn't the first time I'd been shut up in the closet, if closet isn't too grand a word for the little cupboard under the stairs. I was ten and small for my age, but I had to fold myself up into a painful crouch to fit into the narrow, dirty space and that was always part of the struggle, getting me to fit, which was part of his pleasure I've no doubt.

That time I didn't struggle but tried to get in place as quick as I could. He was in a rare temper and I feared he'd have my life if I didn't look sharp about doing as he said. I'd broken a cup, trying to wash it, and then hidden the pieces, which he'd found of course, so besides being a careless, loutish girl, I was a liar too and probably a thief. Marm was at her work so there was no hope of help there, not that she ever dared cross him but sometimes when she was about he went easier on me. He'd slapped me once and pulled me about by my hair before he lit on the cupboard. When he opened the door, shoving and shouting at me, I crawled in as best I could, eager to be out of his hand's reach, and as I was folding myself up so that he could close the door I caught his eye and my heart sank for I saw the ease of my punishment didn't please him and he'd had a glance of the silly figure he cut, a grown man taking on a child, and this had redoubled his anger and there would be hell to pay for me.

Then it was dark and no air. I screamed because I couldn't help it. I heard him pull out the chair at the table and take his seat there, guarding me. "Please," I begged, "let me out. I won't ever be so wicked again."

But he didn't make a sound and that made me anxious as it meant he were thinking. I pressed my forehead against my knees and tried not to scream or beg as I knew when he was quiet like that it would do me no good.

Then I heard him get up and leave the room. I heard the door to the alley behind open and then close. I pushed at the cupboard door but it was hopeless—there was a good lock on it, the only one in our two rooms that kept anything in or out, worse luck for me. I thought he might have gone out to the gin palace and I set myself to a good long wait, possibly until Marm came back, so long that the thought of it brought tears to my eyes.

But after a little while I heard him come back in, pull out the chair and sit again. "Sir," I called out, "may I please be let out now."

For answer I heard that low, sick laugh he had sometimes, when he'd had so much liquor he didn't remember the next day what he'd done, and it made me tremble as I knew that meant the very worst for me. I wished I had not spoken, to remind him I was still at his ease.

After a few minutes I heard him get up again and come to the door. Then he was standing in front of it, laughing in that way I could hardly bear to hear, and I didn't know what to do, beg or be silent. He said, "Mary, I'm opening this door, but if you know what's good for you you'd best not move." The door opened and the light from the lamp confused me so I couldn't see. Then he leaned towards me and I saw he had a little hopsack bag with a string drawn up to the top. Perhaps there was a few inches between my knees and my head, for I was looking up at him, trying to think what I had best do, but before I could make out much of anything he stuffed the bag in with me, saying, "Here's summat to keep you company," and then the door was closed again.

There was another black moment while I tried to understand what it was I had to fear next. I knew at once that there was something in the bag, that it was meant to harm me, but what it was my childish imagination couldn't conjure. Then I felt it moving and knew it was some animal, no doubt as frightened as I was. I'd only a thin skirt on, which I had pulled down over my knees as best I could, so it wasn't long before the creature began to work its way through the two thin layers separating us in that narrow, breathless space. I felt a claw sink into my thigh and I pulled myself up rigid, as if I could make more room, but there was no more room to make and I think the rat sensed that as well as I. I knew it was a rat and when he'd got it. There was plenty to be had in the alleys nearby and often enough he'd brought me to whimpering by sending me out for a pint when it was dark and I had to pick my way among them.

So he'd put one of these rats in the bag and closed it up with me.

I could not speak, but I tried just to breathe and then I said, "Sir, don't do this," but I had only a whispering voice so he mayn't of heard me. The rat wasn't in a panic yet, but was gnawing the cloth and I could hear it and knew in no time the bag would give out and my own skin would be next. I threw my weight against the door so I got one arm free a little and tried to push the bag down to my feet. I cried out "Sir," and I heard him laugh again. The cloth was giving way—I could hear it and feel the animal's snout moving against my leg, but of course I could see nothing and scarcely move, so I was helpless.

I screamed. I felt the first bite at my ankle and I screamed for all I was worth, but after that I felt very little and only screamed because I could not stop screaming. Once it was out of the sack the creature was everywhere at once, crazy to get at me or away from me, couldn't tell which, and it could move about freely as I could not. I scraped and tore my arms against the walls trying to protect myself with my hands and that is why, as you observe, many of the scars is on my hands.

After a long time in which I screamed and begged so that you would have thought a storm would be moved to pity, the door opened and the rat leaped out, scrambled across the floor to the door and back to the safety of the alley.

Or that is how I imagine it must have happened for I did not know at the time, nor did I know anything or anyone for some time to come, including my own marm who was so too when she come home and found me lying for dead in the corner with him asleep at the table that she did what I'd never have thought she had the courage to do—she called the constable and had me conveyed to the hospital at C_____ where I lay in a swoon for many weeks.

This is the account I wrote for my master nearly a year ago, six months after I took up my post as underhousemaid here. I did so at his request, attending on those details which I thought would bring the incidents to life for him. I had sketched them to him the evening when he first remarked the scars on my hands.

It was a wonder to me that Master noticed my scars, as I was on my knees blacking the grate and black to my elbows, but he is an observant gentleman and perhaps he had noticed them some earlier time. He was sitting across the room from me in his leather reading chair, not even facing me but turned to one side and absorbed, so I imagined, in perusing some scientific treatise. I was at my work, wanting to finish up quickly, as I knew he'd be wanting the fire and also I don't like to do such work before Master, but he'd come in while I was at

and so I was obliged to finish.

I was getting up my brushes and blacking when, completely unexpected by me he said, "Mary, I notice you have some scars on your hands, and others near your ear, just there." He had reached up to touch the mark on my neck, leaving it, no doubt, smeared with black. "Would you let me examine them, please."

I was struck dumb, too terrified to move. I can remember now, though it seems a long time ago, even another time from what I am in now, that my first thought was to run.

But where, I thought, do you run from such a civil request from your own master. Yet I could not, I knew, do as he requested for shame of my dirt, and of myself, to be looked at by a gentleman, though I reminded myself he was a doctor and might have only a professional curiosity which he'd a right and reason to gratify. So I stood up very slowly, thinking hard all the while, rubbing my hands in my apron, wringing my hands in shame, and I said, "Sir, I'm ashamed to come close to you as I'm so black and it do travel no matter how I might try to keep it from you."

He didn't say a thing for a moment but closed his book and sat looking at me with such a patient, kind, thoughtful look, such as I would never expect nor even want from a gentleman until I was fair in suspense for his next words. "Go and wash, then," he said, "and come back when you feel you can approach me."

I wanted to cry out, Ah sir, that will never happen in this life, but it wasn't my place to describe to him my place, if you see what I mean, and I told myself this sharp, that his request was not unreasonable and only my own cowardice might keep me from satisfying it. All this was crowding my head, but I did manage to say "Yes, sir," and scurry off down the stairs to the kitchen where I boiled the kettle and washed me as vigorous as a new bride. There was no mirror but Mr. Poole had set out a bit of silver to be polished in the morning so I took up one of the trays and scrubbed my face, making sure there was no black. Then I tucked my hair up in a fresh bonnet and changed my apron. My sleeves had a bit of black on the edges, so I rolled them back.

Mr. Poole had gone off to his room and Annie was already up in our attic, so I had the big quiet kitchen to myself. It was cold, as the stove was out, yet I didn't feel anxious to return to the drawing room where Master sat waiting for me. How could I speak to him, especially on the subject he had proposed?

So I stood for a moment, letting the cold and quiet sink in and remembering my place, and Mrs. Swit used to say we must do when we feel uncertain, and she was right on that for I began to be calm and, seeing I had nothing to fear, went up to Master with a good will.

When I come in he'd lit the fire himself and was standing looking into it, nor did he turn to look at me, so I went right up until I was beside him, made a curtsy to get his attention and said, "Sir?"

He turned to me, slow, I thought, as if he was having a conversation with someone else and I must attend to it to the last, and he looked at me close, as if it were of some interest that I should be there at all. This made me shy so I stepped back one and said, "I've come as you asked me to, sir." Then he came to himself and remembered all about me and again I saw that kind, tender look in his eyes as he took my hands and drew me near the little table with the lamp.

I was timid and would have pulled away but he had such a manner about him, being

doctor I imagine, as seemed to make it all right, so I went along and stood very still while he held my hands near to the light.

My right hand has more marks than my left, mostly on the fleshy part of my palm, the down around to my wrist. These he examined carefully, moving my thumb back and forth and tracing the thick white track there with his forefinger. While he was looking at my poor hands I took the chance to look at his, and a more refined, gentlemanly hand I think I've never seen. His fingers are long and delicate, almost like a lady's, and the nails is all smooth and trimmed evenly, so I thought here are hands such as should never know work, and wanted to hide my own rough red hands away.

"These go very deep here," he said, pressing near my thumb. "Yet you have full use of your fingers."

"I do now, sir," I said. "For a while I could not get that thumb to working but it come back. When the weather's changing I know it, but other than that I'm none the worse."

"Let me see your neck," he said.

I turned my head and pushed my hair up, though it wasn't really necessary as the cap held it in place pretty well. Master bent his eye upon the marks near my ear very intent for some minutes until I was wishing this would be all over and I could go off to my bed. I knew what was coming but not why, so I was puzzled and worried, but I stood still and said nothing until Master spoke.

"These appear to be teeth marks," he said. "Doubtless the bites of some animal."

"That's right, sir," I replied. "And so they are."

He touched the four marks that is close on my ear and his fingers was that cool and soft, I closed my eyes for a second, as I felt the blood rushing to my face. But Master didn't notice my state. He drew his hand away and stepped back so I recovered myself a little, but I could not look at him when he spoke.

"Judging from the size and shape of these marks, I'd say the animal was a rodent and rather a large one."

"He were a big enough rat, that's true, sir," I said, "though I never saw him. He was heavy as a dog."

He made a sound I thought was a laugh so I looked up and found I was right, for he had still the traces of a smile about his mouth, though it was a quick one and gone already. Still his eyes smiled at me, but not with malice, so I felt bold to speak.

"Have I said something funny, sir?" I asked.

"Not what you said, Mary, but how you said it. You have a frank manner that is not without charm."

"I try to speak honest, sir," I said, "as I've nothing to hide."

"That's as it should be, Mary," he replied. Then he turned and went back to the fire where he stood with his back to me and his hands clasped behind. I waited in fair suspense, smoothing my apron like a schoolgirl. Then, as he seemed not disposed to say more, I asked "May I go now, sir?"

Without turning to look at me he begun to talk, as if he was telling the fire about his concerns. "Yesterday," he said, "as I was passing in the hall I noticed you were working in the library, Mary."

"I was, sir," I said. "Only dusting it out."

“Well, I looked in but you didn’t see me.”

“No, sir,” I replied, not seeing the trap I was being led into, “I did not.”

“No,” he continued. “You didn’t because you were standing at the shelf looking into book.”

I could hardly speak, so shocked I was to be caught out and ashamed too. But I found my voice and said, “Oh, sir, I do apologize. It was a book that was lying open and I couldn’t help but look into it and then when I saw what it was I did stop to read a page or two.”

“And what book was it, Mary?” he said.

I thought this was hard as I knew he knew what book it was, as he had left it open, there being no one else in this house as would be looking into his books. “It were a history sir,” he said, “of the kings and queens.”

“And what did you think of it?”

“I thought it was a most interesting book, sir, and so well writ that I was distracted from my duties and caused you to be displeased, so now I don’t think so well of it.”

He turned to me then and I saw that he was still mightily amused at something, which put me off as I was struggling not to burst into tears from the quizzing and didn’t see any humor in it.

“I’m not the least displeased with you, Mary,” he said. “I’m delighted to have a housemaid who can not only read but be distracted by Macaulay’s style.”

“I can read well enough, sir,” I said, “and I do whenever I can, but servants’ fare is mostly high-life novels, so I’m no student and have no way of judging what’s good or bad except as it pleases me.”

“And you can write as well, I suppose.”

“Of course, sir,” I said.

“Then I want you to write something for me, Mary,” he said. “Will you do that?”

“If it’s in my power I will try, sir, though I fear you’ll find my way of writing too mean to be of interest.”

“I’ll bear with that,” he replied. “I want you to write me an account of the manner in which you came by this rodent. That you could be so badly bitten and not have seen the animal has piqued my curiosity.”

“It was in a closet, sir, and it was black as Egypt, that’s all the mystery there is to that.”

“And why were you in a closet, Mary?”

“It were a punishment, sir.”

He took in his breath a little, as if I’d said something that confirmed him in his thought. “Write it out for me, then, Mary. As you can,” he said. “And bring it to me here tomorrow evening, so that I may read it at my leisure.”

“I’ll do my best, sir,” I said.

“Good, then. I know you will.” He turned back to the fire and took up his fire-gazing stick which he does more than any man I’ve ever seen. The fireplace in our drawing room is a big one and puts out enough heat to roast a haunch in my view, but Master is thin-blooded, and gentlemen are I suppose, and don’t mind the heat. I stood there watching him, thinking how odd it was that he should want me to write on my own history, but I couldn’t find any humor in it and already I was thinking just how to start that would make it interesting to him. Then I came to myself and said, “Sir, may I go now?” and he said, “Yes,” without moving a muscle.

but his mouth, so I ran out of the room and along the hall to the back stairs. Then I went up to the attic very slow, as if I didn't want to get to the top, milling over the whole business.

I'd have to get up an hour early as there would be no time to sit during the day, though I thought I might get in a little at tea if Mr. Poole didn't come up with some errand or chore as is often the case. At last I got to the room, undressed in the dark and climbed in with Annie, who was dead asleep and didn't even know I was there.

I lay thinking about Master, who was down below me in his drawing room, gazing at the fire no doubt and thinking Lord knows what. Then I fell on thinking of his cool fingers again on my neck, which was a thought I knew I had no business to be entertaining and I gave myself a talking to on the subject of a servant's foolishness and how wrong it is ever to have fancied outside one's station as it always leads to misery, as I've observed myself often enough, and in the midst of lecturing myself I fell asleep.

It was hard to get up the next morning because it was so rainy and dark, but I knew I had my writing to do and with the rain there would surely be no time to do it during the day. Mr. Poole is always in a state when it rains (which is much of the time) and seems to have a passion for sending those under him out into it and then fussing if a bit of mud comes in through the door. So I got myself out of bed and wrote up my story as best I could. Annie woke up and spoke to me in the dark (I was working by candle as we've no lamps in our room) but I told her I was just at my journal, which I do keep for my own pleasure, so she thought little of it and went back to sleep. Annie is a good girl and a hard worker, but I believe her health is no good as whenever we've a free moment she is asleep and seems to have no life but working and sleeping, which is sad.

All day I had heavy work: carried up coal and water, scrubbed the kitchen floor out on my knees, cleaned the pantry, polished the silver Mr. Poole had left out and took up the rugs in his parlour, but couldn't hang them out for the rain. So I took them all and hung them in the backyard where there's an overhang, and while I was beating them I saw Master cross the yard to his laboratory, his head down and his shoulders slumped as if he was being trod on by the rain.

I was behind the carpet, so he didn't notice me, though I kept beating at it, making a thudding sound. Yet he didn't look my way. When I saw him I thought I might sing out that I'd done as he asked and would bring it along in the evening, but many other thoughts, and something about the worried, tired look of Master as he hurried along to be at his work (which Mr. Poole says is very scientific and important, not like a common doctor who sets bones and tells sick folks they mun stay in bed, for Master sees no one and is interested in the cause of things, not how to tinker and mend, as Mr. Poole says), something in all this kept me quiet and I even stopped my beating to watch him go by. He let himself in with a key (we are none of us ever allowed in Master's laboratory and sometimes I think we should be, surely it must need a cleaning such as he cannot do himself), but just before he went in he stopped and looked back towards the house with a look so sad, as if there was something there he was leaving and he wished he never had to go. He looked all up and down the house, but not at me as I was off to the side in the overhang where the two wings come together, and then he went in and closed the door.

So I worked all day with the thought of giving my writing to Master in the evening like the

promise of a fine day out before me and I thought over my writing to see had I left anything out or said anything too crudely so that he would be offended. But at dinner Mr. Poole told us that Master was taking his meal in his cabinet, as he does sometimes when he is working hard, and there would be no need to lay the fire in the drawing room, so once the dishes were put up we could all be off to bed. Mr. Bradshaw asked leave to go to his mother's in P Street, as she is ill and has no one to look in on her, and so he got consent and went off directly. I sat with my beer after everyone had got up, trying to think of a way to see Master without telling Mr. Poole my reason, for though he never said it, I felt he wouldn't want Mr. Poole to know we had our conversation the night before and also Mr. Poole is very disapproving of the servants ever speaking to Master, or calling themselves to his attention in any way as he says Master should never be distracted from his work and that he is always working in his head, even when he looks like he's at rest, which is surely true.

Mr. Poole was at the sideboard making up Master's tray and complaining that he had to go into the cellar for a bottle of claret which is Master's particular favourite and Cook had served up the plate too soon so the food would be cold. I thought this were an opportunity at least to speak with Master about how I should deliver my writing so I said, "Mr. Poole, I can take the tray out now if you like and you can come behind with the claret." But he only stopped and gave me one of his cold, dead looks, like a fish's eye when you know it's not too fresh and said, "Mary, you know Dr. Jekyll forbids anyone but me to go to the cabinet door. I wonder you could forget this simple direction."

So I just ducked my head over my beer and said I was sorry but I had forgotten. After he went off I said to Cook it seemed to me someone ought to go in and clean for Master. She agreed with me and told me the side door and steps was a disgrace and every time she walked by them on the street she felt relieved that none of Master's friends knew they belonged to our house (for the corner house comes between). But I said, Master didn't have much in the way of friends that I ever saw, except his solicitor Mr. Utterson, who comes around now and then, but Cook said before I come Master sometimes gave large dinner parties and doubtless he would again when he was ready to take a rest from his work.

After we'd done up the dishes there was nothing to do but go off to bed and as it was tea and I was tired from my work I didn't mind much, but I kept wishing I had some way to deliver my writing as I promised.

Then when I was in bed, I thought mayhaps Master doesn't even remember he asked me to write out my story for him and it was just his whim at the moment so he wouldn't have listened to me tell it and he could have some quiet in his drawing room. This cast me down very much and I went to sleep feeling tired to the bones and sad, which shows what comes of wanting to be important and feel different from others in the same station.

The next morning I was washing the front steps when Mr. Poole came out the door and spoke to me very coldly. "The Master has sent for you to come to the drawing room," he said, and I knew he was displeased and suspicious, for Master never pays much attention to the servants and hardly knows their names, or so it seems, though that may be partly due to how determined Mr. Poole is to keep Master from any bother having to do with the household and what a free rein he has over everything that goes on, including who is hired and let go. In most houses I've been in this is not the case and though I know I'm answerable always to Master

Poole, as he is above me, still I can't help but feel that in the end I'm answerable to Master alone.

I brought my bucket in and emptied it out in the yard, then washed as best I could and put on a clean apron. My skirts was black but there was nothing to be done about that and I thought Master might not expect more from one he calls in with no more notice than he has given me. Mr. Poole was following me about, full of disapproval and as gloomy as a cloudy day, but I paid him no mind. I was wondering how I would get my writing down from my room since I felt sure it was for that Master had called me.

And so it was. As soon as I made a curtsy before him, Master put down his teacup and asked if I'd done as he requested.

"I have done it, sir," I said. "But I had no means of giving it to you, as you was in your laboratory last night."

"I see," Master said. Then he took up his tea again and sat looking into the cup as if he thought the next thing to say might be written in there. I stood it as long as I could, then I said, "I haven't got the pages on me now, sir. They're in my room and I don't like to go up there just now as Mr. Poole has his eye on me and is likely to ask what I'm about."

He gave his tea a weak smile and then I stopped being nervous for myself and noticed that he looked very unwell. His face was as pale as paper and his eyes had dark circles underneath. "And you think Mr. Poole would have some objection to your doing as I ask?" he said.

This put me in a difficulty as it could never be my place to speak ill of another servant, but particularly one like Mr. Poole who is over me and has been in this house nearly twenty years, so Cook says. "Mr. Poole would never object to anything you wished done in your own house, sir," I said, "but it's his place to tell me what you want and not the other way around."

"I see," he said, giving me his mild, amused look. "Mary, you seem to have a fair and profound view of social order and propriety."

"It's nothing extraordinary to know, sir," I said. "Every servant knows as much if he's allowed to wish to stay in service."

"So how do you propose we solve this problem of circumventing the indefatigable Poole without compromising your position?"

"I mun tuck the pages in my sleeve after tea, sir," I said, "when I sometimes go up to my room, and then put them somewhere as you direct, so that you may pick them up at your leisure."

"You seem to have given this plan some thought," was all he said.

"Yes, sir," I said. "I have."

Then he just sat looking at me in that kind, sad way he has, but he looked so tired and that I felt I would ask him if he wasn't knocked up, though I wouldn't have put it that way to him. Before I could speak he said, "Will you be working in the library this afternoon?"

"Yes, sir," I said. "I'll have to dust and black the grate."

"Then you could put your pages in the book we discussed before and close it up."

"I could, sir," I said.

"Good, then," he said. "That is how we will circumvent the virtuous Poole."

I did as Master asked, but not with an easy mind. It seemed to me no good could come of it as I've never known a gentleman or lady either who would encourage one servant to deceive

another. Order in a household is as important to us below stairs as above and though I have no liking for Mr. Poole, who is so vain of his intimacy with Master he seems to have no other cause to live, I could not feel easy about the way Master had spoken of him as "the virtuous Poole," showing me his contempt and taking me, whom he don't know, into his confidence. I've been in service ten years now, since I was twelve, and I've never seen such a case though it isn't uncommon for ladies and gentlemen to play their servants off on each other and many's the husband who seeks to lay his wife low by showing his contempt for her to his own dressing maid.

After tea I looked over my writing and changed a word here or there, feeling proud of it all in all, pleased with the way I'd started out particularly, and anxious to have Master's opinion as I have always had a great respect for those as can write things up, which is why I've kept my journal whenever I could over the years, though every time I've left a house it seems to lose them. I tucked the pages in my sleeve and in the afternoon I put them in the book as Master had promised. Then I cleaned and blacked the grate, laid the fire and dusted out the room reading as many book titles as I could without slowing my work. Many of Master's books are scientific and I wouldn't make sense of them if I was to open them, but there's two shelves one of history and one of poetry, that I would dearly like to look into.

When I went back into the kitchen, Mr. Poole was at the sideboard decanting a bottle of port and as I come in he gave me a sharp, critical look which, because of my guilty heart, I could not meet honestly, which shows what comes of sneaking about and, as the saying goes "trying to serve two masters."

Five days passed and I neither saw nor heard Master. He took all his meals on a tray and the only words he had with any of us came to Mr. Poole who sometimes found orders and chemists tossed on the laboratory stairs which he filled himself, so he was in and out, always in a bad humour. My patience was worn thin on several scores. The weather was bad, rain and unseasonable cold, so even if I got a few minutes to myself during a day (which mostly I did not get) I spent them standing under the eaves in the court looking out through the rain at the little garden (as it is called, though it is just a green patch with low misshapen bushes at either end) that separates the house from Master's laboratory, and this only made me gloomier still. I'd always fancied that someday I might have a garden of my own, and it is at this end that I am always saving and live so frugal my fellow servants wonder at me, but I know I mun be in service twenty years and be not much closer to this goal than I am now and here Master has this fair bit of earth. Though, closed in as it is by buildings, the sun has heavy work to get to it, still it seemed to me something could be done with it if anyone had the mind to. But Master is absorbed in his studies and so he crosses and recrosses this bit of garden and never sees there's no need to leave it bare. And here's this big house with so many servants in it, all busy enough to be sure, just keeping it in order, keeping all the fires lit and the larder stocked, as if there were a dozen ladies and gentlemen expected any moment though no one comes much and Master disappears for days at a time, so it's like serving a ghost, who may see what you do or may not.

I brooded on these things when I had the chance and my fellows seemed not much gladder than I. Mr. Poole was like a dog told to wait at the shop door; he was anxious for his master and would jump at every footstep. Poor Annie got a lot of his sharp tongue and bore it, and

was her way, silent and drowsy. Cook and I were of the opinion that hard work is the best cure for low spirits, so we made it our project to scrub out the kitchen from top to bottom and even made the narrow windowpanes sparkle. While we was at it, she told me stories of her childhood in the country, for she was a country lass, and how she come into service first working in a grand estate at S_____, as a scullery maid, and what fine hunting parties the ladies and gentlemen had there, and how the mistress was killed falling from her horse and the master closed the whole place up forever and come up to town. That is how Cook come to be in London, which she declares is a vile, filthy place not fit for anyone to live in and she vows she will go back to the country whenever she can.

That was how we passed the days when Master could have been on the moon as across the yard, for all we knew of his doings. Then on the sixth morning Mr. Poole bustled into the kitchen early, looking as cheerful as I imagine he can, and announced that Master would have his breakfast on a tray in his own bedroom and that I was to look sharp and get a fire up in his room as fast as ever I could, for Master was chilled to the bone and the room was so damp he might die of it.

I put my cap on, as it was so early I'd hardly dressed yet, and a clean apron and hurried up to Master's room. I knocked at the door and heard him say, "Come in," but his voice sounded weak and peevish, so I kept my eyes down, giving him a quick curtsy as I went in and made straight for my work. Even though I scarcely looked at him I took in enough to see that he was propped up on his pillows like an invalid looking as pale as death. It didn't take more than a few moments to get the fire up, as I'd laid the grate three days earlier, so I was soon done and stood up to take my leave when Master said, "Mary, let me have a word with you."

I approached him but couldn't look at him as I felt uncomfortable to be spoken to while he was lying in his *bed*, though he seemed to think nothing on it.

"I've read your story," he said, "and I found it most interesting."

"If you did, sir," I said, "then I'm satisfied." I took the chance of speaking to take a quick look at him, but looked away as quick for he had his kind eyes directly on my face.

"Like many a good storyteller," he went on, "you raise more questions in your tale than you answer."

I didn't know what to say to that as it didn't seem a compliment, nor did I understand what questions I could have raised or why he'd call my writing a "tale" as I'd only told what happened, so I said nothing but stood looking at a rose in the carpet like a dumb creature.

"For example," he said, "nowhere do you explain what your relationship to your persecutor was."

And of course I thought, Oh, I never did, and I wondered why I'd left that out, except that I've never liked much to say it even to myself. "I'm sorry for that, sir," I said. "He were my father."

Master drew in his breath and said, "Oh, I suspected as much, but I'm disheartened to hear it."

Again I could think of nothing to say, except perhaps that I'd heard of worse cases than mine, but that seemed out of place somehow, so I said nothing.

"Another thing you never mention, Mary, is how you feel about this monster."

"Oh, I don't think he were a monster, sir," I said. "He were an ordinary man, but drinkin' did for him as it has for many another."

He was quiet then, and I wondered if I'd said something I shouldn't have. At last he said, "You don't hate this father of yours, Mary?"

"Well, sir, it was like this," I said. "When I come out of hospital, Father was gone and never seen him since. Marm went to work as a sempstress, where she'd a room, and I went out to service ..." I knew I hadn't answered Master's question but he took what I said and seemed to think on it.

"And in your opinion it was only that he drank. You think that drinking caused him to abuse you?" He put this question so careful and serious, as if he really thought I might know the answer and enlighten him, and also it was a question I had thought on considerably myself, especially in the long, dark-filled hours my father put me through as a child, and even afterwards when I was safe from him in the houses of gentlemen like Master, I thought on it so I tried to give Master my answer as true as ever I could.

"When I was very small," I said, "Father didn't drink so much. He had some little work at the docks, and though he wasn't ever a kind man, he weren't cruel to me. Since his wanting to hurt me came on at the same time as his drinking, I naturally put one as the cause of the other."

"But you're not sure which is the cause of which, Mary?" Master said.

"Many a man drinks sir, and we see some of them only become high-spirited and good-natured, and others as is boisterous or wants a good fight with their fellows. With my father when he was drinking it was as if he couldn't get enough of seeing suffering, and as I was a hand, it was me he took his pleasure in hurting. He was a different man then—he even looked different, sir, as if the cruel man was always inside him and the drinking brought him out."

"Or *let* him out," Master said softly.

I had not been looking at Master from shyness to say so much, and when he spoke I saw he was fixed on me, attending on my every word, silent and anxious. I felt a terrible strangeness and scarce knew where to look when a knock come on the door and my eyes met Master's alarm. It was only a moment before the door opened and Mr. Poole come in with Master's breakfast tray, but I saw many things in it: Master's look of sympathy for me, first, and then as I turned to leave I got a full view of Mr. Poole in the cheval glass and saw his look fixed on my back, full of anger, for he could see I had been talking with Master and he couldn't bear it, so I knew, as I hurried out of the room, that I'd best keep to myself as much as I could until that day was out.

That night Mr. Poole told us Master had made himself ill from too much study and hard touching his food, so for two days he did not leave his bed. Cook said she knew how to "bring him back," as she put it, by starting him on soup, eggs and weak tea and then gradually bringing him to more solid foods. Mr. Poole insisted that everything must be brought in and done by himself alone, even to laying the fire, though he was good enough to allow me to bring the coals up, a bit of work his narrow shoulders was probably too weak to bear. He said nothing to me about my talk with Master, but he'd his eye upon me and everything I did and if I had a moment's free time he invented some chore to fill it up. I didn't mind him and was glad enough to have my hands filled, as I felt worried about Master, and it seemed to me that in doing my part to keep his house running smooth, I might help

him to recover his strength.

Cook's method was a good one and in a few days Master was recovered and about his usual routines. One morning as Cook and I was peeling 'tatoes, I spoke to her about the garden which she called the "yard," because she said it was too run-down to be called a garden. "But that's the waste of it," I said. "Here we go out to the greengrocer for parsley and all herbs when we could easily be growing them here."

"A herb garden," Cook said. "I've thought of it myself. We had one at B_____. Square, a yard no bigger than ours here. But the earth would need heavy spading, Mary, and my poor back is too stiff for such work."

"But mine isn't," I said. "Only I've never tried a garden so I wouldn't know how to begin."

"Oh, I could tell you that," Cook said. "I've a green thumb; my mother said it run in our family."

So Cook and I talked on this garden and by the time Mr. Poole come in for tea I persuaded her to talk with him on the subject as if it were her own idea, as I knew he'd never agree to it if he thought it come from my head. I went up to my room and amused myself with my writing a bit, then when I come down Cook was smiling at me and said it was all arranged, that Mr. Poole approved of the idea and had given her leave to use any free time we both could find to begin our project. He even told her there was all the tools we would need in the shed off the laboratory and that in Dr. Denman's time there had been a nice bit of garden there and that in his opinion, it were a waste to have it run-down as it was.

So on one thing Mr. Poole and I are agreed.

I was up early the next morning, well before the sun, and I had washed down the front steps on my knees before anyone in the house was awake. This suited me well enough as I never like being looked at as I'm doing this work, especially as so many of the houses near us are now let to all sorts of tradesmen, so there's a constant traffic and not of the nice gentlemen, either, but those who think it's smart to speak out to a working girl and see they can distract her from her duties. It was black and foggy out, and the gas lights were still lit so each one had a yellow halo round it and they looked like a line of strange, bright fair clouds, making eerie dollops of light along the street which was as quiet as death. I did the front steps and then all the brass and took my buckets to the curb to empty out. I stood looking at the house front and my first thought was, ours is the finest and best kept on the street. Then as I was dreaming a little, on how many houses I've been in and how of them all this is the best place I've had, for I'm paid more here, twelve pounds a year, there's a liberal feeling in the kitchen for we all of us eat as well as we could want and haven't even to get our own beer, and though Mr. Poole is hard on me, he's not unfair, and of course our master is a respected gentleman who does many charitable works and as he is a bachelor, there's nothing for him to keep up after and he's as clean in his ways as a military man. As I was musing thus, I saw a lamp go on upstairs in Master's room. I had a misgiving that he might be sleepless or ill, and I gathered up my buckets to go in lest he might ring, but as I did this the lamp went out again.

When I got back to the kitchen I put the big kettles on and got the stove up for Cook, who come in as I was working, surprised to find me there as she is always first up and has the kitchen warm for us and our tea when Annie and I come down. I told her I'd done my morning work and was now free to run out to the markets for her, so we might both have a

hour before lunch to start on our garden, and I could see she was very pleased, called me "dear Mary" and said I was the best housemaid she'd ever known and a credit to our house, all of which made me feel pleased with myself and glad I'd come up with our project.

By half after ten everything was done, Cook had the shed key from Mr. Poole and we went out to begin our work. We found the shovels and spades, rakes, a good hoe, gloves, a number of empty pots and even a big bag of soil, all put away neatly in the little shed where, Cook said, they must have been sitting for twenty years, waiting for hands as would take them up.

I set to work with Cook's direction, and heavy work it was, as the ground was so hard it came up in great clods. Cook said first those ugly bushes must go and they gave me a fair struggle, though they hardly looked alive, and I thought how all plants do struggle and seem to be longing to flourish no matter how badly they are treated or on what hard, unprofitable soil they fall, so I began to feel a little sad for the poor bushes, but Cook said they'd be the death of our herbs so up they must come.

We had been at it a good time, me digging and Cook breaking up clods with a spade, when we heard the laboratory door open and Master come out, strolling towards us in a leisurely way and looking so strong and well it was a pleasure to see. Cook got up as he approached and began dusting herself off, looking very nervous and surprised, as she rarely sees Master being always in the kitchen, and she said, "Oh, sir, what is the hour? You must be coming for your lunch."

So Master came up to us and I gave up shovelling, feeling a little ashamed for I was sweating and dirty and I knew my face must be red from my struggle with the bushes, though I felt proud too, for there they were, got up on the flaps and ready to be hauled off. Master said to Cook, "It's only just past eleven. I was going in to write some letters before lunch. You might tell Poole I'll take it in the library and there's certainly no reason to hurry."

Cook bobbed him a curtsy and said, "Very good, sir," and then to me, "I'll be off to get cleaned up and the luncheon on, Mary. You may work a bit longer if you're not tired."

I said I would and Cook hurried off, leaving me leaning on my shovel and Master gazing at me in my dirt. "Well, Mary," he said. "Poole tells me we're to have a garden."

"Yes, sir," I said. "Cook says we may have herbs here and she knows the way to gardening."

"You don't know the way yourself?"

"No, sir," I said. "We had some potted geraniums once, at the Marley School, and that's as close as I've been to growing anything."

Master seemed to light up with interest at my reply. "The Marley School, Mary?" he said. "Why, that is one of my projects."

"Truly, sir? You mean you was a teacher there?"

"No, Mary," he said, seeming to think my idea a funny one. "I've never seen the school. But it was partly my idea and I gave the money for the building and I am on the board still. We see to the running of the school."

I thought it odd that Master would be running a school he never saw, and then I thought he saw what went on there he might not be looking so pleased, but that made me feel sorry for Master, with his good intentions and his seeming so pleased to find I was a pupil there, so I only said, "It's where I learned to read, sir, so I'm grateful to you."

This delighted Master so his face broke into a smile, as if someone had given him a fine

present, and he seemed almost shy to have my thanks for he said, "Well, Mary. So. That very fine, very gratifying to me. It seems remarkable really, that you should go to my school and end up in my house."

Then I had such a mean thought it left me speechless, for it was this, that considering how rough the school was, it was a wonder I could read and had got as far as I have in the world which surely even Master mun see isn't very far. So I said nothing, but wiped my sweating forehead on my sleeve and stood looking at Master across the dirt feeling all the world was standing between us and we'd no way ever to cross it, but also that somehow we was also two sides of the same coin, doing our different work in the same house and as close, without speaking, as a dog and his shadow.

Master's smile faded and we looked at each other a moment longer, me feeling no shame in my dirt, but rather proud. Then Master looked down at the shovel pressed in the dirt and said, "Well then, Mary. Good luck with your gardening," and he turned away and went into the house.

So I continued my digging but I felt strange somehow, as if my work would come to no good end and the garden would never be as it was in my imagination, but only a poor, stunted, blighted place where nothing would prosper no matter how much Cook and I might try. And I thought of Master who was so kind and thoughtful today, not distant as he used to seem before we had our talk and he read my history, and I remembered the question he had asked as to whether I hated my father for his ill use of me and how I had failed to answer and Master had not pressed me, for he must have seen what I now understood, that I hadn't answered because I don't know the answer.

I believe to hate my father would be to give in and make small my real feeling which is strong but not like hate, as that seems simple, pure and clean. Yet I feel that my father put this dark place in me that brings sadness on me unawares, when I should be happy to have my good place and such friends as I have and someone like Cook who can advise me on the way of gardening, and who is simple herself and finds happiness in doing her work and knowing her place. But for me, though I can get past it, there's often this darkness and sadness, unexpected and coming from things that should bring happiness, like the thought of the garden and the working in it with Cook, but then it rises up inside like a blackness and I really am in that blackness where my father left me, with no way out and nothing to do but wait until somehow there's some merciful release and I come to myself again.

So I feel my father made me thus, or left me thus, with this sadness which has been hard to bear and will likely never leave me no matter what fortune I have, and it sets me apart from my fellows who seem never to know it. While I can't forgive my father, neither can I regret what I am, and there are times when I would not give up the sadness and darkness because it do seem to me true that this is part of how we mun see life if we are to say we saw it, and it has to do with our being alone and dying alone, which we all mun do. So it seems to me that many people, especially gentlefolks, spend a great deal of money and all their time trying to push all sadness from their lives, which in my view they can never do, because it is *there*, no matter how well off we may be in this world, and it just mun be got through. I see I have the patience to wait it out, and the truth is no matter how dark I feel I would never take my own life, because when the darkness is over, then what a blessing is the feeblest ray of light!

And this is truly something I see in Master and why I am so drawn to serve him and what

think he mun see in me, and why he has wanted to look into my history, because we are both souls who knew this sadness and darkness inside and we have both of us learned to wait.

I couldn't seem to come back to myself after my talk with Master over the garden. It was as if I had been digging up my own childhood and for the rest of the day my thoughts was as hard and black as the soil. These many years I've seldom really thought on my past and have tried to put it behind me, going on with my work, for I see no good in brooding on things that can never be changed. I know Cook thought it odd to see me downcast at lunch, as she was pleased with me and full of plans for our garden, but I could scarcely lift my head. Afterwards I took my buckets and brushes and went out to scrub the flags in the front hall. This is a long, slow, dirty job which I like to do on my knees with my skirts tied up, using a lot of water and brushes, first to loosen up all the dirt, then a deal more until it is clear again, taking it up with my big sponges and pouring more out until I've fair made a little river in the hall. Before I started I got the fireplace going so the hall would dry out fast when I was done, but as I worked it made me so hot that I was dripping and felt I was in a steam cabin such as I have read about in the bathing establishments. I worked and worked, scrubbing hard, sloshing through the filthy water to fill my buckets, going round the house and through the area, so many passersby saw me hurrying along in my bare feet and skirts tied up, then I had to use half a bucket on my feet at the front step before going back in. I was waiting for my spirits to lift with the dirt, but they would not. Then I had a thought that struck me so hard I dropped my brush and rose up on my knees like a rabbit trying to head the fox and that was this, that my father is still alive somewhere.

Why this should so stun me I don't know, but it did, and all at once it was as if he was not just alive somewhere, but in the very hall with me. Our big house was silent all around me. Master had gone to his laboratory after lunch and Mr. Poole was out at the chemist's for his work. Mr. Bradshaw had his day off, Cook and Annie was in the kitchen, so I knew there was no one about, yet I seemed to hear someone walking towards me.

I glanced back at the fire, for a chill had come over me, and gave myself a shake as if I could shake off the dread. But it would not go away and I felt as I used to feel when I heard his bootstep in the alley, that I could pick out his step from among a thousand, for it was always coming for me and each step fairly called my name. Then I felt the water running down my face was changed, that it was tears. I could not think when was the last time I found myself crying. "Oh lord," I said out loud. "What's becoming of me?"

So I had to force myself back to my work and just let the tears run with all the other water I had about me, which they did and quite freely. I thought on Master and how his notice of me has stirred up all this confusion, sadness and dread, all feelings I thought I had put to rest and how it is doing me no good at all, yet I think I cannot undo what's been done, nor should I try.

At dinner Mr. Poole was in a fuss because Master was closed up in his laboratory again and he'd said just to leave him a little cold mutton on the cabinet stairs as he was on no account to be disturbed. So, Mr. Poole said, he feared Master had so little regard for his own health that he was getting to be all the staff could do to keep him well. I felt too low to say much, not that I'm ever talkative, especially when Mr. Poole is about, and Cook noticed I wasn't eating. "Mary," she said, "you'd best be to bed straight away. I fear rising so early and working so

hard has knocked you up and we can't do without you." Mr. Poole raised his eyebrows at that and gave me a long look. Then he said, "You do look pale, Mary. I believe Mrs. Kent is right."

I thought I would fall over to hear a kind word from Mr. Poole and I know my mouth dropped open, but then I thought I must be looking near dead and perhaps they was right and I was coming down with something. So I said, "Yes, sir," and Cook told me to drink all my beer and be off, which I did, getting in bed by eight, even before Annie. I fell straight to sleep, nor did I hear Annie get in, and I think I didn't even move until near dawn when my eyes flew open like windows and my heart was pounding because I knew something was amiss in our house.

Someone was climbing up the back steps, not to our attic but below that, between the kitchen and Master's bedroom. The house was that quiet and still, I could hear the floorboards creak like thunder. I heard a step, then another, then silence. My palms were wet and my legs felt so weak, I thought perhaps I'd been dreaming and somehow carried it over into waking, and as I heard nothing else, I made myself calm by breathing in and out very slow.

Then I heard another step, halting-like, then nothing. "Now I am awake," I said out loud, hoping Annie might be awake too, but she didn't move and as my eyes were used to the darkness I could see her face, slack with sleep, and I had a funny thought, that Annie is like a dog at the end of a hunt when she sleeps and if you put a plate of food under her nose no doubt but she would dream she was eating.

Another step, my thought went away, then another. He was on the landing now and moving towards Master's room.

I thought, of course, it *mun* be Master coming in from his work and moving quietly so as not to disturb Mr. Bradshaw who has his room under those stairs. And I felt foolish for my terror, though, I thought, this is the second time today I have heard footsteps. I heard the door to Master's room open and he went in, so of course it was him, though there was something in the step, so halting, as if he was dragging one foot a little, whereas Master has a light, even way of walking.

But he's tired, I thought, and anyhow it's probably my fancy, as how could I make that out listening through two floors? Then I remembered that my father had that halting way about his walk and how I used to hear my own name in it, long on the first part—Maare, and the short -ry, Maare-ry, until I thought I would scream.

And it come back to me again, as it did so hard this afternoon, that my father is alive still, even if it is only in my own poor head, that he was gone for a while and that somehow Master's kindness and interest has brought him back to life for me.

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