

STORIES
POETRY

The Inglenook

SKETCHES
TRAVEL

MARTHA.

(By J. J. Bell.)

Many a time in the four years during which the village green grocer courted our maid Martha my wife and I shared a good laugh over the bashfulness of the one and the naughtiness of the other. But somehow, when Mr. Peck at last proposed and Martha accepted him, the joke collapsed like a pin-pricked toy balloon, and neither of us could find anything left to laugh at.

Martha was not, speaking literally, "a perfect treasure," but she had long ago become familiar with our little ways, just as we—which was quite as important—had become familiar with hers; and, apart from resenting the bare idea of engaging a stranger, we felt, as we gradually admitted to each other, that Martha had a place not only in our modest household, but also in our affections. But, after all, we only admitted to each other a feeling that had been in existence for many years, ever since the night when our little boy was suddenly taken away—that night, and the dreadful days which followed, when Martha's heart seemed broken as our own hearts, although her hands were ready and steady for the work that had to be done.

I doubt if there was ever a matrimonial engagement which gave complete satisfaction to every one acquainted with either of the contracting parties, and in Martha's case my wife would be the first to admit that she was what is mildly termed "put out" when one morning her maid, busy washing the breakfast dishes, remarked abruptly yet calmly—

"Excuse me, mem, but I maun tell ye I've made up my mind to ha'e Dugald Peck, the green-grocer."

My wife cannot recollect the exact reply she made to the announcement, but she distinctly remembers dropping the lid of a muffin dish by which she set great store, and which she could never trust to Martha's fingers.

In the evening she reported the announcement and some of the subsequent conversation to me, adding—

"But the thing that puzzled me most, Jim, was that Martha wasn't the least bit excited. She didn't even blush."

"How old is Martha?" I inquired.

"That has nothing to do with it—but I fancy she's about forty. You don't mean to inter that a woman cannot blush at that age, do you?"

"It is for you to say, Margaret?" I returned, smiling at her.

She said it without words, and laughed a little laugh that trailed off into a sigh.

Presently she spoke again, seriously.

"No, Martha didn't blush, and she wasn't a bit confused. She just went on washing the dishes as if she had said nothing more important than 'It's not quite so cold this morning.' Way, Jim, she didn't even appear to be particularly glad about it!"

"Perhaps she was sad," I suggested.

Margaret shook her head. "I thought she would have shown some—some sorrow at the prospect of leaving us," she said in a low tone. "I confess I was disappointed in Martha this morning. I didn't," she continued, a note of dignity slightly hardening her voice, "I didn't look for tears of gratitude, but I did expect some expression of—of regret."

"It is too bad," I muttered not knowing what to say. "You have done so much for her, dear—when she was ill, when she was jilted by that wretched fellow just after she came to us, when she—"

"Oh, never mind that . . . And yet I can't believe that Martha isn't sorry to leave me."

"No more can I. In fact, I shouldn't be surprised if she threw over Peck at the last minute and stayed on here!" I exclaimed, cheerfully.

"My dear! The wedding is to be six weeks since. She wouldn't have fixed it so definitely if she had had any doubt about keeping to her bargain. Besides, we are not dependent on Martha. I can get another maid. Indeed, I have sometimes thought of late that a younger woman might suit better."

"Yes, of course," I assented, thinking of our hundred and one little ways up to which a stranger would require to be educated.

Perhaps Margaret was thinking likewise, for she was silent for several minutes.

I lit my pipe, and casually observed:

"I suppose Peck is a decent sort of man."

"I believe he is quite respectable and prosperous, if that's what you mean, Jim. He certainly ought to be the better, with the prices he charges for his vegetables and fruit."

"But what's wrong with him?" I asked.

My wife hesitated. "Well," she said at last, "I'm sure he's a mean man—you can see it in his eye, when you catch it; and I don't mind saying that I wish Martha were going to marry anybody else in the village, for I'm convinced that as Mrs. Peck she'll have harder work and far less reward than she has had here."

"But Martha must see something attractive in him, surely."

"I suppose so. But, as I said, I wish she had taken some one else. Really, Jim, I was amazed when she told me this morning, for I know, and so do you, how she has been snubbing him for years."

Ah, there's nothing like a lover being persistent."

"Lover! Do you think every man who wants a wife is a lover?"

"I think you are a bit severe on Peck," I ventured.

"No, Jim, I'm not. I see the man nearly every day, and I'd be sorry for any woman who became his wife. I'm not thinking of Martha at all now. Mr. Peck wants an assistant, but does not want to have to pay a proper wage. Martha is a comely woman, and a careful one, too, except in regard to glass and china. She would do capably in the shop as well as in the house. Oh, I do wish she hadn't taken that greedy, selfish little man!"

"But what can you do, dear?"

"Nothing! absolutely nothing!—except to go to town as soon as possible and engage another maid. I suppose I should consider myself lucky at my time of life going to a registry office for the first time."

"Is Martha going to be married from here?" I inquired.

"No. She didn't give me time to offer that. She wishes to leave this day month, and go home to stay with her old mother, who has not been well lately, and be married there. I dare say that is the better way."

"Save some trouble."

"I wouldn't have minded that," said my wife, gently, "though I would have hated to see her go out of this house with Mr. Peck. However, I've got to concern myself about the new girl now."

"But you must understand, Jim," she continued after a moment or two, "you must understand that it will take years, probably, to get the best of girls to do everything in the way we are used to. And there are some little things that I don't think I could ask a strange girl to do."

"For instance?"

"Well, I don't think I could ask her to bring our morning tea into the bedroom, as Martha has done since the morning after we came home from our honeymoon, dear. I don't think I could do that. Could I?"

"Perhaps not. Exit one piece of unnecessary indulgence!" I returned, with affected carelessness. "Proceed Margaret."

"No, no. We'll find out plenty of little things we can't have soon enough, such as cooking a Welsh rabbit at eleven o'clock at night because we happen to get suddenly hungry. I never had Martha being up so late, but she seemed to take a pride in it, and of course she hadn't to rice very early. I'll have to do the Welsh rabbits myself in future."

"We'll have dinner an hour later and do without the rabbits," I said, bravely.

"We shall certainly have to alter some of our habits, Jim. Perhaps we have been too easy going. At any rate, you must give up dropping into the kitchen when I'm there to ask me unimportant questions. I don't think—but don't let's talk any more about it now. I'm going to write to Winifred."

As the days went on, depression took a firmer hold on us both. Margaret accounted for it by the fruitlessness of the various visits to the town registry offices, but I felt that it was really due to the strange apathy and callousness of Martha, who treated her mistress with a cold respectfulness, and never ventured a word with regard to her future unless she was asked for it. Naturally, Margaret froze also, and ceased to make kindly inquiries.

"I'm sure," she once sighed despairingly, "I can't think what has come over Martha. Her manner is so queer that sometimes I think she must be ill. I haven't seen her smile since she became engaged, and the other day, when I tried to make her joke about her being our green-groceress in the near future, her expression almost frightened me."

"You've never gone into the kitchen when Peck was there, have you?" said I.

"I couldn't, Jim, I couldn't!"

"I imagine she knows you don't like him, and naturally feels offended."

"I don't think she's offended. Sometimes she's like a dumb thing simply longing to speak. Her eyes haven't changed. It's her face, especially her mouth."

"Have you mentioned our proposed little wedding present, dear?"

"No. We'll send it after her, to her mother's. I couldn't give it to her here now."

"Cheer up, Margaret!" I said, feebly. "She's not worth all the pain you are giving your tender heart."

"Perhaps not—I don't know. . . . And yet I can't believe that she has lost all her feelings. Surely the soul of that rosy little man hasn't gone into her. That's nonsense I'm talking, but I—I feel the whole thing terribly, and—and so do you, Jim."

"I do," I had to confess at last.

Margaret's world and mine had always been rather a small one, and perhaps that was a reason why we felt the matter so seriously and so deeply.

The day of Martha's departure arrived, and the local chariot stood at the garden gate, laden with her belongings and ready to take them and herself to the station.

"You must come, Jim, and say good-bye to her, and wish her luck and happiness," said my wife, entering the study.

"All right," said I, feeling it was all wrong. "Has—has she broken down, Margaret?" I asked nervously.