

LARK RISE

Flora Thompson

In response to their timid knock, the door was opened by a youngish woman. She was like no one Laura had ever seen. Very slight – she would have been called 'scraggy' in the hamlet – with a dead white face, dark, arched brows, and black hair brushed straight back from her forehead, and with all this black and whiteness set off by a little scarlet jacket that, when Laura described it to her mother later, was identified as a garibaldi. She seemed glad to see the children, though she looked doubtful when she heard their errand and saw Martha's size.

'So you want a place?' she asked as she conducted them into a kitchen as large as a church and not unlike one with its stone paved floor and central pillar. Yes, she wanted a maid, and she thought Martha might do. How old was she? Twelve? And what could she do? Anything she was told? Well, that was right. It was not a hard place, for, although there were sixteen rooms, only three or four of them were in use. Could she get up at six without being called? There would be the kitchen range to light and the flues to be swept once a week, and the dining-room to be swept and dusted and the fire lighted before breakfast. She herself would be down in time to cook breakfast. No cooking was required, beyond preparing vegetables. After breakfast Martha would help her with the beds, turning out the rooms, paring the potatoes and so on; and after dinner there was plenty to do – washing up, cleaning knives and boots and polishing silver. And so she went on, mapping out Martha's day, until at nine o'clock she would be free to go to bed, after placing hot water in her mistress's bedroom.

Laura could see that Martha was bewildered. She stood, twisting her scarf, curtsying, and saying 'Yes, mum' to everything.

`Then, as wages, I can offer you two pounds ten a year. It is not a great wage, but you are very small, and you'll have an easy place and a comfortable home. How do you like your kitchen?'

Martha's gaze wandered round the huge place, and once more she said, 'Yes, mum.'

`You'll find it nice and cosy here, eating your meals by the fire. You won't feel lonely, will you?'

This time Martha said, `No, mum'

`Tell your mother I shall expect her to fit you out well. You will want caps and aprons. I like my maids to look neat. And tell her to let you bring plenty of changes, for we only wash it once in six weeks. I have a woman in to do it all up,' and although Martha knew her mother had not a penny to spend on her outfit, and that she had been told the last thing before she left home that morning to ask her prospective employer to send her mother her first month's wages in advance to buy necessaries, once again she said, 'Yes, Mum.'