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One Pair Of Hands



Synopsis

What does a young, well-off English woman do with herself when she's thrown out of acting school and is tired of being a debutante? Well, if you're Monica Dickens, you become a cook. She makes the plunge to a life "below the stairs," confident in her abilities to be a cook because she once took a course in French cuisine. She quickly learns the difference between school learning and real life. Scalded milk, dropped roasts, and fallen souffles plague her in her domestic career, but she perseveres. What makes this book so delightful is the sense of humor and drama Monica Dickens brings to her work. From dressing up for job interviews in a "supporting-a-widowed-mum look" to eavesdropping on dinner guests, she tackles her work with an enthusiasm for discovery. To her descriptions of battles with crazy scullery maids, abusive employers, and unwieldy custards, she brings a humorous and pointed commentary about the delicate and ongoing war between the wealthy and their servants. Written in 1939, this true-life experience reveals a writer who wasted no opportunity to explore daily lives and dramas. Her keen eye for detail, youthful resilience, and sense of the absurd make *One Pair of Hands* a deliciously inside look at the households of the British upper-class.

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Customer Reviews

"Riotously amusing as the book is in parts, Miss Dickens also manages to make it a social document." — The Times "But over and above its gay adventurousness, its variety of keen-eyed and blithe-hearted experience and its implicit challenge to reflection, this book fascinates us too by its lively and unfamiliar detail." — New York Times

Great granddaughter to Charles Dickens, Monica Dickens (1915-1992) was born into an upper middle class family. Disillusioned with the world in which she was brought up, she acted out "she was expelled from St Paul's Girls' School in London for throwing her school uniform over Hammersmith Bridge. Dickens then decided to go into service, despite coming from the privileged class; her experiences as a cook and general servant would form the nucleus of her first book, *One Pair Of Hands*, published in 1939. Dickens married an American Navy officer, Roy O. Stratton, and spent much of her adult life in Massachusetts and Washington D.C., but she continued to set the majority of her writing in Britain. *No More Meadows*, which she published in 1953, reflected her work with the NSPCC "she later helped to found the American Samaritans in Massachusetts. Between 1970 and 1971 she wrote a series of children's books known as *The Worlds End Series* which dealt with rescuing animals and, to some extent, children. After the death of her husband in 1985, Dickens returned to England where she continued to write until her death aged 77.

This book was truly a joy to read. The author has such a gift in the way she makes her character think. I was sorry to see it end.

I found Dickens' book a charming look at what must have been a difficult situation at times. I enjoyed a look at this period of time and her writing style was good. It's a bit distressing to think Charles Dickens' great-granddaughter was reduced to being a domestic, but she made the most of it and turned it into literature and money, so good for her!

Although the author is a direct descendent of Charles Dickens, the writings is totally different. I enjoyed reading about the author's adventures very much.

It is an easy read. It is interesting. But I wouldn't say it is gripping or provides any great insight.

I really enjoyed this book. A look at the "downstairs" side of servitude, and some funny vignettes. Well written. Writing must run in the family - the author is the great(?) granddaughter of Charles Dickens.

This book's never-out-of-print history speaks for itself. I recently re-read and enjoyed it in conjunction with a recent study of "servants" in Britain in the 19th and 20th centuries, and it was a

great adjunct, detailing Ms. Dicken's experiences as a more-or-less upper-class young woman who chose to go slumming as a cook-general for mostly middle-class families struggling to maintain status, which at the time required the presence of servants in the house. Also a fantastic sidelight on the English reluctance to adopt labor-saving devices due to a deeply inculcated belief that "harder is better" or at least more virtuous. Dickens, of course, wasn't stuck in this position as real servants might have been, and skips gleefully from one position to another, shrugging off several occasions when her employers failed to pay her. Lighthearted and funny.

This is a situational comedy of its times - of a well-bred English girl who, because she was bored, decided to become a cook among other things. She is not highly successful even by her own standards - the souffle went soggy, the scones were burnt etc. and she is sooo tired, and stressed and flustered - but for the reader, it is terribly hilarious. Its not "deep" (don't expect any sermons on the poverty gap - she spent all her earnings on clothes) but do expect a laugh or two.

Monica Dickens, the great-granddaughter of Charles Dickens, fits into the "good sport" type of memoirist, recalling life experiences for which she was quite unprepared. I think of Betty MacDonald's "The Egg and I." Apparently well-to-do, Ms. Dickens decided to work as a Cook General for a couple years during the 1930's. The book is a chronicle of her relationships and experiences with various employers. I fully expected that the various households would blend into each other but was delighted to discover how vividly the personalities were portrayed, and so they remained distinct. Most memorable was the clothing designer with a constant finger on the call button, a mistrust of her spending habits and a penchant for draping her in fabrics to envision his newest creations. Some may have a problem with the fact that Ms. Dickens took on the job as a lark and could return to her comfortable life at any time, but the fact is that she really was up to her elbows in the muck of a 1930's kitchen. All in all, I found it a delightful read, although the final chapter which recounts a lecture on "The Problem of the Servant Today" is tedious and merely restates in an arid manner the "problems" so well-documented in the rest of the book.

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