



One Pair of Hands

Monica Dickens

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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.

One Pair of Hands Details

Date : Published August 30th 2005 by Chicago Review Press (first published 1939)

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Author : Monica Dickens

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From Reader Review One Pair of Hands for online ebook

Laura says

Recommended by my English teacher at school; read it and then again much later - it's very funny. Very English too - of a certain decade. I checked, written in 1939. And Yes, she was the grand-daughter, no, great, grand-daughter of Charles.

Julie Durnell says

3.5 stars. Not as interesting as I'd hoped. Monica comes off as kind of a grown up version of Amelia Bedelia, so in that respect her situations are amusing!

LindyLouMac says

It is a long time ago but I still remember this as being very funny as were the rest in the series.

Emily says

I had mixed feelings about this memoir, which was originally published in 1939, about a debutante girl's experiment of trying a life of domestic service after having completed a course in a cooking school. It's hard to say why exactly she does this. Certainly not economic necessity -- she is demurely reticent about her own family's circumstances, but they appear quite well off. She presents it as the simple result of boredom with the same-old society whirl and the whimsical desire to try something different, although I think she's being disingenuous and had publication in mind all along. She took a series of jobs, most of them of short duration, mostly involving cooking, but many with housework thrown in, and one with childcare. Most of her employers are appalling in various ways -- sometimes this is funny and sometimes it's not. It's not always comfortable reading, and there are far too many scenes like one's worst anxiety-dreams in which things are going hopelessly wrong in the kitchen while she has to rush upstairs to open the door to the well dressed dinner guests, and comes back to find everything burning, the souffle collapsed, etc. Sometimes Dickens is funny and likable -- and sometimes not. I didn't like her so much when she was on a train on her way to take a job as the head cook in an establishment reminiscent of Downton Abbey (an interlude that strains credulity a bit, as she was 22 when the book was published, and it's hard to believe she had the gravitas to take on this position). Deciding to "live the part," she writes, "At Paddington I settled myself diffidently into the corner of a carriage, and read a twopenny *Home Blitherings*, my face, innocent of makeup shining like a young moon and my unrouged lips moving with absorbed delight as I followed the lines with my finger." Just a wee bit condescending there, Monica. After a year and a half, she got so worn down at a job where she was both cook and maid of all work -- actually one of the few places where she liked her employer -- that she called a halt to the experiment. After a long period of sleeping and luxurious baths she took up her society life again, with no particular indication that she realized she was lucky to have this choice. The book's interesting enough as a period piece, but not one I'll be returning to again and again.

La Fenice Magazine says

LA FENICE BOOK

Ho letto la trama e mi pareva qualcosa di molto carino poi ho letto la biografia dell'autrice Monica Dickens e non immaginate minimamente chi sia ...lei mi ha colpito tanto, quindi ho deciso di leggere questo romanzo. Vi ricorda qualcuno il suo cognome? Si forse avrete capito a chi appartiene... il grande Dickens!

Monica Dickens era nata a Londra nel 1915 nella celebre e facoltosa famiglia Dickens, pronipote del grande scrittore, delusa dal mondo in cui era cresciuta, decise di lasciare i privilegi della sua condizione per lavorare come domestica. Sulla base della sua esperienza diretta scrisse nel 1939 *Su e giù per le scale*, a cui seguì *One Pair of Feet*, dove raccontò il suo lavoro in ospedale, e l'autobiografia *An Open Book*. Trasferitasi negli Stati Uniti, visse tra Washington e il Massachusetts, sposò un ufficiale della Marina, continuò a scrivere e si dedicò a numerose cause umanitarie. Morì a Reading nel 1992.

Una vita molto avventurosa direi. Qui in questo volume "*One Pair of Hands*" viene proprio narrata una parte della sua vita, nella quale aveva rinnegato la sua classe e accolto quella di cameriera/cuoca/tuttofare per essere indipendente, ribelle e libera ma il suo modo di fare non era del tutto conforme, la sua vita troppo agiata per poter sprofondare in quella povertà d'altri tempi e tutto ciò la portava a licenziarsi con estrema facilità e a non sfruttare a pieno le sue doti. Non sapeva cucinare, era una frana con le pulizie e se poteva nascondeva tutto. "Occhio non vede cuore no duole" era il suo motto.

L'abilità di scrivere di Monica Dickens è sorprendente, un romanzo così semplice potrebbe annoiare perché si ripetono sempre gli stessi passaggi e le stesse mansioni ma lei con la sua verve, la sua capacità di tenere viva l'attenzione sulle sue vicissitudini porta a concludere l'opera in pochissimo tempo senza che la stessa dia noia. L'arte di scrivere e il linguaggio usato naturalmente non ha nulla a che vedere con questi nuovi romanzi che circolano ma è qualcosa con terminologia, punteggiatura e scrittura lineare, ben studiata e perfettamente spuntata.

Due stili il suo e quello di suo Zio diversi vissuti in tempi diversi ma pur sempre con una nota predominante per la scrittura. Una scrittura soffice, uniforme e chiara. La protagonista che sarebbe lei stessa ha una nota sorprendente anche nella sua incapacità, con mille grilli per la testa, mille idee e tanta voglia di fare. I personaggi che le girano intorno in ogni casa sono descritti in maniera variegata ma pur sempre perfetti e senza nessun segno di sbiadimento.

Tutto è concentrato in sole duecento pagine, un piccolo diario dove ella stessa ha voluto descrivere questo piccolo periodo della sua vita. Spero vivamente di leggere il seguito *One Pair of Feet* dove lei andò a lavorare come infermiera.

Una donna forte che si è voluta eguagliare a molte donne di ora anche contro il volere della sua famiglia. Una bella avventura raccontata con il sudore e la sofferenza di chi ha goduto della bellezza delle cose e poi le ha lasciate andare per suo volere.

Un piccolo capolavoro sull'emancipazione femminile!

Pat says

“Terribile”!

Monica Dickens, figlia di una facoltosa famiglia, pronipote del grande scrittore, per assaporare il gusto della vita vera, abbandona i privilegi e inizia a lavorare come domestica. Dall'avventura nasce un libro.

Quanto possono essere tristi certi parti, mi dico.

Assunta e licenziata – nel primo capitolo – dalla La signorina Cattermole.

Assunta e licenziata – nel secondo capitolo - dalla signora Robertson, e poi assunta dalla signorina Faulkene.

Nel terzo capitolo, licenziata dalla signorina Faulkene e assunta dal signor Parrish che se la tiene fino alla fine del quinto capitolo. Pover'uomo.

Nel mezzo, uova rotte, cadute, bruciate. Stoviglie e accessori vari malridotti.

Ci sarebbero altri dieci capitoli. Io mi fermo qui.

Cara Monica Dickens, sarà anche la pronipote del noto Charles, ma che due palle!

Pensavo a una camomilla letteraria, qualcosa che mi accompagnasse sorridendo fra le braccia di Morfeo. E invece sono bastati cinque capitoli per scatenare il mio spirito omicida.

Il libro, da su, è andato giù. Definitivamente. Dalle scale. Insieme a Monica.

Amen.

Come Musica says

Spassosissimo!

Davvero brava, lei!

Claire says

I absolutely adore this book. I've read it multiple times, and (like the Provincial Lady series) it never disappoints. Yes, it is a relatively light and fluffy true tale of a mildly aristocratic young lady who wants to see how the other half lives and hires herself out as a maidservant in Britain in the 1930s. It's beautifully written - she's a relative of Charles Dickens - and great fun. She learns a few lessons along the way, but it's never mawkish or sentimental. It's just one of those books that makes me happy.

Fiona MacDonald says

I'm just head over heels in love with Monica Dickens and her hilarious memoirs. Her writing is wonderful and so full of life I can't stop laughing as I am introduced to a variety of strange and eccentric characters that she has to work with. This memoir follows her life as a cook in various houses. It's fascinating to hear about her duties and her accounts are so rich and funny i sometimes forget I'm reading a true story. Wonderful, wonderful woman, her great grandfather would be so proud ?

QNPoohBear says

Monica is a 1930s socialite who got kicked out of drama school for refusing to wear the school hat. With nothing to do but go out every night, she's bored and wants something to do. She gets the great idea to become a cook, having taken a class on French cuisine. When she lands her first job as a cook-general, she discovers that taking one class is not the same as being a chef. She chronicles her disastrous escapades over the 18 months she spent as a cook/maid in London and the countryside. She even spent time as a cook in a country house, complete with snooty servants.

This memoir is a hoot. Monica's cooking skills are just so bad! She handles her failures well, using humor to make the situation seem a little less awful than it was. I couldn't put it down until I found out how long she stayed at her job and what happened during that time. I did find it repetitive at times—one spectacular failure after another, but her failures are so funny and charming that I couldn't help but become engrossed in her adventures. She had a few successes as well but those were glossed over, of course, in favor of the failures. This is a must read for anyone who has had an awful job or anyone who has repeatedly cooked for other people. Fans of *Upstairs, Downstairs* and *Downton Abbey* will also enjoy this look at life downstairs, and enjoy the country house scene.

Lady Clementina ffinch-ffarowmore says

Dickens' account of the period of over one year she spent in domestic service when one fine day she found herself fed up with society life. She may have been kicked out of drama school but she does use what little acting talent she has to create a persona (or rather personas depending on where she went) more suitable to a domestic, complete with widowed mother who must have her at home every evening. She goes through an assortment of jobs—short term ones, “permanent” ones, and some just for the day—she becomes cook, cook-general, waitress, scullery maid on different occasions—and through employers, kind and not so kind, but most of whom expect more of her than is humanly possible. The result is endless backbreaking work and very tiring days. Sounds dreary you think? It most certainly must have been but Dickens' account of it is almost the opposite, her writing making all she describes very funny indeed (situations she finds herself in, people, and most of all, her own lack of experience and to an extent, efficiency, which gets her into her fair share of scrapes), as she goes from job to job, trying to cope (she has had training in some “fancy” French cooking but isn't quite up to the mark with more basic things like boiling an egg), making friends with the other staff, gossiping, enjoying her employers' rows, and even sweeping the dust under the bed—she does (work aside) enjoy herself thoroughly. A very entertaining and fun read (except the last chapter which had her delivering a lecture on her experiences, which seemed to assume a more serious tone (though there were funny bits in that too) —somehow not in line with the rest).

Austen to Zafón says

A great-granddaughter of Charles, Monica Dickens was a debutante from a wealthy family in the 1930's. As a young woman, she grew bored of "going out to parties that one doesn't enjoy, with people one doesn't even like." Much to her family's surprise, she decides to "go into service," working as a cook-general for the wealthy "on the other side of the green baize door." This memoir covers her day-to-day life during the year and a half she spent going from job to job. It's quite funny, but it's also a social commentary on British life at the time, class distinctions, and the difference between working and a life of leisure. She's quite honest about

the fact that, as a servant, she (and other servants) listens in on her employers' conversations, goes through their personal things, and uses up their food and drink for herself and her co-workers. She also doesn't worry too much about the quality of her work, admitting to sweeping stuff under beds, accidentally dripping soap into soup, and dropping food on the floor and serving it anyway. As she says, "what a mercy it is that mistresses don't see the back-stage details of a dinner party, they probably wouldn't eat a thing if they did." The employers are presented with the same honesty. Some are downright rude and obnoxious, some are nicer, but even the good ones can be condescending. "It's a curious game that people like to play sometimes, drawing out a maid...in order to get amusement out of the screamingly funny idea that she may have some sort of a human life of her own. Nice people like the Vaughans laugh with you, others laugh at you; but it comes to the same thing in the end...You have to humour them by saying amusing and slightly outrageous things so they can retail them to their friends, or 'dine out' on quotations from your conversation." On the whole, I was fascinated by this book and plan to try to find some of her other ones. She was prolific and took on many other interesting jobs before finally devoting her self to charitable work.

Karyn says

This book is an account of the year and a half Ms Dickens chose to spend working as a servant, specifically as a cook-general, despite the fact that she came from a wealthy family, and was at liberty to choose a more leisured life. She justifies her unusual choice on the grounds that she was bored, and that the alternative life of leisure and parties seemed pointless. And she wanted practical experience cooking, and this wasn't possible in her own wealthy household in which the servants ruled the kitchen. So she became a servant herself, and learnt to cook in other people's kitchens. The Penguin description at the start of the book suggests she was at pains to point out that she didn't undertake the experience to write the book, but I'm not sure this is convincing. She was largely out of her depth, and frequently treated badly, and yet she persevered. It has that Down and Out in Paris and London feel of research undertaken for a higher purpose. [Read more](#)

Roberta says

One Pair of Hands è il primo di tre volumi autobiografici in cui l'autrice racconta la sua esperienza come cuoca (One Pair of Hands), infermiera ausiliaria (One Pair of Feet) e giornalista (My Turn to Make the Tea). Monica Dickens (incidentalmente, pronipote di Charles Dickens, sì proprio lui) apparteneva ad una famiglia benestante dell'alta borghesia ma, dopo la scuola di rito, un'esperienza a Parigi da aspirante attrice e la mancata presentazione a corte, decide che la vita oziosa tipica della sua classe sociale è troppo noioso, e decide di trovarsi un lavoro. Non sapendo fare nulla, ed avendo seguito alcuni corsi di cucina, Monica si propone pertanto come cook general (cuoca assunta anche nella mansione di cameriera e donna delle pulizie)

One Pair of Hands è un libro divertente, condito da abbondante ironia (e abbondantissima autoironia) e che a tratti mi ha fatto decisamente ridere, e non solo sorridere. Leggendo la pagina di wikipedia dedicata a Monica Dickens, ho scoperto che il suo obiettivo come scrittrice era di far divertire la gente, di scrivere romanzi in cui le persone potessero riconoscere la vita reale. Considerando che è ambientato non solo in Inghilterra ma anche negli anni Trenta, per me è difficile riconoscermi in questo mondo, ma sicuramente la Dickens non ha fallito per quanto riguarda il divertimento, e One Pair of Hands si può leggere anche un pochino come un libro di storia sociale, perché l'autrice pur non commentando il mondo intorno a sé lo

descrive vividamente.

Certo qualche lettore ha puntato il dito sulle descrizioni a volte un po' crudeli delle persone che la Dickens ha incontrato nei suoi lavori, e anche su una certa condiscendenza nei confronti di una classe sociale più bassa della sua ma non necessariamente composta da sempliciotti. C'è anche da dire che - sebbene l'autrice non si vanta mai della sua scelta di intraprendere un lavoro meniale pur non avendone assolutamente bisogno - dà un po' di rabbia l'attitudine a volte menefreghista che oppone a certi datori di lavoro o a certe situazioni, ben sapendo che lei se lo può permettere, ma gli altri no, dato che se vengono licenziati non possono tornare a casa da mamma e papà. D'altra parte però la Dickens è così brava a ricreare davanti ai nostri occhi un mondo ormai perduto (quello del servizio domestico) e un mondo così universale (quello del lavoratore non perfetto, anzi a volte un po' sfaticato, che cerca di cavarsela senza saper fare un granché ed è comunque, a fine giornata, una persona e non solo un dipendente. Certo se cercate commento sociale non è questo il libro giusto per voi (suggerisco *Below Stairs* di Margaret Powell) però se cercate qualche risata e un bel po' di identificazione, questo memoir è decisamente consigliato.

<http://robertabookshelf.blogspot.it/2...>

In realtà ho letto questa edizione:

<http://www.goodreads.com/book/show/16...>

Cera says

Monica Dickens (grand-daughter of the famous Charles) decided to see how the 'other half' lived by hiding her privileged background and taking on a variety of jobs as a cook-general during the 1930s, when servants were becoming so hard to find in England that a girl with no experience had no trouble finding a position. The book is certainly funny, but there are moments when her knowledge that she can quit at any time and go back to her comfortable life is pretty grating. It's still a fun read, though, and an interesting look at a way of life which has pretty thoroughly vanished.

Paola says

Unsettled by her life of meaningless partying as a debutante in the England between the two wars, Monica Dickens enters "service" undercover to get a radical change of perspective in her life.

Yes of course we know she does it by choice and not because she has no other alternatives - she can choose to say that her mother is a war widower, she can go back to the comfort of her home, she can take humiliations safe in the knowledge that she is socially the equal (or better) of most of the families she works for. Yet for precisely these reasons the uncomprehending pettiness of her employers so hung up on "the servant problem", who cannot fathom that each ring for service puts a spanner in the servants' works, comes across as very grating. With humour and levity she still pulls great punches - for instance:

A maid makes a good defenceless listener for people who want to talk about themselves and not be answered back.

or worse:

It is a curious game that people like to play sometimes, drawing out the maid (baiting the butler in some houses), in order to get amusement out of the screamingly funny idea that she may have some sort of a human life of her own. Nice people like the Vaughans laugh with you, others laugh at you; but it comes to the same thing in the end. Once you get used to the idea of being suddenly hauled out from the oblivion of servitude into the spotlight of attention, and expected to provide entertainment until they just as suddenly tire of you, and intimate that you have said your piece, it's quite an easy game to play. You have to humour them by saying amusing and slightly outrageous things so that they can retail them to their friends, or 'dine out' on quotations from your conversation.

Lovely little book.

(P)lla says

Monica Dickens, pronipote del caro vecchio Charles, racconta in questo volume le sue avventure come cuoca tuttofare alle dipendenze di varie famiglie nell'Inghilterra del primo novecento.

Questo volume è il primo di una trilogia in cui l'autrice ci narra le sue avventure lavorative, in effetti siamo davanti ad un vero e proprio memoir: ci racconta di essere nata in una famiglia benestante in cui lavorare non era per lei né un obbligo né una necessità ma racconta anche che, ribelle sin dall'infanzia, ad un certo punto della sua vita sentì il bisogno di fare qualcosa, di rendersi produttiva e di abbandonare una vita che le stava stretta, piena di convenzioni ed estremamente noiosa. E' così che un giorno lascia la vita oziosa che conduce e si cerca un lavoro, non avendo nessuna esperienza e avendo seguito qualche corso di cucina decide di presentarsi come una cuoca tuttofare (ovvero all'occorrenza anche cameriera e donna delle pulizie).

Le avventure, o più spesso le disavventure, della Dickens rendono questo volume davvero divertente, l'autrice in effetti racconta le sue giornate con una ricca dose di ironia, non risparmiando nemmeno se stessa ma soprattutto i suoi datori di lavoro, con l'ovvio risultato di far sorridere il lettore.

Il quadro che dipinge l'autrice non è certamente positivo nei riguardi dei suoi titolari anzi spesso è spietata nel descrivere le strane manie o gli atteggiamenti di superiorità che inevitabilmente assumono certi personaggi e al contrario è come se cercasse di assecondare in ogni occasione gli appartenenti ad una classe inferiore; ad alcuni questo aspetto potrebbe far storcere il naso ma credo anche che sia del tutto naturale, una volta immersi nella vita downstairs, non riuscire completamente a prendere le parti o giustificare la vita upstairs.

Nonostante questo aspetto, che può piacere o meno, la cosa importante è che Monica Dickens sia stata capace di ricreare perfettamente, con un intento simpatico, un mondo, quello della vita a servizio, ormai dimenticato e molto lontano dai giorni nostri. Le avventure sono tantissime e i guai che combina anche, potrebbe a lungo andare risultare leggermente ripetitivo per chi non ama questo genere di lettura, ovviamente si tratta sempre di siparietti al servizio dell'alta borghesia ma ogni padrone di casa avrà qualcosa di nuovo da mostrare, una nuova personalità, delle nuove fisse e modi diversi di rivolgersi alla servitù.

L'intento della Dickens è in primis quello di divertire il lettore dedicando qualche ora spensierata al volume, non si tratta infatti di un accurato quadro sociale dell'Inghilterra dell'epoca, e per quello che mi riguarda fa benissimo il proprio dovere: ci si diverte e si sorride spesso. Certamente non mancano i temi tipici come le differenze di classe sociale, gli abusi o le lotte personali ma tutto è impregnato da un senso dell'umorismo davvero forte che non può che far da padrone.

Theresa says

Monica is bored. Her life as a debutante is an endless round of exhausting gaiety and 'pointless' parties. She had tried the stage, and dressmaking, and neither seemed to be her cup of tea. What next?

"I felt restless, dissatisfied, and abominably bad-tempered..."

...so I turned to cooking. That was the thing which interested me most and about which I thought I knew quite a lot. I had had a few lessons from my 'Madame' in Paris, but my real interest was aroused by lessons I had at a wonderful school of French cookery in London... I.. came out with Homard Thermidor and Crepes Suzette at my fingertips. I was still unable to boil an egg, however, or roast a joint of beef. "

However,

"When I told my family that I was thinking of taking a cooking job, the roars of laughter were rather discouraging."

"One Pair of Hands" follows Monica, the great-granddaughter of Charles Dickens himself, as she takes one cooking job after another in London, burning sauces, frantically preparing dinners for parties of ten and, in the process, dropping dishes and helping herself to the cooking sherry. Some of her employers are kind (although there is always the 'servant-class mindset' present. Little did they know that Monica was from the upper class), but Monica finds to her dismay that often the servants are looked down on and treated as second-rate, mindless employees.

After a year and a half, Monica is just plain tired and she decides that it is time to make a change.

"Our memories are merciful; they store up details of happiness much more readily than details of sorrow. We, however, respond ungratefully by indulging our innate passion for self-torture by turning remembrance into regret. In the end the memory of something perfect becomes even sadder than the memory of despair, for we torment ourselves with the thought that it can never be quite the same again."

What a lighthearted memoir! The author's entertaining vignettes of her life as a cook and maid are hilarious! I really enjoyed this one and it was a fast read.

Becky says

Loved this book. LOVED. IT. I laughed my booty off the whole way through it (though sometimes my hands covered my mouth in horror at the scraps Ms. Dickens got herself into). Such a great book; man, those Dickensses have writing in the blood, don't they? Her characters were every bit as rich as her great-great-grandpapa's.

Anne says

This is a light read that talks about the granddaughter of Charles Dickens who masquerades as a cook/maid below stairs when she was born and raised above stairs - entertaining.
