

Saint Martin's Light

*From – The Festival of Stones
Edited extract from Chapter 8 – the illustrations are not included
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A stranger once knocked on Martin's door, and said: "I met an old woman living high in the hills. She is ill and needs help. She asked for you."

Martin wrapped bread and wine in a blanket, tied the bundle to his back, and set off with his walking staff. It was late in the day as Martin hurried along. At first he followed the highway and the going was smooth, but, at the foot of the hills, the road turned away to the south and Martin had climb up into the woods. As he went storm clouds gathered and blocked the setting sun. A cold north wind began to blow, and he buttoned up his coat to keep warm. Soon the woods became as black as ink and Martin was forced to feel his way forward with his staff like a blind man.

Rain and sleet beat down on Martin's head as he climbed, and great rocks and boulders blocked his way. At last Martin tripped and fell. He looked around and saw nothing. It was too dark, and the rain and sleet too fierce. He realized he was lost and no longer knew which way to go. So Martin did the only sensible thing a man can do when he cannot see the way and is completely lost: he prayed – and this was his simple prayer.

"Dear Lord,
I have done my best,
But can't lay down to rest –
I am lost and cannot see,
Send a light to comfort me."

Martin looked up and saw a small light hovering in the air before him. He got to his feet, picked up his staff, and followed it. The light lit the ground before him, and even though he did now know where he was, he knew the light was leading him truly and that he would never stumble.

Higher and higher into the hills he climbed, the little light never wavering, until at last it stopped before a hut made of sticks and mud. It was the poorest hovel Martin had ever seen. He had to bend right over to get in the low doorway, and when he was inside he saw an old, old woman lying on a bed of fir branches and moss.

Martin immediately untied the bundle from his back and spread the blanket over the woman's thin body. He took out the loaf of bread, broke it into small pieces, and gave her one to eat. Then he opened the flask of wine, still warm from the heat of his body, and put it to her lips.

In that instant the old woman stood up before Martin. All age fell from her and she looked both young and timeless. She became so bright that he thought the sun itself had risen into the sky behind her. Martin fell down on the ground, and as he did so he saw the moon at her feet and a crown of stars on her head.

"Look up, Martin," she said. "Do not be afraid."

Martin raised his head, and saw the little light which had led him resting on the palm of her hand.

"This as my gift to you," she said. "It is the light of faithful knowing that lights your way. From now on, whenever you are in darkness, this light will shine before you and lead the way."

And so it was. From that day forth, as soon as darkness fell, the little light hovered before Martin and lit his way. The local people were amazed to see such a thing and called it Martin's Lantern.

After he died Martin was buried in the church where he worked, and every year, early in November, all the townsfolk gathered at dusk and each of them carried a lantern. Some carried theirs by hand, and others, remembering how Martin always used a walking staff, tied theirs to a stick to swing before them. Out into the meadows and fields the townsfolk wandered, singing songs and winding through the darkness."