

THE SISTER AND THE CHRIST

In the town of Bethany there lived a family consisting of 2 sisters and a brother. Tradition teaches that the brother was a Scribe of the law, and that the sisters were the housekeepers and homemakers. While they were probably the most influential people of Bethany, yet they were of simple-minded, home-keeping tendencies, and would never have been known to the world had it not been for the distinguished Guest who frequented their home. This Guest was greater than earth's greatest sovereign - His "seamless coat" was more regal than purple.

At last the glorious dream of ancient philosophers and poets was realized. Their sublime conception of the immortal gods dwelling among men, partaking of man's nature, and bestowing immortality upon the human race - the lofty conception of Homer and Plato "that an archetypal man, divine, yet human, would through calumny and persecution, the scourge and the cross, reveal righteousness to the world", has been realized in the person of Jesus of Nazareth. And yet of incomparably more importance than this is the fact that the predictions of the Hebrew prophets concerning the Messiah have been fulfilled in every particular by the princely Man of Galilee.

"Now Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus," and as His eventful life neared its tragic end He seems to have come more and more frequently to the home of these friends in Bethany. They in turn loved Him, and very beautiful and intimate was the relationship between them. So assured is He at all times of a welcome, so firm His position in the home, that He becomes more than guest, He becomes a member of the household. Only on this hypothesis would the overburdened, "gummed" Martha be warranted in bringing to Him the question concerning her sister which contained a covert thrust at Him for acquiescing, if not being fully responsible for her sister's negligence, when she asked: "Lord, dost Thou not care that my sister has left me to serve alone?" This little incident proves in a very graphic manner His intimate standing in the family, and that they considered Him not only friend, but guide and counselor as well.

When the brother was taken ill it was but natural that the sisters should long for the return of their absent friend. They knew His power over diseases. How by a word

or touch He had cured maladies which had ever been counted incurable. Now by a word the defects of birth had been removed, and the man born blind and dumb had been made to see and speak. Surpassing this: He had invaded the realm of Death and renewed the pulses of life. Thus they knew that His power equaled their need. But their friend tarried and the days passed, and disease continued to waste the loved form. At last a message, brief but comprehensive, was dispatched to Him, "Lord, behold he whom thou lovest is sick." Such was their confidence in His ready sympathy and instant help that to their minds the one thing needed was to acquaint Him with conditions. But no answering message was received, neither did He come in person. On the contrary, "He abode 2 days still in the same place where He was."

It was probably a concession on His part to His own tenderness, and disinclination to witness suffering without relieving it, which prompted Him to say to His trusted followers, "Our friend Lazarus is dead, but I am glad for your sake that I was not there, to the intent ye might believe." For had He witnessed the suffering of Lazarus and the agonized grief of the sisters, His sympathetic nature would doubtless have prompted Him to restore His friend to health, and save him the throes of dissolution, and the sisters the bitterness of weeping over their dead.

But life's greatest lessons are learned in the valley of sorrow. The experience was needful for them. Yet it would be a sad return for Christ to the Bethany home, the wailing of the hired mourners would make the desolation more intense than utter silence. In some way Martha had heard that Christ was returning and she hastened to meet Him and the burden of her stricken heart was, "Lord, if Thou hadst been here, my brother had not died." Then followed the most sublime colloquy of which we have any record. Yet, notwithstanding the fact that Christ was explaining the most momentous of all subjects, the great doctrines of the Resurrection of the Body and the Immortality of the Soul, His sympathetic heart yearned for the other stricken sister also, and He called for her. She was hastily summoned and met Him with the same cry, "Lord, if Thou hadst been here, my brother had not died." While this statement proves their absolute faith in the power of His presence, yet it seems to contain an undercurrent of reproach for His long delay, which evidently seems to them past remedy. When the friends who

had come to comfort the bereaved sisters saw Mary go out hastily, they followed her, thinking that she had gone to the grave to weep there. Jesus, seeing the demonstrations of grief on the part of those about Him, also wept, "groaning in spirit, and was troubled." At His request they led the way to the resting place of Lazarus.

The scene was the Judean hillside, with the great reach of blue sky above. The central object was the cave with the stone laid upon it. In the foreground stood the Christ and grouped about Him His dusty, travel-worn followers. They had sought to dissuade Him from returning at this time, reminding Him that His life would be endangered; failing in this, they all responded to the call of Thomas, who said, "Let us also go that we may die with Him," and now they clustered about Him. Still nearer the person of Christ stood the sisters, unconscious of what was so soon to transpire, as shown by Martha's shocked remonstrance at the command that the stone be removed from the cave. In the background, some nearer, and some farther removed, were the Jews who had come from the city to weep with the sisters. The strongest conjecture uttered by them was, "Could not this man, which opened the eyes of the blind, have caused that even this man should not have died?" But now that he had been dead 4 days, they evidently expected nothing more than a fruitless wailing over the dead. Not so! Hear the Master's brief invocation, followed by the briefer command that the dead come forth; then witness a scene surpassed but once in the world's history, and that when the angel rolled the stone away, and Christ Himself burst "the bars of death, and triumphed o'er the grave!" We can but dimly conjecture the scene in the Bethany home that night.

Christ was never guilty of an incivility. He always awaits an invitation, and was never known to force His presence into any heart or home.

There is a famous picture by Holman Hunt, known as "The Light of the World." A friend was looking at the picture for the first time. Nothing escaped his observation. The closed door; the tender, patient Christ; knocking, knocking at the closed door. The poise of the head, as if listening for ever so faint a response from within. Presently the friend exclaimed, "You forgot the latch string." "No, no," replied the painter in a reverent undertone, "this door represents the human heart. The latch string is there, but it is on the inside. The heart is never opened but from within." Christ's own

words corroborate this statement, "Behold, I stand at the door and knock; if any man hear My voice, and open the door, I will come in to him, and will sup with him and he with Me."