Martha...
the Practical Christian

HER mantle is clean!"

The shocked whisper carried to the still figure of Martha who stood before the tomb of her brother, Lazarus, but newly laid therein.- The sibilant sound rose in a moment of silence, but almost at once the wailing of the mourners began again. Arms were raised in the age-old gesture of grief and there were those about who clawed the ground and scattered handfuls of earth and pebbles upon their heads, as they crouched before the cave, now sealed with the customary slab of rock.

Mary, the younger sister of Martha, crouched beside a small bush and wept bitterly, and the loud wailing of the mourners did nothing to calm her emotions.

Martha stood quietly, her figure erect among all the prostrate company, and her face and hands were clean and unstained with the ashes of mourning. Neither were there tears upon her cheeks.

The wailing rose to a shrill crescendo, so that Martha turned away, moving quickly among the prone forms of the dramatic Hebrew mourners of Bethany. She thought: "They mourn loudly in shrill voice, and yet my heart is shut in the narrow darkness of my brother's tomb." Her breath drew inward in a broken sigh, but still she did not weep. There was only the dreadful stillness in her face to hint that Martha's heart grieved, too, in its own deep, inward way.

She wondered tiredly how the dirt and ashes with which mourners were wont to soil themselves could show more grief than was hers, and why one might not wear a clean mantle . . . clean hands and face, too, how should they harm Lazarus, her brother? Surely cleanliness could not dishonor the living or the dead. Is self-abasement needful to show grief? she wondered.

She moved slowly toward the house of Simon the Leper, now her home, the home of the widow Martha, since the death of her husband some twelve months agone. The sun of the early morning pointed a golden finger at the silvered hair escaping from her mantle at the brow.

The hand of God, whispered the stern, ritualistic Jews of Bethany, had touched the tresses of Martha at the death of her husband, Simon, so that the smooth, brown coils had turned silver within a space of days. "Ashes - - -" they whispered. "When Simon died, she did not humble herself in grief, and the hand of Jahveh touched her upon the head, so that her hair should henceforth be the color of ashes!"

Jesus, the friend of Lazarus and Martha, and of the other sister, Mary, had not come, and it was in Martha's heart that perhaps the word of the sickness of His friend, Lazarus, had not gone out to the Master, else surely He would have come, seeing that He loved him.

The house of Mary and Martha, and but yesterday of Lazarus, dreamed upon a sunlit hillside on the outer skirt of Bethany, and Martha climbed the stairway to the upper room where Lazarus had lain but an hour since, before he was borne to the tomb.

All night had the mourners wailed and poured ashes upon their heads from the open fireplace. The ash-strewn room was barren of furniture, and there still hung heavily upon the air the odor of the burial spices. Martha looked about her with clear, grave eyes, and going to the wall hung her long, gray mantle upon a peg. Now, pushing up her sleeves, she set about brushing away the ashes in the dusty room. Her broom was a cluster of soft, new twigs from the acacia tree, together with a wealth of feathery sprays from the cedars
that grew thereabout. The broom made swift headway, so that presently the room was quiet, and newly clean.

Martha moved now to the polished, copper basin at the edge of the hearth, and poured therein from the tall ewer a portion of water. With it she laved hands and face and dried them upon a clean square of cloth.

She thought: What profiteth it the family of one dead to wail and rend the garments, and pour ashes upon the person so that the women of the household must busy themselves thereafter to set the house again in order?

What had the Master said—"Take heed, therefore, that the Light which is in thee be not darkness"? Almost in her vivid memory, the quiet voice of the Master spoke again, so that she was comforted.

Again, had He not said: "Live ye in the spirit of the Word, for the letter of the Law is dead"?

Martha pondered the words of the beloved Master, as she knelt beside the hearthstone, and rubbed white ashes on a blackened copper pot. Once He had said to her: "Martha, Martha, thou art careful and troubled about many things, but one thing is needful—" Martha nodded and said aloud: "I understand! But one thing is needful—that not things nor empty rites, but the one God alone occupy the holiest places of the heart."

Martha and Mary and their brother, Lazarus, were the children of Joab, the Levite, and they dwelt in Bethany. Here the children played among the ancient twisted olive trees in the warm sun, and gathered the dates that fell from the windswept palms at eventide, when the winds of God blew from Jerusalem. Theirs was the rigid training of the orthodox Jew, so that they shunned the whiteness of the painted sepulchres on the hillside, lest they touch the unclean dead, and suffer punishment therefor.

"Lazarus," asked small Martha thoughtfully one day, "Why is it sinful to touch the dead?"

The three children had enjoyed the companionship of a small ewe lamb which had disappeared. It was Martha who found the small one dead, its wool caught in the brambles of a thorn bush. She freed the body of the small creature, weeping the while, and carried it in and laid it in the house of her father.

Never had one small dead lamb caused so much ado in the household of a God-fearing Jew. Joab, the children, and every man-servant and maid-servant of the household were forthwith declared unclean. Every vessel within the house, and every packet of figs and bowl of raisins had suddenly become unclean, according to the old Mosaic law, and all within the household needs must be sprinkled and purified, and prayed upon and sprinkled again.

So now, Martha made her question of her brother, seeing that he was of more years than she, and needs must be the wiser.

And Lazarus, secure in his superior maleness, explained in condescension: "Why -- the Rabbi so says."

Silenced, but not satisfied, the child, Martha, returned to the building of a small house of stones, in which should dwell the small people of her childish play.

If there were doubts and wonderings in the heart of small Martha, as she grew into womanhood, she kept them quietly within, and she was marked by all the village of Bethany as womanly and always first in good works. Let there be sickness or hardship in the village, then might Martha be seen leading the way to the needy household, followed by her sister, Mary, or perhaps a maidservant of her household, carrying garments or food. Neither did she fear to lave the body of one dead and to anoint it with the burial spices and ointments.
This then was the comely young woman, Martha, daughter of Joab of Bethany, whose hand Simon, buyer and seller of the oil of the olive, asked of Joab in marriage. And so Simon took Martha to wife.

Simon was given to long journeyings to the sea, whence he traded to merchant shippers the oil of olives and packets of dried figs and dates. It was from one of these journeys that he returned, pale and shaken and full of fear. He had slept in the bed, he had been told afterward, of one who had died of the dread leprosy that sickened the countenance of so many of the people. And Simon went no more into the olive groves, nor did he enter into the room where sat Martha, his wife, although in Martha there was no fear.

"Is it not possible," she asked of Simon through the doorway of his room, "that this uncleanness has not sat upon you? Truly, I see it not upon your countenance."

Simon lifted his head, now always sunken upon his breast, and looked upon Martha, his wife. Already he had shut himself away from life, so that almost was he already dead.

"Martha, my wife," he said hollowly, "enter no more into my doorway lest I forget my uncleanness and turn again unto the old happy ways before this sickness come upon me. See, already my hands grow pale." And he held his hands up for Martha to see.

"Aye," agreed Martha matter-of-factly, "the hands of Simon, my husband, are indeed pale, so also his cheek, because these seven weeks has he hidden himself from the rays of the sun.

But Simon only shook his head, desolate in fear.

And Martha, his wife, grieved in her heart, and became a wife who was a widow and yet not a widow. So, when at last Simon sickened and died exactly as he had feared, Martha's grief had spent itself upon the closed door of the upper room, in which Simon had lived and died. She moved quietly with the procession of mourners that carried away upon the bier the body of Simon, and
she did not wail or beat upon her breast. Thus she earned the censure of self-righteous neighbors. And Martha looked with quiet scorn upon the wailing neighbors who wept for Simon and who had already forgotten the furtive words of scorn they had turned upon the living Simon but a short time ago.

So, into the empty house of Simon, the Leper, who was not a leper, there came the brother of Martha, Lazarus, and the sister of Martha, named Mary, to live and push out loneliness for the widow, Martha.

Early in the morning Martha was sometimes wont to climb the hillside and sit in the thin morning light at the burial cave of Simon. Because of the nature of the illness to which he had insistent claim, the tomb of Simon was set apart from the other sepulchers. It was here one day that Martha sat and saw approach the village a band of men, long of hair and beard, and clothed in clean white garments. One of them, she marked, was garmented in a clean white robe which bore four blue tassels, and she murmured, "Every Jew must wear a fringe of blue . . ." in the age old chant. The flowing beard and uncut hair marked him as some kind of prophet, and she told herself that here at last was a prophet to her liking. Truly she thought within herself, this one was not like unto the holy men who passed through Beth-ANY now and then, unwashed and odorous, with matted beards and clothed in unclean rags. His stride, too, was free swinging and vigorous, and he moved quickly into the village with his companions.

Thus did the man Jesus enter the lives of Martha and Mary and their brother Lazarus, of Bethany.

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It was now the fourth day since the entombment of Lazarus, and still there came no word of Jesus. But presently now, in the third hour of the morning, there arose upon the dusty road to the East, a small swirl of dust, such as might rise beneath the feet of a company of travelers. Martha leaned against her arms in the open window and watched a pair of small boys set out, running, in the direction of the approaching travelers. Presently, they came running back as Martha had known they would, and now they were crying at the top of their voices, "Jesus comes at last! The friend of dead Lazarus approaches!"

The rough homespun of her mantle hung heavy on her head as Martha sped down the stair and into the road, her face now radiant with hope, now dimmed by sorrow as she understood that her words of greeting must grieve the Master.

The calm face that looked upon Martha as she approached held unearthly knowledge so that Martha spoke humbly, grieving:

"Lord, if thou hadst been here—my brother had not died . . ." and then her voice lifted and the radiance of her faith tumbled like sparkling waters from the fountain of her lips and she said,

"But I know that even now, whatsoever Thou wilt ask of God, God will give it Thee."

And now the sunlight shrunk and became the lesser light, in the presence of the Man, and He spoke quietly.

"Thy brother shall rise again," spoke the gentle voice.

Martha nodded, and her breath was indrawn before she spoke again. "I know that he shall rise again, in the resurrection at the last day."

And now the Man spoke again, and His words were firm and clear, so that the curious onlookers who were crowding the roadway heard every word.

"I am the resurrection and the life: he that believeth on me . . . though he were dead, yet shall he live. And whosoever liveth and believeth in me
shall never die." And here the Man looked upon Martha searchingly and He
asked, humbly, almost pleadingly, "Believest thou this?"

Her belief was a radiance in her countenance at once, so that even before
she spoke, her answer was a light between them.

And all that came about in Bethany that day, sprang from that moment, when
the stone was rolled away from the heart of Martha, and her faith was laid in
the hand that raised Lazarus from the dead.