



Kipling's Tribute

By Mike Mota, P.E.

Civil (and structural) engineers throughout the ages have made it possible for society to "choose the better part." This is the way Joseph Rudyard Kipling portrays engineers in his poem, *The Sons of Martha*.

This poem, written in 1907, draws on the analogy between the story of Mary and Martha (Luke 10:38-42) and engineers. The poem reflects Kipling's recognition of the engineers' reliance on technical ability as a safeguard against things about to go wrong; the tendency to analyze rather than to rely on faith alone; and the willingness to pay particular care on behalf of fellow man. It also notes the inclination to work until the job is completed, rather than just until the end of the prescribed workday.

This poem was used in 1922 by Kipling during the first ceremony known as *Ritual of the Calling of an Engineer* for graduating Canadian engineering students. The only public manifestation of this ceremony is that Canadian engineers wear, on the little finger of the working hand, an iron ring symbolizing the engineering profession. Legend has it that this iron was salvaged after the collapse of the Quebec Bridge in 1907.

A similar ceremony is known in the United States as *The Order of the Engineer*. It was first celebrated on June 4, 1970 at Cleveland State University to foster a spirit of pride and responsibility in the engineering profession, and to bridge the gap between training and experience. Wearing the modern stainless steel ring is intended to present to the public a visible symbol identifying the engineer. (See the January 2008 issue of STRUCTURE® magazine for an article about *The Order of the Engineer*.)

In a tribute to all engineers who quietly work behind the scenes, Kipling's poem is hereby transcribed in its full splendor.

Mike Mota, P.E., is the Regional Manager for the Atlantic States with the Concrete Reinforcing Steel Institute (CRSI) and is responsible for providing technical assistance in all areas of building design and construction to engineers, architects, owners and contractors. Mike may be reached at mmota@crsi.org.

❖ *The Sons of Martha* ❖

*The Sons of Mary seldom bother, for they have inherited that good part;
But the Sons of Martha favour their Mother of the careful soul and troubled heart.
And because she lost her temper once, and because she was rude to the Lord her Guest,
Her Sons must wait upon Mary's Sons, world without end, reprieve, or rest.*

*It is their care in all the ages to take the buffet and cushion the shock.
It is their care that the gear engages; it is their care that the switches lock.
It is their care that the wheels run truly; it is their care to embark and entrain,
Tally, transport, and deliver duly the Sons of Mary by land and main.*

*They say to mountains, "Be ye removed." They say to the lesser floods, "Be dry."
Under their rods are the rocks reproved—they are not afraid of that which is high.
Then do the hill-tops shake to the summit—then is the bed of the deep laid bare,
That the Sons of Mary may overcome it, pleasantly sleeping and unaware.*

*They finger death at their gloves' end where they piece and repiece the living wires.
He rears against the gates they tend: they feed him hungry behind their fires.
Early at dawn, ere men see clear, they stumble into his terrible stall,
And hale him forth like a haltered steer, and goad and turn him till evenfall.*

*To these from birth is Belief forbidden; from these till death is Relief afar.
They are concerned with matter hidden—under the earthline their altars are;
The secret fountains to follow up, waters withdrawn to restore to the mouth,
And gather the floods as in a cup, and pour them again at a city drouth.*

*They do not preach that their God will rouse them a little before the nuts work loose.
They do not teach that His Pity allows them to drop their job when they damn-well choose.
As in the thronged and the lighted ways, so in the dark and the desert they stand.
Wary and watchful all their days that their brethren's days may be long in the land.*

*Raise ye the stone or cleave the wood to make a path more fair or flat;
Lo, it is black already with blood some Son of Martha spilled for that!
Not as a ladder from earth to Heaven, not as a witness to any creed,
But simple service simply given to his own kind in their common need.*

*And the Sons of Mary smile and are blessed—they know the angels are on their side.
They know in them is the Grace confessed, and for them are the Mercies multiplied.
They sit at the Feet—they hear the Word—they see how truly the Promise Runs:
They have cast their burden upon the Lord, and—the Lord He lays it on Martha's Sons.*

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