

A FARMER'S WIFE

THE STORY OF RUTH

BY

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IN the district called Ephrath, belonging to the tribe of Judah, stood the city of Bethlehem, or "house of bread." It was a city with walls and gates, and lay between fruitful hills and well-watered valleys. There among pleasant cornfields and pasture lands lived a man named Elimelech, which means "my God is my King." He was descended from one of the princes of Judah, and was a man of means and consequence.

Elimelech's wife was named Naomi, meaning "pleasant," and they had two sons whose names were Mahlon and Chilion. This old and noble family lived in this fertile region, amid pleasant surroundings, and with happy prospects, until one of the frequent famines that were brought on by want of rain visited their district.

Leaving the parched and sterile fields around Bethlehem, Elimelech, his family and his flocks, left their home and settled in the rich and well-watered lands of the Moabites, beyond the Jordan. As a wealthy foreigner, he probably was well received by the people of Moab, and secured good pasturage for his sheep and cattle.

But much trouble was in store for this family, notwithstanding its wealth had enabled them to leave their own famine-stricken lands. First Elimelech died, and the family was without a head.

Then Mahlon married a beautiful woman of the country in which he was then living, named Ruth, and his brother Chilion married another named Orpah. Such marriages were against the law of Moses, because the Moabites worshipped idols, but as the nation was descended from Lot, the nephew of Abraham, the marriages were not so bad as they would have been with women belonging to other of the different tribes of Canaan.

After a while both of the sons of Naomi died, and she was left a childless widow in a strange land. By her gracious ways she had won the affection of both Ruth and Orpah, and now sorrow locked their hearts together in sympathy. At length, Naomi turned her longing eyes to her old home in Bethlehem. Ten years had come and gone since she left it, and now the news had reached her that there was plenty of food there.

Naomi and her two daughters-in-law started on their way to the land of Judah. After a while, thinking that they had accompanied her far enough, Naomi bade Ruth and Orpah return to their own mothers' homes, and spoke very kindly to them. She kissed them and would have taken leave of them, but they insisted that they would go with her to the home of her own people.

Then Naomi suggested that they would not be welcome at Bethlehem because they were Moabites. They would be looked upon with reproach, strangers in a strange land, and again she pleaded with them to go home, lest their love for her should prove a sorrow to them.

Orpah was persuaded to return and settle down among her kindred, and probably did so from a sense of duty; but Ruth would not leave Naomi, although her mother-in-law gave her one more opportunity to go back to Moab.

The chief cause for separation, according to Naomi, was, not that they belonged to different races, but that they did not worship the same God. But Ruth, in words at once pathetic and sincere, unselfish in spirit and expression, declared her resolve.

"Intreat me not to leave thee, and to return from following after thee: for whither thou goest I will go; and where thou lodgest I will lodge: thy people shall be my people, and thy God my God: where thou diest will I die, and there will I be buried: the Lord do so to me, and more also, if aught but death part thee and me."

Ruth gave up father and mother, friends and relatives, religion and country, and chose poverty and a life among strangers because of her love for Naomi, and her trust in Naomi's God. They reached Bethlehem about the beginning of the barley harvest, and secured some kind of a home.

The city of Bethlehem was stirred by the return of Naomi. She had left them accompanied by husband and sons, and in prosperity. She returned, altered in circumstances, changed in appearance, and accompanied only by a Moabitish woman.

Her friends could hardly believe their eyes, and exclaimed, "Is this Naomi?" To which she would reply, "Call me not Naomi, 'pleasant,' call me Mara, 'bitter,' for the Almighty hath dealt very bitterly with me." There was much surprise shown at the return of Naomi with Ruth, but there is no record that people were helpful or even kind to them, and probably the first thing they had to do was to secure food.

As it was harvest time, Ruth volunteered to go into the fields and glean, and so, one morning, she went forth as an alien, among strangers, to find bread for the two. She came to one of the fields of Boaz, a man of wealth and position, and a kinsman of Elimelech, and asked permission to glean among the sheaves.

In the glory of the early morning, a band of reapers were cutting the bearded barley with their sickles. Behind them, women bound the grain in sheaves, and behind these workers were a group of gleaners, made up from the aged and the young.

Ruth took her place among the gleaners, and bending her back like the rest gathered the stray ears left by the binders. The overseer watched both laborers and gleaners. All were known to him, even the beautiful stranger from the land of Moab.

As the day advanced, Boaz entered the field with the salutation to his men, "The Lord be with you." They replied, "The Lord bless thee." Then glancing around the field, Boaz saw Ruth among the gleaners and asked the overseer who she was. The overseer replied that she was the Moabitish woman who came back with Naomi, and that she had asked permission to gather the barley ears with the rest of the gleaners.

Boaz was interested at once, and, struck by Ruth's modesty and beauty, he went to her and said she was not to glean in any other fields but his all the time of harvest. He told her she need fear no rudeness from the young men, for he had laid his commands upon them not to molest or offend her. He also told her that when she was thirsty she was to drink of what had been prepared for the reapers.

Ruth was deeply touched by this slight kindness. Bowing to the ground she asked why it was that she, a stranger, had found grace in his sight. Boaz replied that he had learned of her loving treatment of Naomi, since the death of her husband, and how she had left her father and her mother, and the land where she was born, to live with her mother-in-law; and then he invoked the blessing of God upon her and upon her work.

The sympathy and sincerity of Boaz were very grateful to Ruth. She was comforted as well, for she knew that he had recognized her goodness to Naomi, and knew that she had come to trust in the care of God.

At meal time Boaz invited her to eat with the reapers, and even handed food to her himself. After the simple meal was eaten and Ruth was again among the gleaners, Boaz told the reapers to let her glean wherever she chose, and to drop some of the grain on purpose for her, so that her work might be lightened.

As the sun began to set, all went their homeward way, and when Ruth reached her home she beat out all the ears of barley she had gleaned and found there were three pecks of barley, about ten times as much as a single Israelite's daily portion of manna while wandering in the wilderness. Her first day's work had secured provision for several days to come.

When Naomi saw what a quantity of barley Ruth had brought home, she asked in whose field she had gleaned. Then Ruth related all the events of the day, and how Boaz had been kind to her.

It pleased Naomi to hear that Boaz had shown kindness to Ruth and to her, because he was a relation of her husband, and one whose duty it was to care for a widow, and one who had a right to help them by law. Such a relative was called a goel, meaning a "redeemer."

So the days of the harvest passed. Every day Ruth gleaned in the fields, and at night returned to Naomi. Each day she kept close by the maidens of Boaz, through the barley harvest, and then to the last ingathering of the wheat.

The harvest finished, the threshing of the grain began. Naomi was anxious that the "redeemer" should exercise his right. According to Israelitish law, when a man died and left his wife childless, his nearest of kin was to take the widow to be his wife, and any son born of this marriage should inherit the name and possessions of the first husband.

In this way he kept his brother's name and inheritance from being blotted out. Naomi saw with thankfulness that Divine Love had led Ruth to the protection of her rightful guardian.

So Naomi planned how Ruth should have an opportunity of speaking to Boaz. She told her to take off the sign of her mourning and widowhood, and go to the threshing-floor when the grain was beaten out.

These threshing-floors were either natural spaces of rock, or open places covered with large flat stones, so that the grain could be readily separated from the husk without waste, and the chaff easily blown away.

The sheaves of grain were spread on these places, and a wooden sledge, covered with iron teeth, was dragged over them by oxen until all the grain had fallen from the dry ears. It was a joyful time, the oxen were not muzzled, so they could eat while they worked, and the master and his servants feasted.

When the grain was threshed, it was cleaned by the cool winds of morning or evening, and by the aid of large fans. As this winnowing had to be done when the breezes sprang up, master and servant often slept all night at the threshing floors, so as to be ready for the first breath of wind, and to see that the grain was not stolen.

Naomi told Ruth to go to the threshing-floor of Boaz, and speak to him during the night. Ruth did as she was told, and at the proper time told Boaz that he had the right to redeem her. Boaz was pleased, and told her that he would do as she had said.

But he reminded her that while he was her kinsman, there was another who was nearer. He would see this man in the morning, and if he would not exercise his right as "redeemer," he would perform the part of a kinsman himself. He told her to lie quietly down until morning, and when it was nearly sunrise he poured into the veil or cloak that she wore, six measures of barley, and sent her home to Naomi.

Ruth went on her way in the dusk of dawn, bearing the present of grain on her head, as was the custom of the country. She was returning to her mother-in-law with a story of hope and blessing that had come to her in the promise of Boaz.

When she reached home, Naomi's first question was, "How hast thou fared, my daughter?" Then Ruth told her all that Boaz had said and done, and how he had given her the barley, saying as he did so, "Go not empty to thy mother-in-law." Naomi was pleased, for she understood how Boaz and Ruth felt towards each other, and so said:

"Sit still, my daughter, until thou know how the matter will fare; for the man will not rest until he have finished the thing this day."

In Palestine, nearly every town, and many villages, were surrounded by walls, and at the main entrances there were deep gateways which generally had broad and shady spaces in front, where people frequently met.

These gates became the chief places of interest. They were often arched over and used as watch towers; they became the guard-house, business was transacted there, and in this way they became markets.

People met in the city gates to discuss the news of the day, and proclamations were made there. Kings and rulers gave audience there, and being a place of general resort, the elders sat there to dispense justice.

In the morning, then, Boaz went to the gateway of the city of Bethlehem, ready to fulfill his pledge to Ruth. As he sat there, the man who was the nearest relative of Elimelech passed by. Boaz summoned him to a seat by himself, using the legal form of expression by which he would understand that there was special business to be transacted.

Then the elders, or wise and respected citizens were asked to hear Boaz's case, and to be at once judges and responsible witnesses, and to ratify the proceedings. In their presence, and in the hearing of the people who gathered near, Boaz stated the facts, saying to the "redeemer":

"Naomi, that is come again out of the country of Moab, seeketh the parcel of land which was our brother Elimelech's: and I thought to advertise thee, saying, Buy it before the inhabitants, and before the elders of my people."

And then Boaz went on and asked the man if he would redeem it, and the man said that he would do so. He further explained to him the customs and conditions of the law, and told him if he took the land he must also take Ruth the Moabitess to be his wife.

But this was a part of the bargain that the man did not want to perform, so he turned his right of redemption over to Boaz, giving as his reason, that he would not mind buying the field if it would become his own personal property, but if he should marry Ruth the field he bought would not belong to him; and so he would have paid out money for something which would bring him little or no benefit.

It is not at all unlikely that he refused to marry Ruth because she was a Moabitess, fearing that a marriage with an alien might mar his reputation and position in the city.

When the man had announced his decision, it was confirmed by the usual custom in all cases of redeeming and exchanging. The one giving up the claim took off his sandal and gave it to the one who received the claim. The matter was thus ratified, as though a bond had been drawn up and signed.

In this way the unnamed kinsman of Elimelech refused to redeem Ruth and her land, and as a proof of it he drew off his sandal and handed it to Boaz before the ten elders and all the people, thus transferring to him the legal right to be the "redeemer."

Boaz then called all present to witness that he had that day bought all that was Elimelech's and all that was Chilion's and all that was Mahlon's, and also that Ruth the Moabitess was to be his wife. And all the elders and all the people who were in the gate said they would be witnesses.

And because Boaz had acted so honorably, all present united in asking the blessing of God upon his marriage. So, with the approval and best wishes of his neighbors and friends, and above all with the blessing of God, Boaz and Ruth were married.

The story of Ruth is a beautiful one, for it shows how the sacrifice and service of love was rewarded. Naomi in her old age and declining days was made glad, and the alien found a happy home. In time a son was born to Boaz and Ruth, and the name of "Obed," or "the serving one," was given to it. This boy grew up to be the father of Jesse, whose son was the mightiest of Israel's kings.

When Ruth's baby boy was born, the matrons of Bethlehem congratulated Naomi, who became the child's nurse. The boy grew up to be the joy of his parents and the comfort of his adopted grandmother, and in time the ancestor of Mary the mother of Jesus.

The Saviour of the world, then, sprang from the tribe of Judah, and from the Gentiles, as they are called in the New Testament, through Ruth the Moabitess.

The memory of the faithful, loving Ruth has been a sweet and living picture for many centuries. She left her home, her friends, her all, to be kind and good to her broken-hearted mother-in-law, and to serve God, and found much more than she gave up. She brought consolation to Naomi, there came to her love, prosperity, and peace, and through her children's children, Jesus the Christ.

