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R U T H

(from the Hebrew, "Beauty")

If we had nothing else by which to remember her, the name of Ruth would be rendered forever immortal by one memorable sentence. That oft-quoted sentence - a beautiful blend of earnest entreaty and solemn pledge - is spoken by a daughter-in-law to her mother-in-law and is the example par excellence of that too rare type of devotion.

When widowed mother-in-law and the 2 widowed daughters-in-law came to the parting of the ways at the border of Judah and Moab, Ruth kindly but firmly refused to turn back: "Entreat me not to leave thee, or 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, I will die, and there will I be buried; the Lord do so to me and more also, if aught but death part thee and me".

The devotion expressed in these moving words outweighed a whole set of opposing circumstances. In her father's household in Moab, back to which she naturally would have gone, there would have been for her the obscure but safe status of widow, with likely chance for re-marriage. With Naomi in Bethlehem, there was every promise of poverty and hardship in the midst of a people whose regard for Moabites might barely approach tolerance. Despite the close tie by marriage, Naomi underrated her and plainly did not wish her to go. To Ruth's speech of deathless devotion, no word of grateful response gets into the record; only this: "When she saw that she was steadfastly minded to go with her, she left off speaking unto her". Ruth managed somehow to comfort herself with the silence that gave consent.

Again, the mother-in-law showed scant appreciation of her when she did go. When Naomi's former neighbors gathered round the 2 wayworn travelers inquiring "Is not this Naomi?" note her reply: "Call me not Naomi, call me Mara, for the Lord hath dealt very bitterly with me. I went out full, and the Lord hath brought me home again empty". That is to say, I had husband and sons when I went out; now I have nothing. Another kind of mother-in-law would have been gracious enough - and truthful enough - to say: "I have one comfort left; God has given me a good daughter-in-law!"

Stark poverty faced them in Bethlehem. There was no place for them in the homes of



Naomi's kindred. Every Hebrew household contained women enough for the household tasks. In that primitive society, too, no occupation outside the household was open to women - except a very ancient one not mentioned in polite society. But by great good fortune the seasonal opportunity of gathering in the fields was just at hand. It was the time of barley harvest in Bethlehem, and the stray wisps of barley left by the reapers by right belonged to the gleaners - the fatherless, the stranger, and the poor. Naomi was too aged and too worn by the journey just ended, so Ruth must glean alone. The work was not only hard for her but hazardous. A widow, young and a stranger and barely above the status of beggar, might well be considered the lawful prey of the roistering horde of men-servants among the reapers.

Why had she come to Bethlehem? Why had this lone young widow faced all these odds? Because back in Moab she had found in her husband and her husband's family life moral and religious ideals finer than any she had ever known but no doubt in her finer moods had dreamed of and longed for. To her, Naomi now stood for all that was left of all that: "Thy people shall be my people and thy God my God". Then to herself she said: "My mother-in-law is in poorer case than I am: she has no longer husband and sons; she has no one but me!"

At first much of this was lost on Naomi. Only after Ruth had become breadwinner for them both did she seem to sense any advantage in having her about. When the younger woman came home with shining eyes to relate the courteous treatment she had received at the hands of the owner of the field, the agile wits of Naomi, long unused, set to work once more. Boaz was kinsman; he was wealthy; he was eligible; he was evidently well-disposed. From this time on a new sincerity is to be seen in Naomi's "My daughter"! Then she unfolded a plan for retrieving the fallen fortunes of her family. Ruth, knowing nothing of the local customs of courtship and marriage, and trusting her mother-in-law completely, followed her instructions implicitly in a midnight encounter with Boaz that but for her own highmindedness and his consummate tact would have compromised all 3 of them. The fortunate outcome of this precarious courtship left Boaz determined to take with no delay the necessary legal steps to make Ruth the Moabitess his wife.

The story hastens to its happy conclusion. When Ruth brought forth her first-born,



the attending women said to Naomi: "Blessed be the Lord, which hath not left thee this day without a kinsman - and he shall be to thee a restorer of thy life and a nourisher of thine old age, for thy daughter-in-law hath borne him - she who is better to thee than 7 sons." History does not record Naomi's reply, but "she took the child and laid it in her bosom and became nurse to it." And they called his name Obed; he became the father of Jesse, who became the father of David the king, who was in the line of ancestry with Jesus the Christ.