

**SOJOURN TO MOAB** - The scene is laid in Bethlehem of Judea, which is situated some 6 miles south of Jerusalem, and also in Moab beyond the Jordan, bordering on and east of the Dead Sea. During the reign of the Judges a grievous famine spread throughout the land of Judah. Elimelech, his wife Naomi, and their 2 sons, Mahlon and Chilton, determined to emigrate into the country of Moab beyond the Jordan River. There seems to have been no absolute necessity for this sojourn. Others continued to remain in Judea and tided over the period of distress.

While it would seem that upon their arrival in Moab they were well received by Eglon, the King of Moab, yet they did not prosper. The 2 sons married daughters of Moab. Mahlon, the eldest son, married Ruth (some writers say that Ruth was the young daughter of King Eglon), and Chilton married Orpha. Both women appear to have been model wives. Within 10 years, however, Elimelech and his 2 sons died childless, and were buried in the land of Moab. Naomi was left in destitute circumstances. Her heart and her spirit were broken. She felt that God had deserted her - the last link which bound her to earth was torn away. "The heart knows its own bitterness." Thus, apparently she is alone. What does the human heart dread more than to be utterly alone! Loneliness, how can we define it? One must experience it to know its real depth. DeQuincy says - "King and priest, warrior and maiden, philosopher and child - all must walk those mighty galleries alone". Naomi yearned for her old home and the home friends and resolved to return to Bethlehem again.

**RETURN OF NAOMI WITH RUTH TO BETHLEHEM** - Naomi had learned that God had visited the people of Israel in giving them bread. Wherefore she set out, with her 2 daughters-in-law as an escort, on her way to Judea. There was no thought on her part of taking Ruth and Orpha back to her native home. It was under the impulse of affection that they accompanied her. Naomi was not aware, evidently, of their intention to accompany her all the way. To a clearer understanding of this tiresome journey it may be well to remind the reader of the irregular topography and mountainous nature of this country. Her home was on the east side of the mountains. Trains or caravans of camels were the vehicles of transportation. What a contrast to the trains, automobiles and airplanes of today!



We can almost see them slowly winding their way up the narrow mountain path until the top or pass of the mountain is reached, where they would naturally dismount. Looking down the descending slope of the mountains into the Jordan valley and beyond the Jordan into the land of Judea and perhaps into Bethlehem itself, what a scene met their gaze. Those of us who have been absent from home for a long time know the feelings and wellings in the heart when we get in sight of "home, sweet home". What else on earth have we to compare with it?

At length Naomi turns to Ruth and Orpah to express to these young women her deep appreciation of their faithfulness to her family, now dead, and to herself. Then was enacted the most dramatic scene of the story - when Naomi, addressing her 2 daughters-in-law, said "Go, return each to her mother's house; the Lord deal kindly with you, as ye have dealt with the dead and with me. The Lord grant you that ye may find rest, each of you in the house of her husband." She clasps them in a parting embrace, but they lift up their voice and weep, saying, "Surely, we will return with thee unto thy people." A second time she bade them go, and once again they sob and pretest. "And Orpha kissed her mother-in-law, but Ruth clave unto her." Naomi is deeply moved. Orpha finally decides to retrace her footsteps, and Naomi says to Ruth, "Behold thy sister-in-law is gone back unto her people and unto her gods. Return thou after thy sister-in-law."

Ruth was at the parting of the ways. It was a decisive moment. How seemingly alone she finds herself. If she decides to go with Naomi, she must give up Orpha, who had been most dear to her, her kindred, friends and country. With a firm and steadfast resolution she in no uncertain language refuses to leave Naomi. Her resolve is one of the most unhesitating confessions of love in literature. - "Entreat me not to leave thee, and to return from following after thee; for whether thou goest, I will go; and whether 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; Jehovah do so to me, and more also, if aught but death part thee and me."

From this point on, Ruth occupies the central figure of the story. The journey is continued. Moab is left behind, the Jordan crossed, and at length, arm in arm, the 2 world-famous friends reach Bethlehem. Their arrival produces somewhat of a sensation,



but we do not find her friends moved by her penitence and grief. Again Naomi would seem to be alone except for Ruth.

**GLEANNING IN THE HARVEST FIELD** - It was the beginning of the harvest time when Naomi and Ruth arrived in Bethlehem. It was necessary that Ruth seek employment. She, therefore, suggests to Naomi that she become a gleaner after the reapers, gathering up the fragments. This was a very lowly task, the humble place of the widow, the orphan and the very poor. In accordance with the then Jewish law, the poor had the right to glean in anyone's fields. Moreover the owner of the field must not gather all the wheat and barley from the fields of grain. Ruth was too proud to beg, but not too proud to earn a livelihood by honest work. So she started out to glean and came to the fields belonging to Boaz, a man of wealth and influence. When he came up to the field to greet the reapers, he was attracted by this young woman and said - "Whose damsel is this?" The reply was that she was a Moabitish damsel that had come with Naomi out of Moab. Boaz was perfectly aware of all that she had been to Naomi, as well as her belief in the God of Israel, and he treated her with the utmost courtesy and respect. He bade her remain in his field among his maidens and refresh herself at his feasts, which she continued to do. Ruth was astonished at the offer of these kindnesses. Then said Boaz: "The Lord recompense thy work, and a full reward be given thee of the Lord, the God of Israel, under whose wings thou art come to take refuge." He brought to her protective kindness, and saw to it that his reapers left plenty of barley gleanings. Boaz represents the one great quality of kindness. He is often spoken of as "Boaz the Kind". After beating out, or flailing, what she had gleaned, Ruth returned home. How pleased was Naomi when she mentioned that it was in the fields of Boaz that she had gleaned. Then Naomi replied: "Blessed be he of Jehovah who hath not left off his kindness to the living and to the dead . . . . the man is nigh of kin to us." Thus Ruth continued to glean in the fields of Boaz till the end of the harvest.

**THE HARVEST FESTIVAL** - Naomi was greatly pleased and impressed by the extraordinary favors shown Ruth by Boaz. She laid a bold plot to bring about their marriage, but there were seemingly obstacles to overcome. The custom of the times on this point were "A deep principle pervading the constitution of Israel was care for the preservation of



families. Hence the curious 'levirate law' where a husband had died without issue, the nearest brother-in-law (levir) might be called upon by the widow to perform for her all the duties of a husband, and raise up seed for the deceased. Here, however, there is no brother-in-law available; both the sons of Elimelech are dead. But around the strict letter of the law had grown up the more elastic 'custom of goel'; the nearest of kin had a general duty to act as 'redeemer' (goel) for the unfortunate."

After the harvest season was over a harvest festival was held by the threshing floor. Each reveller would seem to have lain down near by to sleep in the open air. Ruth did as Naomi directed. Through the darkness she went to the place of the harvest festival, and after all was quiet and Boaz had fallen asleep at the end of a heap of grain "she came softly and uncovered his feet and laid her down". When at midnight he awoke he was startled and said "Who art thou?" Her modest answer was "I am Ruth, thy handmaid; spread therefore thy skirt over thy handmaid, for thou art a near kinsman." Covering a woman with one's mantle meant he would be her protector, i.e., he would marry her. This was a sort of proposal. Boaz said again to her, "Fear not; I will do to thee all thou sayest; for all the city of my people doth know that thou art a worthy woman. And now it is true that I am a near kinsman; howbeit there is a kinsman nearer than I?" Boaz's first thought was for the innocent young woman. In order that no scandal might attach itself to the occasion she went home before daybreak, previous to which, however, she was given six measures of barley. Ruth related the whole conversation to Naomi who was greatly pleased and said "The man will not rest, until he have finished the thing this day." As Shakespeare says - "There is a divinity that shapes our ends, rough hew them how we will."

THE FOLLOWING MORNING AT THE GATE OF BETHLEHEM - It is clear, I presume, that Bethlehem was a walled city. It was at the gate where a great deal of the town business was carried on and where legal decisions were rendered by the Elders. Boaz arrived early in the morning and waited for the nearest kinsman to come by. He hailed him, and in the presence of 10 chosen elders, made known to him his business. "And he said unto the near kinsman, Naomi, that is come again out of the country of Moab, selleth the parcel of land which was our brother Elimelech's; and I thought to disclose it unto



thee, saying "Buy it before them that sit here, and before the elders of my people. If thou wilt redeem it, redeem it; but if thou wilt not redeem it, then tell me, that I may know; for there is none to redeem it beside thee; and I am after thee." 2 great problems were involved: the inheritance of Elimelech and the acceptance of Ruth as the representative of the family of Elimelech. To Boaz's utter amazement, the nearest kin was willing to accept the inheritance. Then Boaz replied: What day thou buyest the field of the hand of Naomi, thou must buy it also of Ruth, the Moabitess, the wife of the dead, to raise up the name of the dead upon his inheritance."

It is a little difficult to reconcile this statement with the strict "levirate law" with the vague custom of kinship. But this utterance of Boaz served its purpose. The nearest kin refused to redeem the inheritance under these conditions and drew off his shoe from his foot and handed it to Boaz, which was the accepted symbol of closing the bargain, and bid Boaz redeem the land. Boaz called the elders to witness this fact that he had purchased the landed estate of Elimelech and that he had also purchased Ruth to be his wife.

MARRIAGE OF BOAZ AND RUTH - Boaz married Ruth and we have every reason to believe the union was a happy one, although Boaz was twice her age. There was born to them a son called Obed, and thereupon Ruth became the ancestress of the house of David. It is needless to say that Naomi laid the child in her bosom and became its nurse. Thereafter great joy prevailed in this household. This story is the classic example of true and tried friendship between 2 women. It is often compared with David and Jonathan, and Damon and Pythias. It is the passionate love of a girl for her mother-in-law.