

THE LOYAL FACE

I.

Tonight I am going to tell you a love story. Sometime ago I was preaching at one of our leading colleges. In conversation with one of its outstanding men, he told me that he had not read a love story since he had left school. How much he has missed. To take such a course is like living by a brinning spring and never taking time to kiss it on the lips. It is like spending years beside the sea without even being thrilled by its liquid beauty and its manifold voices. It is like living under the shadow of majestic mountains without ever lifting your eyes to where the huge peaks climb toward the dawn behind the stars. Everybody ought to love a love story.

But this love story calls for our attention because it is so beautifully unique. Most love stories tell us of the devotion of a woman to a man, and of a man to a woman. They are all right, and I confess I still revel in them if they are well written. Of course, you will know at once that I came out of the ark when I tell you that in my opinion the sweetest love story in English Literature is "Lorna Doone". It was written many years ago over in England. The eyes that first sparkled over it have been closed in the last sleep long ago. Perhaps most of us have never read it. But if you would give it a chance it would still be like making a journey into a new country.

If this is not a love story between a man and a woman, no more is it a love story between man and man, like David and Jonathan, or of Damon and Pythias. Strange to say, it is a love affair between two women. These two women were separated by about all the chasms that can divide one soul from another. They were women of different nationalities. Much of our patriotism is not so much love

for our own country as hatred for that of the other fellow. Then these women were of different religions. That often makes a wide chasm. Then they were of different ages. One was old, the other was young. Here is morning clinging to the eventide. Here is June throwing her lovely arms around the withered neck of November.

Then about the sharpest test of all grew out of the fact that they were bound together by a certain kind of kinship. They both loved the same man. One loved that man as a husband. The other loved him as a son. This is the unique story of the devotion of daughter-in-law to mother-in-law, and mother-in-law to daughter-in-law. What a rare treasure. Everybody knows that the mother-in-law has been the T.N.T. for a million domestic explosions. Everybody remembers the touching telegram that a son-in-law sent to a fellow son-in-law. "Our mother-in-law lies at the ^{down}point of death. Come and help us pull her through." But here is a story built out of this unsightly and unpromising material. Certainly it is worth reading.

By this time you have guessed my story. I am talking to you about the Book of Ruth. I hope you have read this book and are familiar with it. It is one of the beautiful surprises of the Old Testament. It comes right after the stormy and tempestuous and bloody Book of Judges. It comes just before the little less stormy Book of Samuel. To find it here is like finding a spring in a desert. It is like coming upon a beautiful violet blooming in the crater of a volcano. While men were hating, fearing, fighting, and destroying each other, there were a few that were loving God and man and ^alying the foundations of a better day.

II.

How did these two lovers, Naomi and Ruth, come to get together? The Book is named for the younger woman. I am not going to quarrel with that. No honor is too great to be accorded to Ruth. The meaning of her name is open to question. Some authors seem to think it means "friend", or "friendly". But Naomi, we know

the meaning of her name. It fits her exactly. It means "pleasant". She was one of these rare and radiant souls that is good to have around. If you were having a wedding at your house, one guest you would have to have would be Naomi. If you were having a funeral, her presence would be an even greater necessity. Countless millions can thank God that these two winsome women came together.

How, I repeat, did it come about? The author sets us down amidst strange scenes. But the fundamental fact is very familiar. The Bethlehem country is suffering from a depression. Long ~~long~~ months have passed with no rain. The fields are parched. Poverty is stalking abroad. Many men are out of work. Among the families that are most keenly feeling the pinch of poverty is one made up of a father and mother and two boys. Elimelech has not been able to find work. The lot of Naomi has been even harder. She has had to listen to two hungry boys asking for bread that she cannot give.

At last one evening Elimelech comes home, throws himself down in utter exhaustion. Then he takes up the conversation where they had left off the day before. "There is no use. If we stay here we are going to starve. Now they have had rain over in Moab. I know you hate to go, but it is necessary." "The will of the Lord be done," Naomi answers. "But I did so hope we could remain in the land of our fathers. You see it is not of us I am thinking, but of our boys. Moab is not so far off physically, but it is a long way off spiritually. If we go there our sons will have to grow up among pagans. They might even come to violate the law of Moses, and marry pagan girls. You know that would break our hearts."

But in spite of their reluctance the next day they packed their meager belongings on the back of a donkey and started on their sad trek to a new life. They were very much like the Ookies that struggled out of the dust bowl to begin life anew in California. I can imagine they were just about as welcome in Moab as the Ookies have been in the state of their adoption. Even then, their reception was more kindly than Naomi and her husband had ~~first~~ expected. Being genuinely

*Surprises of Kindness - Far Away
Raphael*

kind themselves they had received kindness at the hands of these strangers. ✓
At last Elimelech ~~was~~ had a job, and life was moving on in that new world.

Not long had these strangers been living in Moab before Naomi came to realize that her worst fears had been well founded. She and her husband were home-sick, but not the boys. They were finding the Moabitish children just like the ones they had left behind. They were rapidly picking up their language to the horror of their parents. Then as the months passed and the boys grew to young manhood, there came a report that the older son was seen in company with a pagan girl by the name of Ruth. They were hoping that the younger boy would have better sense, ^{but} when they found that he was giving unusual attention to a girl named Orpah. Then followed family conferences, solemn warnings, They had about as much effect on the boys as trying to stop a cyclone with a fly swatter. At last both boys married.

"Well," said Naomi, "that is the last straw. I will never speak to a one of them again. They have broken the law of Moses, and they have broken my heart. They have made their own beds, and they can lie on them." No, she lived long ago, but she had better sense than that. When she found ~~out~~ that the silly geese ^{had} actually married it filled her with disappointment. But she invited the boys to bring their wives to their home. She treated them with a courtesy and consideration that fairly took their breath. She made them forget that they were of different race and of different religions. She made them even forget they were in-laws. What a woman!

III.

But this new home had hardly been well established till it began to fall apart. First, Elimelech died and Naomi was left a widow. Then a still more terrible tragedy followed hard upon the heels of that. Both the boys died. When they were laid to rest Naomi felt that there was no longer any reason for her remaining in the land of her adoption. So one day she told her daughters-in-law

of her purpose to return to the land of her fathers. She was now ^{getting to be} an old woman. Every tie of blood that had bound her to that new land had been broken. She could at least go back and lay her tired dust to rest in the land of her fathers.

Both the girls were understanding and sympathetic. They agreed that they could not send her away alone. They would accompany her at least to the borders of Moab. So the next day these three set out in company. At last they came to the chalk hills that overlooked Naomi's home land. Then they nerved themselves to say goodbye. Orpah came first. She kissed Naomi tenderly and turned back to her native land sobbing and with face wet with tears for she loved Naomi tenderly. Then it was Ruth's time. This young woman threw her arms about the neck of Naomi and there she clung.

"There, there," said Naomi, "you must be going. Orpah is already gone. Soon she will turn the bend of the road and be out of sight. You must join her. And God grant that you will find rest ^{each} in the home of your husband." At this Naomi sought to unclasp the hands that clung so tenderly about her neck. But Ruth held on only with a greater firmness. Then she spilled out of her heart the tenderest confession of love and loyalty that I know in the literature of the world. "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 ought but death part thee and me."

How beautifully simple and yet how majestic. How eternal in its importance. Ruth's confession is more than a confession. It is the declaration of faith. It is the assertion of a choice. It was a choice that was to bring beauty and loveliness into her own life. It was a choice that was destined to help change the whole world. It was to breathe on all the future centuries like a breath of springtime. It was to go unbelievably far in changing this world desert into a garden.

"Thy people," said Ruth, "shall be my people." Thus this daring young woman identified herself with a race that she had not known. She had only known Naomi and her family. But as she clung to this gallant hearted woman she said, "If you are a sample of your people; if there are others of your race that are as winsome and good and wholesome as you, then that race may have my love and loyalty forever."

Better still, she said, "thy God shall be my God!" How had Ruth come to fall in love with God. She had seen his beauty in the face of Naomi. The beauty of the Lord God had rested upon this pleasant woman as the sunshine rests upon the hills. Ruth had seen Naomi in the time of her joy and in her sorrow. She had seen her in days of sunshine and of shadow. She had come to learn that the secret of her winsomeness was her religion. "If God can make folks like you," she said, "I am going to give him the chance to remake me. 'Thy God shall be my God!'"

IV.

What was the outcome?

A few days later two women made their appearance upon the streets of the little village of Bethlehem. The villagers looked askance at them. They were strangers. Naomi had lost her place in the life of the village. Ruth had never had any. Naturally the villagers looked at them with questioning eyes. Naturally the first days were very dark days. These women had no money. Something had to be done by them and for them, and that at once.

It so happened that it was harvest time. Ruth volunteered to go into the fields as a gleaner. Now ~~it so happened that~~ the field in which she was to glean belonged to a splendid and wealthy bachelor by the name of Boaz. When he came among his reapers he was not long in noticing this new gleaner. I have an idea that Ruth was easy to look at. At least having looked at her Boaz turned to his reapers and said, "You are cutting the grain too close. Don't be so careful.

Drop a handful of wheat now and then." Thus when Ruth got home ~~the next night~~ she had so much grain it demanded an explanation. She told Naomi ^{where} ~~what~~ she had gleaned and and what the landlord did. And Naomi being a ^{normal} ~~normal~~ and wholesome minded woman was naturally a genuine match maker. She saw what was going on in the hearts of these two young people. ^{So} She did a little skillful managing, and ~~saw~~ they lived happily ever after.')

I can imagine I am sitting down with Naomi on life's other side, interviewing her, as we interview folks in this world. And I am asking her to tell me something of what life has taught. "Life has taught me two things," she said. "First, it has taught me that to them that love God all things work together for good. When the terrible drouth came and we were scourged out of Bethlehem by ghastly hunger, I thought we were ruined. It was hard for me to keep rebellion out of my heart. But God's hand guided through it all. I know now what it means. He was sending me to find Ruth. But for this hard ordeal I would never have found Ruth. Then how much poorer I and the rest of the world would have been. Then just as we were settling down to peace and comfort in Moab, tragedy came again and we had to leave. But if this hadn't happened we would probably have died in Moab and Ruth would never have come to make the lovely marriage she has made in my home land."

"A second thing that I have discovered is the amazing use God can make of one single soul that is loyal to him." Here in this stormy and bloody today there is one faithful and defenseless woman. Through joy and sorrow she is faithful to God. And God makes of her a roadway along which his Almighty feet walk to the accomplishment of his purpose.

"So what?" you say. Well this: One day the sweet angel of suffering came to the home of Boaz and Ruth and a baby boy was born. They named him Obed. Other years went by and there was another boy born among those Judean hills. The sunshine was tangled in his hair, and the blue of the skies looked out from

his eyes, and an angel choir sang in his heart. His name was David. He was one of Ruth's grandbabies. "And there were in that same country shepherds abiding in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night. And the angel of the Lord came upon them, and they were sore afraid. And the angel said, Fear not, for behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy, which shall be to all people. For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, which is Christ the Lord." And that Saviour was Ruth's grandbaby. Certainly the world couldn't keep house without Ruth. We shall always thank God for her.