

The Lion And The Mouse

by F.W. Boreham

Everybody is familiar with Aesop's story of the mouse that, despite his diminutive proportions and puny insignificance, rendered invaluable service to the lion when the King of Beasts was in dire extremity. The New Testament contains a very similar story – the story of Paul and Phebe. *I commend unto you Phebe our sister, which is a servant of the church which is at Cenchrea; that ye receive her in the Lord as becometh saints, and that ye assist her in whatsoever business she hath need of you, for she hath been a succorer of many, and myself also.*

One of the charms of the Pauline Epistles lies in their revelation of the Apostle's overflowing and abiding gratitude to the obscure people who, just when he needed them most, cheerfully placed their modest services at his disposal. 'Paul', says William Brock, 'had a multitude of noble qualities; but he had one outstanding quality that great men seldom exhibit: he never forgot a kindness and never forsook a friend.' And everybody knows why. It was because Paul had sat at the feet of One who takes good care that no cup of cold water given in His name ever misses its generous reward.

I

Once in a blue moon it falls to the lot of a public man to read his own obituary notice. Mr. Charles Brookfield closes his *Random Reminiscences* by telling of an interesting experience of the kind. He was laid up at the Isle of Wight with a sharp attack of pleurisy; one afternoon it was rumored that the malady had proved fatal; and the evening papers rushed out the usual sketches of his character and career. Mr. Brookfield had the satisfaction of lying in bed, propped up by snowy pillows, and reading these lachrymose lamentations and candid criticisms. The latter proved by far the more entertaining. But the climax of the sick man's enjoyment was reached when, in the columns of a leading journal, he was told that '*though*

never a great actor, he was invaluable in small parts'. Mr. Brookfield used to say that he regarded that phrase as one of the finest compliments ever paid him.

Some of the world's best work is done by those who, by no means great actors, are nevertheless invaluable in small parts. I was chatting this morning with David Morton. David is a young minister, anxious to make the most of his opportunities.

'I notice,' he remarked, 'that, all through your ministry, you have gone in for series of sermons – sometimes a series of a dozen or twenty and sometimes a series running into hundreds. Can you suggest a series that would suit my people at Mount Morell?'

'Yes,' I replied, 'give them a series on *Second Fiddles*! Go through your New Testament. When you come upon names like Peter, James, John, Paul, Barnabas, Luke, Timothy and the like, pass them by. These are *first* fiddles and attract a good deal of attention. But when you come upon names like Phebe, Philemon, Archippus, Onesimus, Stephanas, Fortunatus, Achaicus, Amplias, Rufus and the like, make a note of them. These are *second* fiddles.' They are not born leaders; but they are superb followers. They may lack the perspicacity to see what needs doing to right earth's wrongs, but, once it is pointed out to them, they will exhaust all their energies in the prosecution of the task. They are eager to help, anxious to serve, grateful to be commanded. They are conscious of their own limitations. They know that they can never hope to lead; but when they find a leader who knows how to command their devotion, they will show their delight by following him through thick and through thin. "Dundas is no orator," Pitt once said; "he is not even a speaker; but he will go out with you in any weather!" He was a second fiddle. So was Phebe.

II

Paul was in Greece. Whilst there, pioneering the establishment of the Church in Europe, and maintaining himself the while by working at his trade, he turned wistful eyes still farther west. He was half-way from Jerusalem to Rome! Rome! The thought captivated his fancy. Rome, the mistress and metropolis of the world! How he longed to go! He himself had never seen Rome. For that matter, none of the Apostles had seen Rome. It would be wonderful to go

on, farther and ever farther westward, until he found himself preaching Christ under the shadows of the Capitol! Paul was Rome-sick. But he realized that he was already a long way from his Asiatic base. He must return to Jerusalem; tell the brethren there the story of his travels; and strengthen the foundations on which all his activities rested.

There, as in a cameo, you have a picture of Paul. The outstanding characteristic of Paul was his love of big things. His mind was captivated by great empires, great events, great men, great movements and great adventures. He loved stating tremendous truths in tremendous terms. And he was never so happy as when approaching great cities—Rome, Athens, Jerusalem, Ephesus—with a view to making converts and establishing churches within their walls.

And here he is, surrounded by the glory that is Greece, and finding himself torn between going on to Rome on the one hand and retuning to Jerusalem on the other! Rome represents the Power that, displacing Greece, has the world at its feet. Jerusalem represents the tender grace of a day that is dead. And so, in surveying Rome and Jerusalem from his vantage-point in Greece, Paul is confronted by the splendors of yesterday, today, and tomorrow. His whole heart cries out for Rome; but his judgement dictates the wisdom of a return to Jerusalem.

But, if he cannot *go* to Rome, he can at least *write*. And write he does. *Paul, a servant of Jesus Christ...to all that be in Rome, beloved of God, called to be saints...I thank my God for you that your faith is talked about all over the world.* How these excellent and exemplary Christians got there, nobody knows. It is one of the mysteries of revelation. No missionaries had ever been sent from Damascus or Antioch or Jerusalem to Rome. Yet there these people were. In a way, it is not surprising. All roads lead to a city like Rome; and it was the most natural thing in the world that men and women who had fallen under the spell of the Savior in Asia Minor should, in the ordinary course of business, have found their way to Rome and have bound themselves together there in the bonds of Christian fellowship.

Travelers from Rome had told Paul of the existence of this consecrated and persecuted group in the heart of the world's metropolis and Paul ached to visit them. Sooner or later, he fully intended doing so. But at present the way seemed barred. So he wrote. And thus there came into existence the priceless little document that we know as the Epistle to the Romans!

But it is one thing for Paul to sit on his portico in Cenchrea writing his Epistle to the Romans; it is quite another thing to get the letter, when written, into the hands of those Roman Christians. How was that very essential item on the apostolic program to be arranged? And it is here that the mouse comes to the aid of the lion. It is here that Phebe comes into the picture.

Anybody who cares to glance at the footnote to Paul's Epistle to the Romans will find that it reads: *Written to the Romans from Corinth and sent by Phebe, servant of the church at Cenchrea.* Womanlike, she saw Paul's dilemma. The letter, however important and however valuable, was useless unless delivered. How could it be conveyed to those Christians in Rome to whom it was addressed? She would step into the breach! She would carry it! And she did! In days when travelling was particularly hazardous, when means of locomotion were few and when postal services were unknown, she, a woman, carried Paul's letter all the way from Corinth to Rome! Phebe could not have written the letter, but she could bear it to its destination. Paul could write it; but he could not deliver it. And so the lion and the mouse achieved their triumph of co-operation. Phebe set out on her long and trying sea-voyage, and on her long and still more trying overland journey, carrying the precious Epistle with her. *I commend unto you Phebe*, Paul adds in his postscript; *receive her in the Lord, for she hath been a succorer of many, and of myself also.*

If David Morton takes my advice, and preaches to his people at Mount Morell a series of sermons on *Second Fiddles*, and if he includes Phebe in his list—and how can he exclude her?—he must do two things by way of preparation. First, he must reach for his atlas and examine carefully the route that Phebe must have taken in order to deliver her little roll of parchment to the people in Rome. And, having done this, he must scan the sixteen chapters of the Epistle in order to appreciate the unspeakable worth of the parcel that Phebe undertook to deliver.

If, as might easily have happened, she had failed to reach her destination alive! Or if, as might still more easily have happened, she had lost, or been robbed of, her treasure on the way! As she made her way along those lonely and dangerous roads, she bore under her robe, as Renan has pointed out, the entire future of Christian theology.

That is why I suggest that, before preaching his sermon on Phebe, David Morton should glance through the Epistle. It is the golden link that unites the old dispensation with the new: it is the classical statement of the relationship between Jews and Gentile: to this day Jews all over the world—Christian and non-Christian—study it with respect and often with emotion.

Or look at the fifth chapter. *Therefore, being justified by faith...* There stands the foundation stone of the Reformation! But for that chapter, you could never have had a Luther or a Wyclif or a Knox. And, if the Reformation has its roots in the Epistle, what of the great revival? When John Wesley entered the little gathering at Aldersgate Street on that never-to-be-forgotten 24th May 1738, the leader of the meeting was reading Luther's preface to the Epistle to the Romans. It was this that led Wesley to trust Christ, Christ alone, for salvation. This was the match that lit in his soul the flame that soon set half the world ablaze.

Or what of the seventh? Dr. Alexander Whyte declares that the seventh of Romans is the most terrible tragedy in all literature. You may search the classics of the ages and nowhere will you find a tragic passage to compare with this one. All your *Macbeths*, your *Hamlets*, your *Lears* and your *Othellos* are, he says, pale ghosts of tragedies, mere stage-play, when set alongside the awful tragedy of soul-shipwreck outlined in the seventh of Romans. The seventh of Romans, Dr. Whyte adds, should always be printed in letters of blood. All the passions and the terrors of eternity are packed into it. Here, Dr. Whyte says, Heaven and Hell meet as they meet nowhere else in the universe, and here they grapple together for the everlasting possession of the immortal soul of man. In comparison with this, no other tragedy is worth calling tragedy.

And the eighth! In that eighth chapter of his, Paul dares the universe. He defies infinity. He summons, two by two, all the powers that be, and glories in their impotence to dissolve the sacred tie that binds him to his Lord.

He calls *Life and Death* before him and dares them to do it!

He calls the *Powers of this World* and the *Powers of Every Other*: none of them, he says, can do it!

He calls the *Things of the Historic Present* and the *Development of the Boundless Future*. Whatever changes may come with the pageant of the ages, there is one dear relationship that nothing can ever affect!

He calls the *Things in the Heights* and the *Things in the Depths*; but neither among angels nor devils can he discover any force that makes his faith to falter!

He surveys *this Creation* and he contemplates *the Possibility of Others*; but it is with a smile of confidence and triumph.

'For I am persuaded', he says, 'that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor powers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor height, nor depth, nor any other creature shall be able to separate us from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus our Lord.'

How many thousands, like John Bruce, the Covenanter, and Uncle Tom, the slave, and Augustus Toplady, the hymn-writer, have, in the crises of life and amidst the shades of death, turned to that incomparable chapter and rested serenely in the inalienable love that it reveals.

And so I might go on. But there is no need. One cannot turn the leaves of the Epistle in this casual way without recognizing the immensity of the treasure that Phebe bore in her bosom on that memorable journey.

IV

And the beauty of it is that Phebe's historic achievement in acting as Paul's postman is characteristic of the entire spirit of her life. Never a day but she did something of the kind. She was the succorer of many, Paul tells us. And, in commending her to the people to whom he is writing, the people whose faces he has never seen, he gives her a significantly beautiful title. He calls her *the servant of the Church*.

Paul begins his Epistle by referring to himself a servant. *Paul, a servant of Jesus Christ, to all that be in Rome*. And he closes the Epistle by conferring the same title upon Phebe.

Paul—a servant!

Phebe—a servant!

The lion—a servant!

The mouse—*a servant!*

And, when you come to think of it, it is a lovely word, and the title a proud title. 'Only a servant!' you say, but what more could you wish to be? When the Archbishop of Canterbury preached at the coronation of the King, he chose as his text the words, '*I am among you as he that serveth*'. It is the supreme dignity of the King to be of service to his people. On the crest of the Prince of Wales there stands the words 'I serve'. When the Prime Minister calls together the members of the Imperial Cabinet the official summons reads that 'the servants of the King are commanded to meet'. The King—a servant; the Prince—a servant; the Prime Minister—a servant; Paul—a servant! Life holds no truer luxury than to be of service to somebody.

Phebe—a servant! One can scarcely conceive of a more vivid phrase. I go to a house, and the servant answers the door. She does not engage me in conversation or introduce business of her own. She says only as much as is necessary to intelligently introduce me to her master. And then, as I enter *his* presence, she silently vanishes, and I see her no more. That was the kind of service in which Paul, the servant, and Phebe, the servant, simply reveled. Such men and such women, glorying in their service, may rely upon hearing a voice that is like the sound of many waters addressing them as servants when, at last, they see their Master's face. *Well done, good and faithful servant!* Even amidst the glories of the Throne, the memory of service will be the sweetest memory of all.