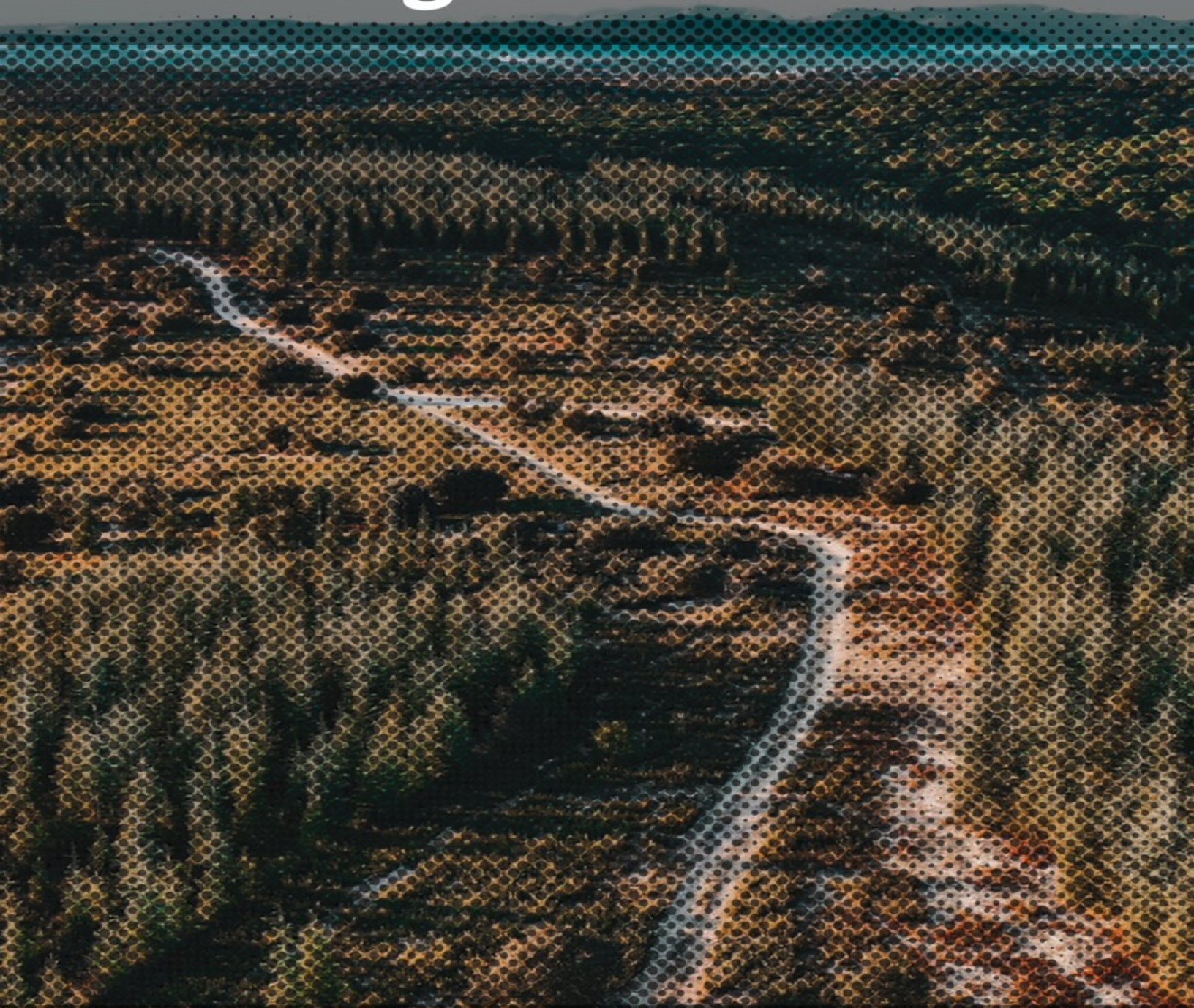


S. Baring-Gould



Perpetua.
A Tale of Nimes
in A.D. 213

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CHAPTER I

EST

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The Kalends (first) of March.

A brilliant day in the town of Nemausus—the modern Nîmes—in the Province of Gallia Narbonensis, that arrogated to itself the title of being the province, a title that has continued in use to the present day, as distinguishing the olive-growing, rose-producing, ruin-strewn portion of Southern France, whose fringe is kissed by the blue Mediterranean.

Not a cloud in the nemophylla-blue sky. The sun streamed down, with a heat that was unabsorbed, and with rays unshorn by any intervenient vapor, as in our northern clime. Yet a cool air from the distant snowy Alps touched, as with the kiss of a vestal, every heated brow, and refreshed it.

The Alps, though invisible from Nemausus, make [pg 2]themselves felt, now in refreshing breezes, then as raging icy blasts.

The anemones were in bloom, and the roses were budding. Tulips spangled the vineyards, and under the olives and in the most arid soil, there appeared the grape hyacinth and the star of Bethlehem.

At the back of the white city stands a rock, the extreme limit of a spur of the Cebennæ, forming an amphitheatre, the stones scrambled over by blue and white periwinkle, and the crags heavy with syringa and flowering thorns.

In the midst of this circus of rock welled up a river of transparent bottle-green water, that filled a reservoir, in which circled white swans.

On account of the incessant agitation of the water, that rose in bells, and broke in rhythmic waves against the containing breastwork, neither were the swans mirrored in the surface, nor did the white temple of Nemausus reflect its peristyle of channeled pillars in the green flood.

This temple occupied one side of the basin; on the other, a little removed, were the baths, named after Augustus, to which some of the water was conducted, after it had passed beyond the precinct within which it was regarded as sacred.
[pg 3]

It would be hard to find a more beautiful scene, or see such a gay gathering as that assembled near the Holy Fountain on this first day of March.

Hardly less white than the swans that dreamily swam in spirals, was the balustrade of limestone that surrounded the sheet of heaving water. At intervals on this breasting stood pedestals, each supporting a statue in Carrara marble. Here was Diana in buskins, holding a bow in her hand, in the attitude of running, her right hand turned to draw an arrow from the quiver at her back. There was the Gallic god Camulus, in harness, holding up a six-rayed wheel, all gilt, to signify the sun. There was a nymph pouring water from her urn; again appeared Diana contemplating her favorite flower, the white poppy.

But in the place of honor, in the midst of the public walk before the fountain, surrounded by acacias and pink-blossomed Judas trees, stood the god Nemausus, who was at once the presiding deity over the fountain, and the

reputed founder of the city. He was represented as a youth, of graceful form, almost feminine, and though he bore some military insignia, yet seemed too girl-like and timid to appear in war.

[pg 4]

The fountain had, in very truth, created the city. This marvelous upheaval of a limpid river out of the heart of the earth had early attracted settlers to it, who had built their rude cabins beside the stream and who paid to the fountain divine honors. Around it they set up a circle of rude stones, and called the place Nemet—that is to say, the Sacred Place. After a while came Greek settlers, and they introduced a new civilization and new ideas. They at once erected an image of the deity of the fountain, and called this deity Nemausios. The spring had been female to the Gaulish occupants of the settlement; it now became male, but in its aspect the deity still bore indications of feminine origin. Lastly the place became a Roman town. Now beautiful statuary had taken the place of the monoliths of unhewn stone that had at one time bounded the sacred spring.

On this first day of March the inhabitants of Nemausus were congregated near the fountain, all in holiday costume.

Among them ran and laughed numerous young girls, all with wreaths of white hyacinths or of narcissus on their heads, and their clear musical voices rang as bells in the fresh air.

Yet, jocund as the scene was, to such as looked [pg 5]closer there was observable an under-current of alarm that found expression in the faces of the elder men and women of the throng, at least in those of such persons as had their daughters flower-crowned.

Many a parent held the child with convulsive clasp, and the eyes of fathers and mothers alike followed their darlings with a greed, as though desirous of not losing one glimpse, not missing one word, of the little creature on whom so many kisses were bestowed, and in whom so much love was centered.

For this day was specially dedicated to the founder and patron of the town, who supplied it with water from his unfailing urn, and once in every seven years on this day a human victim was offered in sacrifice to the god Nemausus, to ensure the continuance of his favor, by a constant efflux of water, pure, cool and salubrious.

The victim was chosen from among the daughters of the old Gaulish families of the town, and the victim was selected from among girls between the ages of seven and seventeen. Seven times seven were bound to appear on this day before the sacred spring, clothed in white and crowned with spring flowers. None knew which would be chosen and which rejected. The selection was not made by either the [pg 6]priests or the priestesses attached to the temple. Nor was it made by the magistrates of Nemausus. No parent might redeem his child. Chance or destiny alone determined who was to be chosen out of the forty-nine who appeared before the god.

Suddenly from the temple sounded a blast of horns, and immediately the peristyle (colonnade) filled with priests and priestesses in white, the former with wreaths of silvered olive leaves around their heads, the latter crowned with oak leaves of gold foil.

The trumpeters descended the steps. The crowd fell back, and a procession advanced. First came players on the double flute, or syrinx, with red bands round their hair. Then followed dancing girls performing graceful movements about the silver image of the god that was borne on the shoulders of four maidens covered with spangled veils of the finest oriental texture. On both sides paced priests with brazen trumpets.

Before and behind the image were boys bearing censers that diffused aromatic smoke, which rose and spread in all directions, wafted by the soft air that spun above the cold waters of the fountain.

Behind the image and the dancing girls marched [pg 7]the priests and priestesses, singing alternately a hymn to the god.

“Hail, holy fountain, limpid and eternal,
Green as the sapphire, infinite, abundant,
Sweet, unpolluted, cold and clear as crystal,
Father Nemausus.

Hail, thou Archegos, founder of the city,
Crowned with oak leaves, cherishing the olive,
Grapes with thy water annually flushing,
Father Nemausus.

Thou to the thirsty givest cool refreshment,
Thou to the herdsman yieldeth yearly increase,
Thou from the harvest wardest off diseases,
Father Nemausus.

Seven are the hills on which old Rome is founded,
Seven are the hills engirdling thy fountain,
Seven are the planets set in heaven ruling,
Father Nemausus.

Thou, the perennial, lovest tender virgins,
Do thou accept the sacrifice we offer;

May thy selection be the best and fittest,
Father Nemausus."

Then the priests and priestesses drew up in lines between the people and the fountain, and the ædile [pg 8] of the city, standing forth, read out from a roll the names of seven times seven maidens; and as each name was called, a white-robed, flower-crowned child fluttered from among the crowd and was received by the priestly band.

When all forty-nine were gathered together, then they were formed into a ring, holding hands, and round this ring passed the bearers of the silver image.

Now again rose the hymn:
"Hail, holy fountain, limpid and eternal,
Green as the sapphire, infinite, abundant,
Sweet, unpolluted, cold and clear as crystal,
Father Nemausus."

And as the bearers carried the image round the circle, suddenly a golden apple held by the god, fell and touched a graceful girl who stood in the ring.

"Come forth, Lucilla," said the chief priestess. "It is the will of the god that thou speak the words. Begin."

Then the damsel loosed her hands from those she held, stepped into the midst of the circle and raised the golden pippin. At once the entire ring of children began to revolve, like a dance of white butter[pg 9]flies in early spring; and as they swung from right to left, the girl began to recite at a rapid pace a jingle of words in a Gallic dialect, that ran thus:
"One and two
Drops of dew,
Three and four
Shut the door."

As she spoke she indicated a child at each numeral,

“Five and six
Pick up sticks,
Seven and eight
Thou must wait.”

Now there passed a thrill through the crowd, and the children whirled quicker.

“Nine and ten
Pass again.
Golden pippin, lo! I cast,
Thou, Alcmene, touched at last.”

At the word “last” she threw the apple and struck a girl, and at once left the ring, cast her coronet of narcissus into the fountain and ran into the crowd. With a gasp of relief she was caught in the arms of her mother, who held her to her heart, and sobbed [pg 10]with joy that her child was spared. For her, the risk was past, as she would be over age when the next septennial sacrifice came round.

Now it was the turn of Alcmene.

She held the ball, paused a moment, looking about her, and then, as the troop of children revolved, she rattled the rhyme, and threw the pippin at a damsel named Tertiola. Whereupon she in turn cast her garland, that was of white violets, into the fountain, and withdrew.

Again the wreath of children circled and Tertiola repeated the jingle till she came to “Touched at last,” when a girl named Ælia was selected, and came into the middle. This was a child of seven, who was shy and clung to her mother. The mother fondled her, and said, “My Ælia! Rejoice that thou art not the fated victim. The god has surrendered thee to me. Be speedy with the verse, and I will give thee crustulæ that are in my basket.”

So encouraged, the frightened child rattled out some lines, then halted; her memory had failed, and she had to be reminded of the rest. At last she also was free, ran to her mother's bosom and was comforted with cakes.

A young man with folded arms stood lounging [pg 11]near the great basin. He occasionally addressed a shorter man, a client apparently, from his cringing manner and the set smile he wore when addressing or addressed by the other.

"By Hercules!" said the first. "Or let me rather swear by Venus and her wayward son, the Bow-bearer, that is a handsome girl yonder, she who is the tallest, and methinks the eldest of all. What is her name, my Callipodius?"

"She that looks so scared, O supremacy of excellent youths, Æmilius Lentulus Varo! I believe that she is the daughter and only child of the widow Quincta, who lost her husband two years ago, and has refused marriage since. They whisper strange things concerning her."

"What things, thou tittle-tattle bearer?"

"Nay, I bear but what is desired of me. Didst thou not inquire of me who the maiden was? I have a mind to make no answer. But who can deny anything to thee?"

"By the genius of Augustus," exclaimed the patron, "thou makest me turn away my head at thy unctuous flattery. The peasants do all their cooking in oil, and when their meals be set on the table the appetite is taken away, there is too much [pg 12]oil. It is so with thy conversation. Come, thy news."

"I speak but what I feel. But see how the circle is shrunk. As to the scandal thou wouldst hear, it is this. The report

goes that the widow and her daughter are infected with a foreign superstition, and worship an ass's head."

"An ass's head hast thou to hold and repeat such lies. Look at the virgin. Didst ever see one more modest, one who more bears the stamp of sound reason and of virtue on her brow. The next thou wilt say is——"

"That these Christians devour young children."

"This is slander, not scandal. By Jupiter Camulus! the circle is reduced to four, and she, that fair maid, is still in it. There is Quinctilla, the daughter of Largus; look at him, how he eyes her with agony in his face! There is Vestilia Patercola. I would to the gods that the fair—what is her name?"

"Perpetua, daughter of Aulus Har——"

"Ah!" interrupted the patron, uneasily. "Quinctilla is out."

"Her father, Aulus Harpinus——"

"See, see!" again burst in the youth Æmilius, [pg 13]"there are but two left; that little brown girl, and she whom thou namest——"

"Perpetua."

Now arrived the supreme moment—that of the final selection. The choosing girl, in whose hand was the apple, stood before those who alone remained. She began:

"One, two
Drops of dew."

Although there was so vast a concourse present, not a sound could be heard, save the voice of the girl repeating the jingle, and the rush of the holy water over the weir. Every breath was held.

"Nine and ten,
Pass again."

Golden pippin, now I cast,
Thou, Portumna, touched at last."

At once the brown girl skipped to the basin, cast in her garland, and the high priestess, raising her hand, stepped forward, pointed to Perpetua, and cried, "Est."

[pg 14]

CHAPTER II

ÆMILIUS

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When the lot had fallen, then a cry rang from among the spectators, and a woman, wearing the white cloak of widowhood, would have fallen, had she not been caught and sustained by a man in a brown tunic and lacerna (short cloak).

“Be not overcome, lady,” said this man in a low tone. “What thou lovest is lent to the Lord.”

“Baudillas,” sobbed the woman, “she is my only child, and is to be sacrificed to devils.”

“The devil hath no part in her. She is the Lord’s, and the Lord will preserve His own.”

“Will He give her back to me? Will He deliver her from the hands of His enemies?”

“The Lord is mighty even to do this. But I say not that it will be done as thou desirest. Put thy trust in Him. Did Abraham withhold his son, his only son, when God demanded him?”

“But this is not God, it is Nemausus.”

“Nemausus is naught but a creature, a fountain, fed by God’s rains. It is the Lord’s doing that the [pg 15]lot has fallen thus. It is done to try thy faith, as of old the faith of Abraham was tried.”

The poor mother clasped her arms, and buried her head in them.

Then the girl thrust aside such as interposed and essayed to reach her mother. The priestesses laid hands on her, to stay her, but she said:

“Suffer me to kiss my mother, and to comfort her. Do not doubt that I will preserve a smiling countenance.”

“I cannot permit it,” said the high priestess. “There will be resistance and tears.”

“And therefore,” said the girl, “you put drops of oil or water into the ears of oxen brought to the altars, that they may nod their heads, and so seem to express consent. Let me console my mother, so shall I be able to go gladly to death. Otherwise I may weep, and thereby mar thy sacrifice.”

Then, with firmness, she thrust through the belt of priestesses, and clasped the almost fainting and despairing mother to her heart.

“Be of good courage,” she said. “Be like unto Felicitas, who sent her sons, one by one, to receive the crown, and who—blessed mother that she was—[pg 16]encouraged them in their torments to play the man for Christ.”

“But thou art my only child.”

“And she offered them all to God.”

“I am a widow, and alone.”

“And such was she.”

Then said the brown-habited man whom the lady had called Baudillas:

“Quincta, remember that she is taken from an evil world, in which are snares, and that God may have chosen to deliver her by this means from some great peril to her soul,

against which thou wouldst have been powerless to protect her.”

“I cannot bear it,” gasped the heart-broken woman. “I have lived only for her. She is my all.”

Then Perpetua gently unclasped the arms of her mother, who was lapsing into unconsciousness, kissed her, and said:

“The God of all strength and comfort be to thee a strong tower of defence.” And hastily returned to the basin.

The young man who before had noticed Perpetua, turned with quivering lip to his companion, and said:

[pg 17]

“I would forswear Nemausus—that he should exact such a price. Look at her face, Callipodius. Is it the sun that lightens it? By Hercules, I could swear that it streamed with effulgence from within—as though she were one of the gods.”

“The more beautiful and innocent she be, the more grateful is she to the august Archegos!”

“Pshaw!” scoffed the young man; his hand clutched the marble balustrade convulsively, and the blood suffused his brow and cheeks and throat. “I believe naught concerning these deities. My father was a shrewd man, and he ever said that the ignorant people created their own gods out of heroes, or the things of Nature, which they understood not, being beasts.”

“But tell me, Æmilius—and thou art a profundity of wisdom, unsounded as is this spring—what is this Nemausus?”

“The fountain.”

“And how comes the fountain to ever heave with water, and never to fail. Verily it lives. See—it is as a thing that

hath life and movement. If not a deity, then what is it?"

"Nay—I cannot say. But it is subject to destiny."

[pg 18]

"In what way?"

"Ruled to flow."

"But who imposed the rule?"

"Silence! I can think of naught save the innocent virgin thus sacrificed to besotted ignorance."

"Thou canst not prevent it. Therefore look on, as at a show."

"I cannot prevent it. I marvel at the magistrates—that they endure it. They would not do so were it to touch at all those of the upper town. Besides, did not the god Claudius ——"

"They are binding her."

"She refuses to be bound."

Shrieks now rang from the frantic mother, and she made desperate efforts to reach her daughter. She was deaf to the consolations of Baudillas, and to the remonstrances and entreaties of the people around her, who pitied and yet could not help her. Then said the ædile to his police, "Remove the woman!"

The chief priest made a sign, and at once the trumpeters began to bray through their brazen tubes, making such a noise as to drown the cries of the mother.

"I would to the gods I could save her," said [pg 19]Æmilius between his teeth. He clenched his hands, and his eyes flashed. Then, without well knowing what he did, he unloosed his toga, at the same time that the priestesses divested Perpetua of her girded stole, and revealed her graceful young form in the tunic bordered with purple

indicative of the nobility of the house to which she belonged.

The priest had bound her hands; but Perpetua smiled, and shook off the bonds at her feet. "Let be," she said, "I shall not resist."

On her head she still wore a crown of white narcissus. Not more fresh and pure were these flowers than her delicate face, which the blood had left. Ever and anon she turned her eyes in the direction of her mother, but she could no longer see her, as the attendants formed a ring so compact that none could break through.

"Elect of the god, bride of Nemausus!" said the chief priestess, "ascend the balustrade of the holy perennial fountain."

Without shrinking, the girl obeyed.

She fixed her eyes steadily on the sky, and then made the sacred sign on her brow.

"What doest thou?" asked the priestess. "Some witchcraft I trow."

[pg 20]

"No witchcraft, indeed," answered the girl. "I do but invoke the Father of Lights with whom is no variableness, neither shadow of turning."

"Ah, Apollo!—he is not so great a god as our Nemausus."

Then at a sign, the trumpeters blew a furious bellow and as suddenly ceased. Whereupon to the strains of flutes and the tinkling of triangles, the choir broke forth into the last verse of the hymn:

"Thou, the perennial, loving tender virgins,
Do thou accept the sacrifice we offer;
May thy selection be the best and fittest,

Father Nemausus.”

As they chanted, and a cloud of incense mounted around her, Perpetua looked down into the water. It was green as glacier ice, and so full of bubbles in places as to be there semi-opaque. The depth seemed infinite. No bottom was visible. No fish darted through it. An immense volume boiled up unceasingly from unknown, unfathomed depths. The wavelets lapped the marble breasting as though licking it with greed expecting their victim.

The water, after brimming the basin, flowed away over a sluice under a bridge as a considerable stream. [pg 21]Then it lost its sanctity and was employed for profane uses.

Perpetua heard the song of the ministers of the god, but gave no heed to it, for her lips moved in prayer, and her soul was already unfurling its pure wings to soar into that Presence before which, as she surely expected, she was about to appear.

When the chorus had reached the line:
“May thy selection be the best and fittest,
Father Nemausus!”

then she was thrust by three priestesses from the balustrade and precipitated into the basin. She uttered no cry, but from all present a gasp of breath was audible.

For a moment she disappeared in the vitreous waters, and her white garland alone remained floating on the surface.

Then her dress glimmered, next her arm, as the surging spring threw her up.

Suddenly from the entire concourse rose a cry of astonishment and dismay.

The young man, Æmilius Lentulus Varo, had leaped into the holy basin.

Why had he so leaped? Why?

[pg 22]

CHAPTER III

BAUDILLAS, THE DEACON

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The chain of priests and priestesses could not restrain the mob, that thrust forward to the great basin, to see the result.

Exclamations of every description rose from the throng.

“He fell in!”

“Nay, he cast himself in. The god will withdraw the holy waters. It was impious. The fountain is polluted.”

“Was it not defiled when a dead tom-cat was found in it? Yet the fountain ceased not to flow.”

“The maiden floats!”

“Why should the god pick out the handsomest girl? His blood is ice-cold. She is not a morsel for him,” scoffed a red-faced senator.

“He rises! He is swimming.”

“He has grappled the damsel.”

“He is striking out! Bene! Bene!”

“Encourage not the sacrilegious one! Thou makest thyself partaker in his impiety!”

[pg 23]

“What will the magistrates do?”

“Do! Coil up like wood-lice, and uncurl only when all is forgotten.”

“He is a Christian.”

“His father was a philosopher. He swears by the gods.”

“He is an atheist.”

“See! See! He is sustaining her head.”

“She is not dead; she gasps.”

“Body of Bacchus! how the water boils. The god is wroth.”

“Bah! It boils no more now than it did yesterday.”

In the ice-green water could be seen the young man with nervous arms striking out. He held up the girl with one arm. The swell of the rising volumes of water greatly facilitated his efforts. Indeed the upsurging flood had such force, that to die by drowning in it was a death by inches, for as often as a body went beneath the surface, it was again propelled upwards.

In a minute he was at the breastwork, had one hand on it, then called: “Help, some one, to lift her out!”

Thereupon the man clothed in brown wool put [pg 24]down his arms, clasped the half-conscious girl and raised her from the water. Callipodius assisted, and between them she was lifted out of the basin. The priests and priestesses remonstrated with loud cries. But some of the spectators cheered. A considerable portion of the men ranged themselves beside the two who had the girl in their arms, and prevented the ministers of Nemausus from recovering Perpetua from the hands of her rescuers.

The men of the upper town—Greek colonists, or their descendants—looked superciliously and incredulously on the cult of the Gallic deity of the fountain. It was tolerated, but laughed at, as something that belonged to a class of citizens that was below them in standing.