

# Chapter I. The King Of The Wood.

“The still glassy lake that sleeps  
    Beneath Aricia's trees—  
Those trees in whose dim shadow  
    The ghastly priest doth reign,  
The priest who slew the slayer,  
    And shall himself be slain.”

MACAULAY.

## § 1.—The Arician Grove.

Who does not know Turner's picture of the Golden Bough? The scene, suffused with the golden glow of imagination in which the divine mind of Turner steeped and transfigured even the fairest natural landscape, is a dream-like vision of the little woodland lake of Nemi, “Diana's Mirror,” as it was called by the ancients. No one who has seen that calm water, lapped in a green hollow of the Alban hills, can ever forget it. The two characteristic Italian villages which slumber on its banks, and the equally Italian palazzo whose terraced gardens descend steeply to the lake, hardly break the stillness and even the solitariness of the scene. Dian herself might still linger by this lonely shore, still haunt these woodlands wild.

[002]

In antiquity this sylvan landscape was the scene of a strange and recurring tragedy. On the northern shore of the lake, right under the precipitous cliffs on which the modern village of

Nemi is perched, stood the sacred grove and sanctuary of Diana Nemorensis, or Diana of the Wood.<sup>2</sup> The lake and the grove were sometimes known as the lake and grove of Aricia.<sup>3</sup> But the town of Aricia (the modern La Riccia) was situated about three miles off, at the foot of the Alban Mount, and separated by a steep descent from the lake, which lies in a small crater-like hollow on the mountain side. In this sacred grove there grew a certain tree round which at any time of the day and probably far into the night a strange figure might be seen to prowl. In his hand he carried a drawn sword, and he kept peering warily about him as if every instant he expected to be set upon by an enemy.<sup>4</sup> He was a priest and a murderer; and the man for whom he looked was sooner or later to murder him and hold the priesthood in his stead. Such was the rule of the sanctuary. A candidate for the priesthood could only succeed to office by slaying the priest, and having slain him he held office till he was himself slain by a stronger or a craftier.

This strange rule has no parallel in classical antiquity, and cannot be explained from it. To find an explanation we must go farther afield. No one will probably deny that such a custom savours of a barbarous age and, surviving into imperial times, stands out in striking isolation from the polished Italian society of the day, like a primeval rock rising from a smooth-shaven lawn. It is the very rudeness and barbarity of the custom which allow us a hope of explaining it. For recent researches into the early history of man have revealed the essential similarity with which, under many superficial differences, the human mind has elaborated its

[003]

<sup>2</sup> The site was excavated in 1885 by Sir John Savile Lumley, English ambassador at Rome. For a general description of the site and excavations, see the *Athenaeum*, 10th October 1885. For details of the finds see *Bulletino dell' Istituto di Corrispondenza Archeologica*, 1885, pp. 149 *sqq.*, 225 *sqq.*

<sup>3</sup> Ovid, *Fasti*, vi. 756; Cato quoted by Priscian, see Peter's *Historic. Roman. Fragmenta*, p. 52 (lat. ed.); Statius, *Sylv.* iii. 1, 56.

<sup>4</sup> ξιφήρης οὖν ἐστὶν ἀεὶ, περισκοπῶν τὰς ἐπιθέσεις, ἔτοιμος ἀμύνεσθαι, is Strabo's description (v. 3, 12), who may have seen him "pacing there alone."

first crude philosophy of life. Accordingly if we can show that a barbarous custom, like that of the priesthood of Nemi, has existed elsewhere; if we can detect the motives which led to its institution; if we can prove that these motives have operated widely, perhaps universally, in human society, producing in varied circumstances a variety of institutions specifically different but generically alike; if we can show, lastly, that these very motives, with some of their derivative institutions, were actually at work in classical antiquity; then we may fairly infer that at a remoter age the same motives gave birth to the priesthood of Nemi. Such an inference, in default of direct evidence as to how the priesthood did actually arise, can never amount to demonstration. But it will be more or less probable according to the degree of completeness with which it fulfils the conditions indicated above. The object of this book is, by meeting these conditions, to offer a fairly probable explanation of the priesthood of Nemi.

[004]

I begin by setting forth the few facts and legends which have come down to us on the subject. According to one story the worship of Diana at Nemi was instituted by Orestes, who, after killing Thoas, King of the Tauric Chersonese (the Crimea), fled with his sister to Italy, bringing with him the image of the Tauric Diana. The bloody ritual which legend ascribed to that goddess is familiar to classical readers; it is said that every stranger who landed on the shore was sacrificed on her altar. But transported to Italy, the rite assumed a milder form. Within the sanctuary at Nemi grew a certain tree of which no branch might be broken. Only a runaway slave was allowed to break off, if he could, one of its boughs. Success in the attempt entitled him to fight the priest in single combat, and if he slew him he reigned in his stead with the title of King of the Wood (*Rex Nemorensis*). Tradition averred that the fateful branch was that Golden Bough which, at the Sibyl's bidding, Aeneas plucked before he essayed the perilous journey to the world of the dead. The flight of the slave represented, it was said, the flight of Orestes; his combat with the

priest was a reminiscence of the human sacrifices once offered to the Tauric Diana. This rule of succession by the sword was observed down to imperial times; for amongst his other freaks Caligula, thinking that the priest of Nemi had held office too long, hired a more stalwart ruffian to slay him.<sup>5</sup>

Of the worship of Diana at Nemi two leading features can still be made out. First, from the votive-offerings found in modern times on the site, it appears that she was especially worshipped by women desirous of children or of an easy delivery.<sup>6</sup> Second, fire seems to have played a foremost part in her ritual. For during her annual festival, celebrated at the hottest time of the year, her grove was lit up by a multitude of torches, whose ruddy glare was reflected by the waters of the lake; and throughout the length and breadth of Italy the day was kept with holy rites at every domestic hearth.<sup>7</sup> Moreover, women whose prayers had been heard by the goddess brought lighted torches to the grove in fulfilment of their vows.<sup>8</sup> Lastly, the title of Vesta borne by

[005]

<sup>5</sup> Virgil, *Aen.* vi. 136 *sqq.*; Servius, *ad l.*; Strabo, v. 3, 12; Pausanias, ii. 27; Solinus, ii. 11; Suetonius, *Caligula*, 35. For the title "King of the Wood," see Suetonius, *l.c.*; and compare Statius, *Sylv.* iii. 1, 55 *sq.*—

"*Jamque dies aderat, profugis cum regibus aptum  
Fumat Aricinum Triviae nemus;*"

Ovid, *Fasti*, iii. 271, "*Regna tenent fortesque manu, pedibusque fugaces;*" *id. Ars am.* i. 259 *sq.*—

"*Ecce suburbanæ templum nemorale Dianæ,  
Partaque per gladios regna nocente manu.*"

<sup>6</sup> *Bulletino dell' Istituto*, 1885, p. 153 *sq.*; *Athenaeum*, 10th October 1885; Preller, *Römische Mythologie*,<sup>3</sup> i. 317. Of these votive offerings some represent women with children in their arms; one represents a delivery, etc.

<sup>7</sup> Statius, *Sylv.* iii. 1, 52 *sqq.* From Martial, xii. 67, it has been inferred that the Arician festival fell on the 13th of August. The inference, however, does not seem conclusive. Statius's expression is:—

"*Tempus erat, caeli cum ardentissimus axis  
Incumbit terris, ictusque Hyperione multo  
Acer anhelantes incendit Sirius agros.*"

<sup>8</sup> Ovid, *Fasti*, iii. 269; Propertius, iii. 24 (30), 9 *sq.* ed. Paley.

the Arician Diana<sup>9</sup> points almost certainly to the maintenance of a perpetual holy fire in her sanctuary.

At her annual festival all young people went through a purificatory ceremony in her honour; dogs were crowned; and the feast consisted of a young kid, wine, and cakes, served up piping hot on platters of leaves.<sup>10</sup>

But Diana did not reign alone in her grove at Nemi. Two lesser divinities shared her forest sanctuary. One was Egeria, the nymph of the clear water which, bubbling from the basaltic rocks, used to fall in graceful cascades into the lake at the place called Le Mole.<sup>11</sup> According to one story the grove was first consecrated to Diana by a Manius Egerius, who was the ancestor of a long and distinguished line. Hence the proverb "There are many Manii at Ariciae." Others explained the proverb very differently. They said it meant that there were a great many ugly and deformed people, and they referred to the word *Mania* which meant a bogey or bugbear to frighten children.<sup>12</sup>

[006]

The other of these minor deities was Virbius. Legend had it that Virbius was the youthful Greek hero Hippolytus, who had been killed by his horses on the sea-shore of the Saronic Gulf. Him, to please Diana, the leech Aesculapius brought to life again by his simples. But Jupiter, indignant that a mortal man should return from the gates of death, thrust down the meddling leech himself to Hades; and Diana, for the love she bore Hippolytus, carried him away to Italy and hid him from the angry god in the dells of Nemi, where he reigned a forest king under the name of Virbius. Horses were excluded from the grove and sanctuary,

<sup>9</sup> *Inscript. Lat.* ed. Orelli, No. 1455.

<sup>10</sup> Statius, *l.c.*; Gratius Faliscus, v. 483 sqq.

<sup>11</sup> *Athenaeum*, 10th October 1885. The water was diverted a few years ago to supply Albano. For Egeria, compare Strabo, v. 3, 12; Ovid, *Fasti*, iii. 273 sqq.; *id. Met.* xv. 487 sqq.

<sup>12</sup> Festus, p. 145, ed. Müller; Schol. on Persius, vi. 56 *ap.* Jahn on Macrobius, i. 7, 35.

because horses had killed Hippolytus.<sup>13</sup> Some thought that Virbius was the sun. It was unlawful to touch his image.<sup>14</sup> His worship was cared for by a special priest, the Flamen Virbialis.<sup>15</sup>

Such then are the facts and theories bequeathed to us by antiquity on the subject of the priesthood of Nemi. From materials so slight and scanty it is impossible to extract a solution of the problem. It remains to try whether the survey of a wider field may not yield us the clue we seek. The questions to be answered are two: first, why had the priest to slay his predecessor? and second, why, before he slew him, had he to pluck the Golden Bough? The rest of this book will be an attempt to answer these questions.

[007]

## § 2.—Primitive man and the supernatural.

The first point on which we fasten is the priest's title. Why was he called the King of the Wood? why was his office spoken of as a Kingdom?<sup>16</sup>

The union of a royal title with priestly duties was common in ancient Italy and Greece. At Rome and in other Italian cities there was a priest called the Sacrificial King or King of the Sacred Rites (*Rex Sacrificulus* or *Rex Sacrorum*), and his wife bore the title of Queen of the Sacred Rites.<sup>17</sup> In republican Athens

<sup>13</sup> Virgil, *Aen.* vii. 761 *sqq.*; Servius, *ad l.*; Ovid, *Fasti*, iii. 265 *sq.*; *id. Met.* xv. 497 *sqq.*; Pausanias, ii. 27.

<sup>14</sup> Servius on Virgil, *Aen.* vii. 776.

<sup>15</sup> *Inscript. Lat.* ed. Orelli, Nos. 2212, 4022. The inscription No. 1457 (Orelli) is said to be spurious.

<sup>16</sup> See above, p. 4, note 1.

<sup>17</sup> Marquardt, *Römische Staatsverwaltung*, iii.<sup>2</sup> 321 *sqq.*