

**THE FARM OF APTONGA:
A STORY FOR
CHILDREN, OF THE
TIMES OF S. CYPRIAN**

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The Farm of Aptonga: A Story for Children, of the Times of S. Cyprian by J. M. Neale

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J. M. NEALE

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A STORY FOR
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THIS STORY
WAS WRITTEN FOR
MY DEAR LITTLE
MARY SACKVILLE
AND IS DEDICATED TO HER.

Vos, o fortes varoes, de quem eu canto,
Perdoai se nao dou tudo o que he vosso ;
Porque nao ha ninguem que possa tanto,
Menos eu, que entre todos menos posso :
E se eu quiz empregar em vos hum canto
Que en conhego por baixo, rudo, e grosso,
He só porque me força hum desejo,
Que vejao de vos todos o que eu vejo.

FRANCISCO D'ANDRADE.

And you, ye valiant ones, whose fame I sing,
Forgive me if I give you not your due :
For none your guerdon of meet praise can bring,
I least of all, who less than all can do :
And if I venture here an offering
Rude in itself, and all unworthy you,
'Tis but because to this desire I bow,
That all may see you, as I see you now.

THE
FARM OF APTONGA.

CHAPTER I.

HOW THERE CAME NEWS FROM CARTHAGE TO AD FINES.

Would you like to know how some of those early Christians were spending such a glorious summer afternoon as this is,—fifteen hundred years ago?

I could carry you at once to the place, and set you down among the family in which I hope that you will soon become interested;—but it is better that I should first show you how the country lay, so that, by-and-bye, when we shall have to pass through it in company with fierce persecutors or brave confessors, we may know it again.

About sixty miles to the south of Carthage is the little town of Aptonga, just on the skirts of the Numidian mountains. If we stroll up a wild glen to the right hand, and walk briskly for an hour, we shall come out on one of the hill-farms, niched in between two steep wooded crags, but open to the refreshing breeze from the north, and looking forth over the great plain towards the Mediterranean. —*Ad Fines* for that is the name of the place,—is a gray old building, straggling, two-storied, with a balcony in front of the upper windows:—sheds, cart-houses, and barns scattered round it; and barley fields—now basking with

their second crop in the blaze of an August sun—dotted over the mountain side. I dare say that some of those walls could remember the battle of Zama;—the people that lived then knew nothing about building them in the Roman way, but put their stones together as best they could, and a quaint picturesque mountain-farm they have made. Look! there is the boundary of the land this way; you may notice that head of Mercury on the stone column that serves for a mark. Some one, I see, has garlanded it with flowers:—well, we will not take them down, nor (which I should much like to do) knock the god's head off. For it is a time of persecution and we must remember the Canons which command that we are not to give needless offence by such acts as these. Now we enter the enclosure. Look at those oxen lazily whisking their tails in the sun;—I should say they were of the true Mauritanian breed;—and so we may go into the hall, which seems kitchen, parlour, and hall in one.

Those two,—I need not tell you that they are mother and daughter: they are too much alike, though one may be six and thirty, and the other can scarcely be sixteen, to leave any doubt about that. The mother is a widow, as you may see by that mourning cloak which she wears over her *stola*: (they call it a *ricinium* in Rome, but it may have another name here:) and the *toga prætecta* of the girl, with its purple border at the edge, shows her to be unmarried. They are spinning, you see: and for any one who would sit down under the chesnut that shadows the farm, the buzz of the insects, that are sporting away their little lives in the glorious sunlight, the faintish rustling of the wind in the leaves, the whirr of the spinning wheel from the house, and the occasional lowing of a cow from some distant shed, how drowsy it would make him!

The mother's wheel stops. 'Lucia,' she says—

'Well, dear mother.'

'I have been thinking about your brother; and I begin to be sorry that I ever let him go to Carthage.'

'Why,' said Lucia, 'he and our good Priest wished it so much that it would have been quite unkind to say No.

There is no fear,—there can be no fear; for every one says that all is quiet. I am sure he will not be the less glad to come back to *Ad Fines*, because he has seen the city.'

'If you were old enough to remember all that we suffered in the time of Decius, you would not wonder that I feel anxious now. God send all for the best! It is but a fortnight; and that is my greatest comfort.'

'At all events,' said Lucia, 'I shall be glad when my sister is home again. Secunda is at no great distance, and we shall see her soon.'

'Dear Secunda!' cried the mother. 'Yes:—and how delighted I shall be at her return!'

'Do you know, mother,' said Lucia presently, 'I think that Vivia is more than half disposed to receive our faith. The day before yesterday, when the rest were gone down into the valley, to that sacrifice to *Robigo*, she staid at home, and said that she would rather trust to the God of the Christians to keep off the blight, than to a thing made with hands.'

'We will get our Bishop to talk with her,' said Quintilla—for that was the name of the mother; 'I have noticed what you tell me:—and it would be a great comfort indeed, if but one of the household were heirs with us of the other world, as they are sharers with us of this. How glad such a thought would have made your father, 'the blessed one!''

'So it would, dear mother, and so it does.—But who is that?' And as she spoke, a tall man was seen striding up the steep road from the glen, at a pace very little suited to such an ascent, on such an afternoon.

'It looks like your uncle,' said Quintilla. 'But what can have brought him here now?'

'It is he indeed.—Shall I go and meet him?'

Almost before her mother could reply, a large strongly built man hurried into the farm-yard, wiping the big drops from his forehead as he came in, and entered the hail.

'Why, Acilius!' said Quintilla.

'Dear uncle, what is the matter?'

'Matter!' roared Acilius Glabro, the centurion, for such he was. 'Matter!' And he strode up and down the room, panting with exertion and excitement.

'It is nothing about Paulinus?' said the anxious mother.

'Matter:' cried the centurion, a third time.—'I knew it would come to this. Matter! Here's an end to your folly:—I knew how it would be, when you took to worshipping the Head of an ass!—Well, well;—after all, it is no concern of mine, and I am a fool to meddle with it.'

'But what is it, uncle?'

'But you will be reasonable,—I know you will,'—continued the Roman soldier. 'No great harm in this Christian madness, while it costs you nothing; wiser folks than you have been led away with it. Come, come; I am sure you will not make fools of yourselves now, when you know what I have to tell you. The Proconsul has orders to proceed against all Nazarenes; and, by Mars! he is the man to set up to his instructions.'

'Do you mean,' asked Quintilla, turning pale, 'that there is to be a persecution?'

'Persecution!' cried Acilius. 'I know that your people are to be rooted out of the earth, and I hope you will be wise in time. The Augustus has ordered his edict to be carried out here, and he will be attended to, I can tell you.'

'But are you sure, brother? Is this really so? Or are you only talking to frighten us?'

'Do you think I should have run up from Aptonga like a madman, only to frighten a woman and a silly girl? I know it for certain, and thus it was;—but first—have you never a cup of Sicilian, or of barley wine?'

'Barley wine you shall have, and welcome—bring it, Lucia; but let me hear the worst at once.'

'Well, it was thus,' continued Acilius, after he had drunk and was refreshed. 'I was in the guard room about the seventh hour, talking over the good old times when I served in Germany,—by Mars, they were times! and longing for something better than this idle life, when, all of a sudden,

there came such a shout from the forum as if the Augustus were entering the place. I and two or three others ran out, and there was the deputy Proconsul, with his lictors, setting up a placard against the town-house. But first of all he read it through, and it was as I tell you: Valerian will have no more of this scum here—I crave your pardon, Quintilla, but I always speak my mind;—and the long and the short of the matter is, you must give it up.'

'What will become of Paulinus!' cried Quintilla, making no reply to the centurion's speech.

'Paulinus!' repeated Acilius; 'why, where is he?'

'He set forth for Carthage three days ago, with—well; he went.

'And a good thing too, by the emperor's life,' said the centurion: 'I'll warrant, he will see enough to cure him of his folly. The lad's a good lad, though you have perverted him. He is safe, never fear; but what I am afraid about is you and Lucia here.'

'God will take care of us, brother: leave it in His hands, and be sure—'

'Pretty care He has taken of the Nazarenes before now,' interrupted the centurion. 'I do not reckon myself a coward,—at least others don't; but I declare to you that what I saw under the god Decius would have made me one. I would have worshipped any god you please,—a beetle or a lizard, like those fools the Egyptians, sooner than bear what those madmen bore at Carthage.'

'I believe you, brother,—' replied Quintilla; 'and yet children did what you own you could not have done. Is not that strange?'

'Strange, aye! But it is witchcraft; any thing may be done by that. I pray you to listen,' he continued earnestly. 'The Ædile here hates Nazarenes as he hates poison, and you may be very sure that you are down in his list. You cannot get away; it is out of the question; where could you go? and you lame too. (I wish to my heart you had been deaf into the bargain, before ever that pestilent fellow,