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MONA THE VESTAL.

A TALE OF THE TIMES OF ST. PATRICK.

BY MRS. ANNA H. DORSEY.

CHAPTER V.—(Continued.)

She did not know how long she had slept, when she was aroused by voices speaking near her in low, muffled tones. Scarcely breathing, she listened.

"It is nearly midnight, and they are not here yet."

"If the tide is not too high, they will surely come."

Then Mona heard no more for an instant or two, for the wind roared through the cavern, filling it with spray. Then, as it subsided, she heard the words "sacrifice," "polluted," and "death;" and, folding her hands over her bosom, she thought of her mother, and prepared to die, feeling assured that those who were speaking were emissaries of the Druids, who had tracked her hither for terrible and mysterious purposes. They spoke again.

"I will wait a few moments longer. Arrange the altar-stone, and place the tapers on it. I will uncover the crucifix and sacred vessels."

"Oh," thought Mona, wringing her hands what fate awaits me? I dare not speak. All is mystery! Oh, hapless Mona! Oh, faithless vestal!"

"I hear them coming! Hark! one,—two,—three! There are four of them," said one.

"Welcome, my children!" said the other, who now came forward a little, in full view of the trembling Mona, who saw, as she crouched farther back, that he was a venerable stranger, of noble and benign aspect: and while those who approached him—a woman, a youth, and two men, all closely muffled—knelt at his feet, he spread his hands over them, saying, "May He whom ye have to adore be thy reward!"

"The holy names be glorified forever!" said one of the men; "but we had danger and death to grapple with on our way. The Druids and people are out searching for one of the vestals of yonder temple, who, it is feared, has been lured off by a demon. Some say they saw a Banshee flying over the rocks at sunset; but we, who cared little for the clamor, pretended to join the search for the protection of our lives, and finally reached here in safety, thanks be to the Father, to the Son, and to the Holy Ghost!" continued the man, reverently crossing himself.

"Awful words! What mean they?" gasped Mona, shuddering. "Oh that day-dawn would come, that I might return to Dairene!"

"We have brought our son Cormac to receive the waters of baptism, which thou, holy Finian, has promised he shall receive to-night," said the woman.

"Dost thou believe, Cormac, in God the Father, Creator of heaven and earth?" said the venerable man, turning to the youth who stood modestly before him.

"I believe," was the response.

"Dost thou believe in Jesus Christ, His divine Son, who, coequal with the Father, was born for our redemption and died for our salvation, and who, rising from the dead, ascended into heaven, where, at the right hand of the Father, He liveth to make intercession for us?"

"I believe," answered the lad earnestly.

"Dost thou believe in the Holy Ghost, the Lord and Giver of Life, who proceeded from the Father and the Son, who together with the Father and the Son is adored and glorified,—the third person of the adorable Trinity?"

"I believe."

"It is well, O beloved son, that our God has in His infinite mercy blessed thee with the gift of faith! When the holy mysteries are celebrated, and the others receive the bread of eternal life, I will pour on thy head the sacred waters of regeneration, which will make thee one with us in the household of Faith," said the holy man, turning toward the rude altar, which was now arranged in order for the celebration of the holy mysteries. On it, and leaning against the dark-gray walls of the cave, was an ivory crucifix, before which stood a cushion and paten of gold, covered with a rich veil of silk fringed with pearls, and four lighted tapers of wax, whose sharp rays falling on the ivory Christ revealed all the beauty of its chiseled agony.

"It is He!" whispered Mona. "It is He! Those outstretched hands,—those wounds,—that awful crown! O UNKNOWN! O lovely and sorrowful One, save me!"

Then, silent and awe-struck, the poor vestal folded her hands over her bosom, and watched with eager, burning eyes the celebration of the divine mysteries. From her niche she saw it all, but could hear nothing; for the tide was up, and the surf was foaming through the abysses and rents below, with a deafening roar. When the holy Finian, adoring, elevated the stainless Host, beneath whose mystic veil the humanity, the divinity, and the unmeasurable

love of a God are hidden,—when those present bowed their heads to the rocky pavement to pay Him homage,—a sense of the presence of a mighty power overshadowed Mona's heart.—Her dream, and all that Dairene had told her,—the legend,—the holy name of God,—the death of Jesus Christ,—all seemed blended together with this midnight mystery. She could not define her sensations; the Spirit of God was breathing over the darkened waters of her soul, but she knew not what it was: she only felt that henceforth the temple, the sacred fires, NERF, and the Druids were less than nothing to her,—that there was a higher and diviner Truth, which she must find,—that the Deliverer of whom she had dreamed, and the Christ of whom she had heard, were one and the same being, whom not to know was eternal loss.

"They will leave me here in darkness, and will perhaps never return again; or I may be discovered by the emissaries of Semo and die in my ignorance," whispered Mona, as she saw the venerable Finian turning to leave the altar. "O life! what art thou, compared to the joys of the celestial realms of the Deliverer? Rather lose all—life itself—than such glorious hope!" "And, obeying the supernatural impulse that governed her, she glided forward, downcast and trembling, and fell at the feet of Finian, imploring his compassion."

CHAPTER VI.—THE VESTAL OF CHRIST.

"She is a vestal—one of the vestals of NERF!" exclaimed one of the men, starting back with a look of horror.

"Who art thou, and what dost thou here, poor child?" asked the good Finian in a gentle and compassionate voice.

"I am Mona the vestal. I was pursued by a ferocious wolf, and fell into the hands of strange men, from whom I escaped and fled hither for safety," she replied, meekly.

"She will betray us to the Druids! Let her perish, O Finian! Better that one pagan should die than that scores of Christians be destroyed," exclaimed the man.

"Better, O my son, that a score of Christians receive the crown of martyrdom than that one soul should perish," replied the saintly Finian, pointing to the crucifix. "Remember Him who, betrayed by one of His own household, insulted and abused by His foes, expired in cruel torments on the ignominious cross for the love of us, who knew Him not. Let us imitate His divine example, and count all things—even life itself—as nothing for His dear sake! We will protect thee, trembling one, and return thee in safety to thy home."

"I have no home. All that I have seen and heard to-night makes me an outcast from yon temple which was my home. But who are ye, who would suffer death for me so willingly?" said Mona, amazed at the noble sentiments she had heard.

"We are Christians," replied Finian.

"What is that? Do ye worship Tienne and Nerf?"

"We worship ONE who is mightier and holier than Tienne,—God, the Creator of heaven and earth. Tienne is only the element of His power, the creation of His hands, who, if He so willed it, could be darkened and hurled away from the face of the heavens forever.—NERF is one of His lesser creations, subject also to Him, who is the Supreme Lord of all!"

"A mighty God!" whispered Mona, with awe. "A mighty God! And He whom ye were adoring, whose bowed head and outstretched arms and wounded side bespeak some great sorrow,—Who is He?"

"The Son of God, who, to save mortals from the wrath of perdition which their dark ingratitude and sins merited, took on Himself the form of man, and tasted of suffering and death for their deliverance. A man of sorrows, and afflicted with griefs, He became our brother, making all who believe co-heirs with Him of the kingdom of heaven."

"The Deliverer! Oh, noble,—oh, generous,—oh, divine art! Cannot I also believe and adore Him?" she asked, eagerly.

"Not if thou dost worship false deities and place faith in demons; for such are the oracles on whose revelations thy priests rely. Our God is a jealous God, and will have no other gods before Him," replied Finian.

"I spurn all that is false, O holy man!—Why should I worship the untrue? Let me do homage only to the true and living God," said Mona, with simplicity and earnestness.

"Thou art ignorant, poor child, of the dreadful doom that awaits thee if it is discovered by the Druids that thou hast forsaken the worship of the temple to become a Christian. Torments, and a slow, lingering death by fire, amid diabolical rites, would be the penalty of thy offense. What sayest thou now?" asked the good Finian, while all listened breathless for her answer.

"I cannot but die," said Mona, while her dark eyes brightened, and a smile lit up her face like a glory. "I could but die for the love of Him who died for me."

"Blessed art thou, O child, in thus receiving from Almighty God the supernatural gift of faith! Blessed art thou in being willing to suffer stripes and death for the love of Jesus Christ!" cried the holy Finian spreading his hands over Mona's head. "To-morrow seek

me here; and, after instructing thee, I will give thee Holy Baptism, without which no man shall see God. Afterward thou shalt learn all the mysteries of our holy faith,—a faith whose fruition is immortal life and an eternal perfection of bliss."

"I know not how to thank thee. A new world opens around me, through which I see, dimly, fair visions like those I beheld in my dream," said Mona, in a low and gentle tone. "But whither shall I go? Except the temple, I have no home on earth. Shall I abide here?"

"Here, poor child? On this barren and deserted rock?" asked Finian.

"I fear not solitude. Except this, I have no shelter on earth."

"We come hither at stated times to celebrate the holy mysteries and administer the divine rites of our faith: otherwise it is lone and deserted."

"Lady," said the mother of the boy who was to receive baptism. "I am a poor fisherman's wife, used to hardship and danger, and, if thou wilt, can remain here with thee. My son shall bring us provisions and keep guard about us until a better place is provided for one so gentle and fair."

"Thanks, mother," said Mona, humbly kissing the rough hand of Lena, the fisherman's wife; "thanks!"

"Thy wit is ever ready, Lena," said her husband. "I, like the pagan I used to be, was for throwing the dark-eyed maiden over the cliffs into the sea, fearing for our lives; but thou—ah, thou dost know how to be a Christian indeed. Thou wilt bring blessings on my poor roof!"

"Silence, Stephen!" she said, with a smile; "thou dost forget the orphan sons of him who was thy foe, who now live, fed and cherished beside thy hearth! It is true, father: they were left bare and homeless, and Stephen brought them in his arms, wrapped in his falling, and, in the name of Christ, bade me be a mother to them."

"God's blessing be on ye both, my children! Go on: emulate the virtues of the saints, and in this holy strife keep the soul's eye fixed singly on Christ Jesus, who will be your exceeding great reward. Take care, good Lena, of this the wandering lamb of His fold, who sighs to enter the peaceful pastures of which He is the Shepherd. It was a happy thought, and a courageous one, to remain with the maiden. Now, Cormac, art thou ready to receive holy baptism?"

"Yes, father, I am ready," replied the boy, coming forward.

Then all gathered around the saintly man, while he administered the sacrament of baptism to the youth, explaining, as he proceeded, every part of the solemnity, until it was over and Cormac was declared to be a son of the Church. "These life-giving waters have erased the stain of the fall; thy soul, purified and regenerated now, is clothed in a white garment, which see, O son, that thou carry unspotted to the judgment-seat of Christ." Then the little band knelt down, while he gave them his blessing, after which they dispersed, leaving Mona and Lena alone in the cavern.

"Rest thee, lady," said Lena, shaking up the moss and spreading her gray cloak over it. "Try and sleep. I will watch beside thee till morning."

But, like a tremulous lily swayed to and fro by a soft wind, Mona's soul full of new and holy thoughts, could not rest; there was no repose for it. One moment, like the flower, it was lifted upward, then in its weakness and sweet humility bowed earthward; now it turned to the shadow, now to the sunshine, but all the time diffusing fragrance which floated upward to its newly-discovered Lord in praise and thanksgiving.

"What is baptism, Lena, and what the stain of which the holy man spake?"

"Gentle lady, I am poor and unlearned, and fear I cannot in my humble language make plain my meaning," replied Lena, with humility.

"Thou art not so ignorant, O Christian, as I! Until this hour I have been in darkness. Then tell me what I ask, concerning that stain which only the waters of baptism can erase," said Mona gently.

"That stain, noble lady means the pollution of our natural state. When the great God created heaven and earth, He created man, a pure being, in His own image and likeness, and also a woman, unsullied and innocent, a companion for the man. The delights of the new earth were theirs,—communion with God and companionship with angels. They daily walked with the fair sons of God, and held the scepter of dominion over the realms in which He placed them. But the great foe of God and man—the devil—gained entrance into that kingdom of peace, and tempted those favored ones, the father and mother of our race, to an act of disobedience; and, transgressing the law of their Creator, they fell from their pure state, brought sin and death into the world, and closed the celestial gates of heaven. Driven from the glorious home of their innocence, the guilty pair wandered forth into a bleak and barren world, repentant, and practicing the works of

penance in labors and suffering. But all creation groaned and travailed for deliverance.—The race of man, which had multiplied on the earth, walked in the shadow of death and withered under the malediction of the Most High, until, moved to pity, He so loved the world as to give His only begotten Son to die for our salvation. He came,—Jesus the Deliverer. He opened a fountain of living waters, in which the soul may be cleansed from the pollution of the fall. He instituted a Divine faith and Divine sacraments. He died for our salvation, and, rising again from the dead, ascended to heaven, where He liveth to make intercession for us; and as He entered into His heavenly kingdom He left wide open the celestial gates for all to enter in who believe."

"I believe!" said Mona, with clasped hands, while the remembrance of her dream in the temple flashed over her. "Canst thou pour these purifying waters over me?"

"Not I,—oh, no, lady! It is only those who have Divine authority to administer the holy sacraments who can do it. In case thou wert dying, and no help at hand, then it would be lawful; but not now."

"Dost thou know," said Mona, laying her small white hand on Lena's cheek, where it lay like a snow-flake—"dost thou know that I feel within me a new life,—a something grand and beautiful, which rises up, and up, and up, until, lost in stary realms, I hear strains of delicious music, and see forms of light, like birds with the sun-shine on their wings, flash by me? What is it?"

"It is thy soul aspiring after immortality. But hark! What sounds are those, lady?" said Lena, starting up, and creeping toward the mouth of the cave, whither Mona followed her. Looking down along the shore, they saw crowds of men, who held aloft blazing torches, hurrying to and fro, peering among the crevices and rocks, and skirting the border of the woods, in search of something lost. Loud shouts mingled with the wild howl of the unleashed beagles, who coursed up and down tearing and tossing the sands, in search of the trail, which at a certain point the surf had washed out.—As they came nearer, she heard them shouting, "Mona! Mona! Mona! where art thou?" and saw Semo, his white hair floating on the wind, almost frantic, directing the search here and there.

"They seek me!" said Mona, sadly.

"And should they find thee, lady, what wouldst thou say?"

"I would say, I am no longer a vestal of Nerf, but a vestal of Christ," she replied, firmly. "But see!—see!—they come nearer; they will find their way into the cavern. I cannot die without baptism. Behold! they turn their footsteps hither. Quick! quick, Lena!" she cried, in tones of anguish.

"O God! if it be for Thy glory and our salvation, save us. Thy weak servants, in this hour of peril, and forgive the meanness of Thy little ones if, in the moment of tribulation and death, she pours the waters of regeneration on this child, who wishes to belong to Thy kingdom," said the holy woman, lifting her eyes to heaven. Then, stooping down, she scooped up a handful of water from a hollow in the rock, and was about pouring it on Mona's head, who knelt, meekly and pale, at her feet, when suddenly the clamor ceased, the beagles were off on a false scent, and, coursing down into the woods, were followed by Semo and the yeomen of the temple, and the shore was left dark and lonely, with no sound to disturb the solitude but the eternal moan of the restless sea.

The next day was dark and lowering. A fine rain driven by easterly winds added to the chilly and gloomy aspect without. Within the temple all was silent and dismal. In a lofty apartment, lighted only by the sacred fires burning with blue and flickering gleams on their silver tripods, sat Semo, in a chair of gray stone, beneath a canopy of black marble elaborately carved in foliage interspersed with faces of unearthly grotesqueness. His head was sunk on his bosom, while his dark robe, on which were embroidered in gold and jewels the signs of the zodiac, was folded over the lower part of his face, leaving visible only his broad forehead and deep-set eyes, which gleamed out from the shadow of his brow like living coals. Before him stood the young Counts of Bretagne and Heilberg, with Abaris the bard.

"Clotaire of Bretagne, if thou wert not a stranger who came hither in good faith to study in our schools,—if thou hadst any other plea than ignorance of the sacred laws of Erin,—this day would be thy last," said Semo, slowly. "But I believe thy story, albeit it differs in a degree from some accounts I have heard," he continued, glancing toward the Saxon. "I have watched thee closely the few days we have been together, and, from unmistakable signs, I know that a lie is not in thee. But let not this lesson go unlearned. Thy ignorance of the laws of our religion, which make it death to touch a vestal of Nerf, and the act itself, which, apart from the offense, was noble and chivalrous, acquit thee."

"Venerable sage," said Clotaire, bending on one knee, "I am grateful for thy clemency.—But pardon me if, scorning all mean shifts and

crooked ways, I ask thee what is perhaps a rude question."

Semo nodded his head in reply. "Are the vestals of Nerf vowed for life to the service of the temple?"

"Why askest thou, stranger?" replied Semo, looking down to hide a fierce light which was kindled in his eyes.

"Because, if they are not, and can be released from their vows, I would pay a royal ransom for Mona," he said, eagerly.

"Thou wouldst buy her? There are slaves in Erin, but they come from Britain,—from Gaul,—from Rome. No native of the land has ever been in bonds," he replied, in suppressed tones.

"Enslave Mona! I would wed her!" exclaimed the noble youth.

"Thou wilt never wed Mona. Forget her, Count of Bretagne, forgo her; or it may not go well with thee."

Just then a wail rang wildly through the marble hall, and Dairene rushed in, tearing her hair, frantic in all her gestures, and fell sobbing at the feet of Semo.

"Why this anguish, Dairene?" he asked, in a cold and severe tone.

"Mona! Mona! the light of my heart is no more! she has fallen from the cliffs into the sea! Here is her veil, which a fisherman found hanging on the rock from which she fell! Oh, child of my age! thou art lost to me forever!"

"Thou hast forgotten the presence of strangers. Cover thy face, Dairene, return, and hang the shrine and statues with cypress and poppies," said Semo, coldly; but his lips quivered, and a shudder, scarcely perceptible, passed over him; for Mona, whose life he had saved from the sacrificial knife, had been the only human joy of his existence; he delighted in her as in a fair and fragrant flower, which, strengthening and growing in brightness and splendor under his fostering care, he had offered spotless and fresh to his deities.

"Ye can retire. Be ready to start ere dawn to-morrow, toward Tara," he said, calmly.

As they left apartment, a door at the upper end was opened by a feeble hand, and a Druid, arrayed in his sacerdotal robes, entered. He was older and more bowed than Semo, and there was an expression of blended fear and horror on his countenance as he tottered toward him.

"Aged Moriat, what brings thee hither? Thy limbs are weak and faltering with the weight of years. I would have come to thee," said Semo, stretching out his hands, and leading him to his own chair.

"I may not tarry, O Semo. Strange marvels have come to pass. Cadanities threaten the land! The oracles but rarely reply to our invocations: they have some mightier Power been almost silenced. But to-day, when I offered sacrifice to Tienne, there came a sound like the rushing of mighty wings, and the sacred fires were suddenly extinguished. A heap of blackened ashes was all that remained of the victim and the glowing coals on which it lay, while a voice issued from the shrine,—it sounded like a wail from Tartarus,—crying, 'Never more! Henceforth we are chained in silence. Behold, the King enters His inheritance to rule over those He has ransomed with a price. Never more!—never more!'"

"It is an evil omen," cried Semo, wringing his hands. "Our power is departing from us. Cormac gave us the first blow. The second we received in the grove of Tara, when the King of the Jews was crucified in Palestine, filling the earth with blackness and horror, as if a God had died. The third is at hand! Woe for the priests and bards, woe for the temples and shrines, of Erin!" And, covering his face with his robes, he wept.

CHAPTER VII.—TARA.

A party of weary travelers was winding slowly and cautiously through a dark and narrow gorge, whose outlet was concealed from view, either by an abrupt turn or by the heavy mist which obscured the day-dawn. Not a word was spoken. Some sat upright in their saddles, enjoying such fitful repose as only extreme fatigue invites; others gazed on the blank mist which surrounded them, with a dreamy and abstracted air. The very horses looked sullen and hungry, as their hoofs rung on the loose pebbles and rocks which obstructed the path. An aged man rode in their midst; his voluminous robes were wrapped closely around him, almost concealing his face,—while his bowed head and his silent and majestic air invested him with an aspect of great dignity. It was Semo, the Arch-Druid, with a party of Druids, bards, and brehons, on their way to Tara, for the twofold purpose of assisting at the grand festival of Baal and of being present as peers of Erin at the assembly of the Estates of the nation. The two foreign nobles, Clotaire of Gaul and Ulric of Germany, under the escort of Abaris the bard, who had been appointed by Semo as their Mentor and associate, rode together. The German wore a dissatisfied and hungry expression on his handsome features, while he of Bretagne, somewhat moody, indulged in sad, fruitless thoughts, which did little honor to his powers of self-control and good sense; for he still cherished wild love-visions of Mona the vestal.

* St. Finian, one of the precursors of St. Patrick.