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MONA THE VESTAL.

A TALE OF THE TIMES OF ST. PATRICK.

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CHAPTER III.—(Continued.)

Semo waved his hand, and Abaris, gathering his mantle over his arm, retired within the recesses of the sacred grove.

"He belongs to a race of royal heroes," said the Druid,—"heroes who bequeath with their jewels and swords a dauntless spirit to their sons. Erin has her priests and bards, but her defenses are the true and loyal hearts of an unconquered race, who ever rush on the invader, like avenging deities."

"Pardon me," said the Saxon, with humility, "if, proud of my fatherland, I deemed it without a peer in the art of war. Let those who will, seclude themselves among the volumes and parchments of old, learning mysteries and systems which will neither give strength to the sinews nor valor to the heart; as for me, lead me, O Semo, to some of the warlike princesses of Erin, where I may practice all those glorious exercises which the valiant love."

"And thou?" said the sage, turning toward Clotaire of Bretagne.

"Think not meanly of me, O Semo, if, according to my father's wishes, I desire to learn the arts of legislation and the science of jurisprudence among a people whose code of laws is the admiration of nations. I wish the province over which I shall one day reign to be prosperous and happy; hence it is my first wish to submit myself to the wise government of the schools, that I may learn the art of governing with equity," said the young Count of Bretagne looking down with a blush.

"Nay, thou has no cause to blush for thy choice. I know thy people of old. They are our ancient allies; and I can declare that a dastard or a craven heart are monsters unknown in Gaul! In thy choice is no lack of true courage. He who would legislate wisely must learn the surest and happiest method of applying laws to the necessities of his people.—Ye shall each, under competent teachers be gratified. But not at once. I am on my way to the assembling of the Estates of Tara, whither it is my desire that ye accompany me.—When we return, I shall be able to decide on the course to be pursued for both of ye. But come; last night ye were guests, to-day pupils," said Semo, leading the way towards the cloisters of the temple.

In silence the strangers followed him, when, opening a low arched door, overhung densely with vines, he invited them to enter. They found themselves in a lofty, oblong hall, on each side of which were stalls, or alcoves, in each of which sat a youth, poring over volumes of parchment by the light of tapers; for every ray of light was jealously excluded from this abode of learning. Each one arose, saluted Semo, and, bowing courteously to the strangers, resumed his studies. The venerable Druid then led them through a narrow door into a hall of gray stone, lit but dimly by the few sun-rays that could force their way through the impenetrable foliage without, when the wind shook the leaves. Two long tables of oak extended from one end of the hall to the other. They were spread with wooden bowls, small willow baskets of cresses, loaves of brown bread, and huge flagons of frothing milk. While they stood near the upper end of the hall, the door opened, and the youths of the schools, preceded by two bards, came in, and, after offering the strangers seats of honor, sat down and began their meal in silence, while one more advanced in learning than the rest, read an Etruscan manuscript aloud, which, being recently found beneath some Italian ruin, in a sealed vase, described the voyage of the Phoenicians and their discovery of Ireland. Clotaire modestly partook of the plain fare spread before him, and could scarcely disguise his astonishment to see the Arch-Druid, seated at the lower end of the table, listening with interest to the narrative of the adventures of these hardy mariners over the midnight seas. But Ulric of Heidelberg indignantly crumbled the brown bread on the trencher, and pushed back with a look of contempt the crisp water-cresses, while his eyes wandered up and down in search of wine. Not one word of the precious manuscript did he hear, and he was fain, when the gnawings of hunger became insupportable, to swallow a bowlful of milk.

In a few hours afterward they were, with Semo and a party of Druids and bards, in the saddle, on their way up toward the Shannon, where between wild and craggy headlands it dashed out into the Atlantic.

"Hist! Sir Clotaire of Bretagne! how dost thou feel after thy breakfast of cresses and black bread! There is no serf in thy province but fares better."

"Feel? Better than thou, Sir Ulric, after thy ill humors at the student's fare! By Apollo! but the milk thou didst drink was not long in turning to curds in such a proud stomach!" replied Clotaire, laughing.

"Sir bard," said Ulric, turning with a sul-

len look to Abaris, who at that moment reined up his steed close by, "pardon a stranger, but tell me, is abstemiousness a rule of obligation in the schools of Erin?"

"Abstemiousness the most rigid. The human mind progresses but slowly without temperance and moderation. The greatest enemy to intellectual excellence is sensuality. But be of good cheer. Thou wilt soon learn to enjoy the brown bread and frothing milk, the sweet fish from our loughs, the mutton from our hillsides."

"Mutton! oh!" ejaculated Ulric, with wailing mouth.

"Sometimes, on high festivals of TIENNE and NERF NOAM, the rule is somewhat relaxed: wine and game and white bread are allowed. We always fare alike," replied Abaris, laughing.

"I hope there are many of these festivals, Sir bard; for, to confess the truth, I have been used to spiced boars' meat, venison, fowls, pastries, and wines, from my boyhood up; hence this sort of fare will inevitably cause my death," said the Saxon, moodily.

"Let some less ignoble foe do that, Count Ulric; and see that thy death-wound is not in thy back," exclaimed Clotaire, with disgust.

"Count of Bretagne, dost thou dare insinuate that I would fly from a foe?" cried Ulric, fiercely, as he wheeled his horse around so suddenly that the noble animal fell back on his haunches.

"I mean that he who is afraid of black bread will surely be afraid of a stronger foe," cried Clotaire, laughing gayly.

"Semo sends for the stranger called Ulric," said an attendant, running between the two.

"Let it lie there for the present!" exclaimed the Saxon, throwing his gauntlet to the earth, while he grew white with rage; "but remember—"

"Let mine keep it company!" replied Clotaire, chafing, as he dashed his bow down beside it. "We will abide our time. Friends or foes, as ye choose, Sir Ulric of Heidelberg. My levity is my misfortune," he continued, turning to Abaris, who had been an interested spectator of the scene, which developed leading traits in the characters of those who had been confided to his care.

"Moderation in words is no less excellent than moderation in our appetite. But spur thy horse after me toward yonder steep. Below it lies a scene of blue hills, bright loughs, wild cascades, rocks, glens, woods, and waving fields,—a picture so beautiful that earth has not its equal, while far beyond spreads out the ocean, like a dream of heaven."

## CHAPTER IV.—MONA.

It was a soft, dewy spring morn. There was a glory in the thin haze that hung like draperies of silver tissue over wave and shore. There was brightness on the tree-tops, and dashes of light on the sharp cliffs that reared their high and grotesque outlines over the rushing river, that swept with a wild and sonorous song towards the sea. The brightness was over all. It nestled down like white-winged birds into quiet, mossy glens, flashed athwart the solitary places on the hill-sides, and shot back into caverns where sea-birds reared their young. Flower and shrub and heath filled the air with sweetness, while the winds, riding down on the crested waves, sounded like an array with banners. High up on a rocky promontory, which hung beetling and hoary over the estuary, stood a marble temple, with noble porticoes, lofty pillars, and statues of fine proportions, which gleamed out clear and distinct against the deep blue of the sky. It was one of the temples of NERF, where, at stated periods, her mysterious rites were celebrated by Druids and vestals,—vestals of the moon, who, like the Roman vestals of a later time, bound themselves by vows of the most sacred character to the observances of the service of the temple. The midnight rites were over, and the vestals were at liberty to wander through the sacred groves, or visit the caves where the sacred fires were kept burning.

In a cavern which was almost inaccessible, and which seemed detached from the mainland, so far did it hang over the eddying and whirling tide, two vestals were reposing on the moss-grown rocks,—resting, after their fatiguing and perilous ascent. Their robes of white and silver, girdled about the waist by a zone of gems, flowed loosely around them. One was veiled, and, with her forehead leaning on her hand, was silent. The other, panting and flushed, threw back her veil for air. Far back in a sheltered niche, on a tripod of silver, burned the sacred flame, strong and bright, but fitfully, as the wind, in gentle eddies, sighed past it.

"The flame needs no feeding to-day, Dairene," said the unveiled one, bending over it.—"And never shone a vestal fire on a lovelier face. An exquisite regularity of features filled with expression, a complexion whose stainless purity blended with the hue of the rose, eyes large, dark, and radiant, and hair as black as the raven's wing, flowing in glossy waves far below her waist,—with neck, arms, and hands of the most statuesque form,—combined to make her a creature of rare and matchless loveliness.—"

"And as this flame trembles and seems as if it would fly if it were not bound by unchangeable laws, so I feel oftentimes a yearning wish to escape toward something high and pure and holy,—only, Dairene, I know not how. Canst thou tell me?"

"What is higher or better, Mona, than the pursuit of virtue? And what holier state canst thou wish than the service of NERF NOAM?" replied Dairene, lifting her veil and disclosing an old but sad face. "It is novelty, child, thou art seeking. But beware: vestals should avoid all that is foreign to their vocation."

"But oh, Dairene, I am so weary!" cried Mona, throwing herself at Dairene's feet and leaning her cheek on her knees.

"Weary, Mona? Weary of what, child?"

"Of—of—I know not what," she replied, with a gush of tears.

"A vestal of NERF—one who will in a few days be admitted into the inner shrine of the temple—shedding tears and complaining of weariness! Why, child, thou hast done nothing to-day but put fresh garlands on the statues. A child might have done that, and not been weary," exclaimed Dairene, in undisguised amazement.

"Dost thou know my mother, Dairene?" abruptly asked Mona.

"Know her? Yes; she was my sister.—But talk not of her, Mona; never more breathe her name. She was a vestal of the temple," said Dairene, with quivering lip.

"A vestal! How? Oh, dear Dairene, tell me all," besought Mona.

"It is too horrible for thee to hear, child. And, moreover, if Semo should know that I ever spoke to thee of thy mother—Hush, child! I fear to speak."

"Nay, Dairene, Semo can never know it.—Tell me. If thou dost not, I will ask Semo," said Mona, with a firm and resolute tone and manner.

"NERF NOAM! Ask Semo! Child, such a question would be death. But, if thou wilt hear the story, listen," said Dairene, pale and agitated.

"Thanks, dear Dairene," said Mona, gently, while she wound her arm caressingly around her. "Now go on."

"Thy mother," whispered Dairene, "was a vestal of yonder temple. She broke her vows. She disappeared,—no one knew when or how. It was only known that she went in to keep vigils before the shrine, and never was seen afterward; then horrible things were whispered, and all was mystery. But one bright morn a little babe was brought and laid among the lotus-flowers and roses which we had gathered and thrown in heaps on the floor of the vestibule of the temple, to make garlands for the statues. None knew whence it came; but I, more curious than the rest, found in a corner of the robe that was folded about the little one the name of 'Ioline,' traced in blood.—Searching along the embroidered margin, I discovered another clue in these words:—'This night I die.' I knew all then. She was the solitary flower of my life; I had loved her,—oh, Mona, thou canst never conceive the love I bore that faithless one; but, child, she had stained the honor of her caste, she had polluted the dignity of the temple, and had Semo ordered me to sheathe the knife in her heart I should have done it,—yes, O Ioline, I must have done it,—and died."

"That night the Druids wanted a spotless victim for the rites, and the babe, they said, was a wail which had been sent by the gods.—Messengers came and lifted it from the couch where it was sleeping, and bore it away. I heard its frightened wail as they rushed through the long, cold passages with it. Then I folded up my heart like a withered thing, watered neither with tears nor feeling, and thrust it far back under the shrine of memory; for I was a vestal of NERF, and what were these weak human emotions to me?"

"But the child was spared. It was said that when Semo was about to plunge the sacrificial knife in its throat it stretched out its hands to him, and smiled. He sent it away, and offered a young lamb in its stead."

"What became of the babe, then?" asked Mona, whiter than the lilies on her bosom.

"It was reared in the temple. She is now a vestal of NERF."

"And the child's mother?" said Mona, shivering.

"Nothing certain was ever heard. We only know that, if a vestal of NERF violates her vow, a horrible fate awaits her," said Dairene, sadly.

"And I am the child of that mother who perished in mystery?"

"Thou art! thou art!—child of my loved and lost Ioline!"

Mona bowed her head on her knees, while her black tresses fell like a mourning veil around her, and wept bitterly. Dairene, silent and sad, looked out over the foaming estuary toward the bright ocean, where thousands of white-winged sea-birds were glancing in the sunshine or skimming the rolling billow. The spray that dashed up against the cliffs was not colder or more briny than the tears that dripped over her faded cheeks.

"I dreamed of her last vigil. I thought at first it was NERF NOAM; but now I know it was my mother," said Mona, at last.

"How canst thou tell?" asked Dairene.

"Was she not tall and slender as the mountain-ash? Did not her hair, brown and soft, fall, waving over a brow of snow, to her very feet? Were not her eyes large and black, like those of a timid fawn? And her voice—oh, Dairene! was there a voice in all Erin like it? Oh, I know—I know it was my mother!" exclaimed Mona, clasping her hands.

"Tell me thy dream," said Dairene, mournfully.

"It was three nights ago. The horns of the moon tapered toward the zenith, and I was crowned with poppies, and conducted by the vestals to the anteroom of the inner shrine, to keep vigils preparatory to my initiation. All was silent and solemn. The statues of LATONA and NERF, as the pale moonlight shone down through the narrow windows on them seemed full of life; their heads bent toward me, their arms were opened as if to embrace me. A great awe fell on me,—an awe like that which comes with a shadow and touches the heart with ice. While I sat thus, silent and breathless, low, sweet music stole on my ears: the soft strains filled the air like the fanning of beautiful wings. It was nothing earthly, Dairene. Then the door,—that door studded with pearls and emeralds—of the inner shrine, where none but the initiated enter, opened noiselessly, and a pale and beautiful one, draped in white and silver tissue, came out and glided toward me. There was no sound of rustling robes; but whenever her feet touched the floor it looked as if she trod in moonlit water. Almost dead with fright, I could not remove my eyes from hers, as she approached me; but, when she stooped over and kissed my forehead with lips like those corals which are brought from Indian seas, a warm thrill coursed down to my heart, filling it with ineffable calm.

"Follow me, Mona," said the white-robed one. "Follow me, child of my bosom."

"She took my hand and raised me up.—Then out of the temple, on—over the crags, through the forests, along over strange moors, through fairy ranges, along steep hill-sides and deep glens and dreary wilds, we sped, until we came to a sea,—a leaden sea, whose waters rolled in great sullen billows and floated up without a sound on the shore. Beyond, we could see dark clouds, through which flashed incessantly lurid and ghastly lights, hanging low down along the horizon, which chased each other with solemn murmurs, like ghosts of the mighty slain. On—on—on toward the leaden sea we sped.

"I dare not go with thee, strange and loving one, I said, shrinking back.

"Fear not," said the white-robed one, gathering me close to her bosom. "Those billows, which seem so terrible, will not harm thee."

"Then on we sped again,—over the dark sea,—gliding with a swift and easy motion, like a sea-bird when it floats on the wind-tide, until we reached the shore over which hung the gloomy clouds. It was a shore of solemn twilight, where lotus-flowers nodded to the waves and the long rank sedges moaned to the sighing winds. All was silent; only now and then a voice of lamentation, swelling on the air, reached our ears. Then I saw processions, and groups, and solitary ones,—sages, kings, philosophers, and poets, all earth-born,—glide past; and the only sound they uttered was a wailing cry of 'How long? how long?' Pale lights flickered over the shore while they passed onward, still crying, 'How long? how long?'"

"Mona, thy dream, if dream it was, is strange and mysterious," said Dairene.

"We paused not long on this darksome shore, but sped away over heights precipitous and grand, above which the clouds were tipped with gold,—through vales of beauty and flowers, where strange and glorious beings wandered, who, turning to salute us as we passed, inquired if we were earth-born, then went on their way, also sighing, 'How long? how long?'"

"For what are they sighing?" I asked.

"For deliverance, which will come to them through ONE ye know not of."

"Then on we sped, until a deep, broad gulf lay before us. No eye could fathom its depths; we could only hear the roar of sluggish waters far below; but beyond it, resting on its marge, was a rim of light, so glorious and splendid that no mortal eye could bear its rays. Above it hung a rack of wild, black clouds, so heavy and motionless that I thought they were a range of bleak granite hills.

"It is the dawn," said my guide,—"the dawn of deliverance."

"Then, gathering me again to her bosom, we sped over the abyss, under the barrier of cloud, into a region so full of light and loveliness, where creatures of such perfect and glorious beauty were passing to and fro to the sound of harmonies indescribable, that I fell prostrate, adoring and loving the source of such mystic splendor. And yet we were only on the suburbs of this celestial land. There our journey ended, my guide had whispered. While, filled with silent ecstasy, I lay with my forehead to the earth, I heard one say, 'Arise!' I lifted my head, and, lo! coming toward me

I beheld ONE of marvelous and divine majesty, whose eyes, filled with pity and tenderness, looked on me. He seemed to be a royal personage, or perhaps the ruler of the land; for, as he passed along, all bowed, and paid him homage, with songs of adoration which I could not understand. And yet, O Dairene, instead of a jeweled crown he wore a *coronals of wounds*, from which shot forth celestial glories, while from His outspread hands dropped blood like a fountain, which seemed to fall in showers of gold to the earth, making the waste places glad and the barren spots to rejoice. And I saw that His feet had been pierced; and, as the wind lifted His robe, I saw an open wound in His left side, through which I saw a vision of multitudes who had sought shelter here. He plucked a palm branch and laid it in my hands. Then the vision faded. Methought I was in a cavern, into which the sea was dashing with a horrible roar. I was pursued by phantoms arrayed like Druids, who led on wolf-dogs to devour me. I looked toward the temple. It was blazing; while NERF NOAM descended from her pedestal and seized a burning brand and rushed toward me, leading on my foes; but the waves kept them at bay. When, filled with anguish and terror, I awoke, I was lying on the broad marble step of the pedestal on which stands the statue of LATONA, with the bright sunshine around me."

Mona ceased speaking, and covered her face with her veil.

"Strange things have happened in the temple, Mona, even in my day," said Dairene,— "things so strange and terrible in their auguries that I dare not speak of them. But it is no harm to tell legends. The older vestals talk of them; and it is even said that Semo trembles when they are told; but I don't know."

"What are those legends, Dairene?" asked Mona, in a voice of deep interest.

"I will tell thee one,—the one which is recorded in the *Shemous-More*. Once, when the Baul-fire was blazing upon the plains of Tara, and the high mysteries of TIENNE were being celebrated with great pomp and splendor, when the Druids, and bards, and kings, and princes, and nobles, all in their magnificent robes, marched into the sacred grove to assist in the solemnities, a sudden darkness over-spread the earth; the sacred fire was extinguished, the ground shook, and there was a sound in the air like the roaring of wind and wave. Priests and people fled together in wild affright to the open plains, expecting every instant the destruction of Nature. But at last the darkness dispersed, Nature once more smiled serenely; and the multitude, still pale and trembling with an unknown horror, resumed each one his station and duty. After consultation in the great hall of Tara with the Druids, the king directed the Arch-Druid to go to the temple and consult the oracle and ascertain the meaning of this elemental disturbance.

"It was done; and, while the multitude without were waiting in breathless anxiety and awe for the answer, the Arch-Druid appeared on the portico of the temple. His face was whiter than his hair, and his voice, usually loud and sweet, was piping and tremulous, as he imparted to the assembly the decree of the oracle.

"In the country of the Jews," he began, "they are putting to death the Son of God, their king, who came to reign over them and bring salvation to the nations."

"Then a cry of horror filled the air; the people beat their breasts and tore their hair when the Decree was announced to them.—They felt that a malediction was over the earth. The King of Ulster, in his rage, rushed through the sacred grove, leaping and hacking the trees, and rallying his knights of the Red Branch around him, to march to the kingdom of the Jews and avenge the death of a God."

"But, while marshalling his knights in order and denouncing the Jews, an old wound in his head opened, and he fell dead."

"A glorious death! But, Dairene, who is God? And why should Jesus Christ His Son die? Is not a God powerful and mighty?—Does it mean TIENNE, Dairene?" asked Mona, anxiously.

"I can tell thee no more, Mona. That is the legend; but I have heard," she whispered, looking tearfully around her, "that since then the oracles have been dumb."

"Let us go, Dairene! This is a fearful thing. He must be a mighty one to whose power the oracles submit," said Mona, going toward the mouth of the cave, and shading her eyes with her hands as she looked in the direction of the temple. "I see a cavalcade winding up the steep leading to the temple."

"It is Semo. Come away!" cried Dairene, gathering her veil around her.

## CHAPTER V.—THE ALTAR AT MIDNIGHT.

The day before the cavalcade of Druids and bards arrived at the temple of NERF, towards sunset, Ulric of Heidelberg and Clotaire of Bretagne, apparently on friendly terms, had wandered away from the halting-place, arm in arm, as the others thought, to explore the fair

• Psalter of Tara.

† Carey.