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MONA THE VESTAL.

A TALE OF THE TIMES OF ST. PATRICK.

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CHAPTER XIII.—(Continued.)

With downcast eyes, Mona stood like a white-robed spirit watching over the dead, so pale, so motionless, so holy was her aspect,—her wondrous beauty half veiled, half-disclosed, her hands folded like two lilies on her bosom, and her eyes looking down, darkening her white cheeks with the shadow of their black fringes. But her heart was not there,—no, not there.

"Come; my lord and his guests await us," said the Lady Bernice, sweeping along in her superb beauty, followed by Mona. They looked like the unclouded moon and the evening star. Mona's heart was troubled. She felt like a bird entangled in the fowler's snare.—In her poverty and humble obscurity, she had experienced the sweetness and joy of suffering; her soul, undazzled by the glare of life, had bounded lightly forward, and each cheerful endurance had brought her nearer heaven; but now temptations, siren voices, the glitter and magnificence of riches, distracted the even tenor of her progress. Not that she yielded to them or that she even feared them; they only for a fleeting moment diverted her mind from its calm and joyous contemplations; like a breath of wind they passed over her soul, rippling and agitating its pure depths, until the bright images reflected therein from heaven were hidden,—only hidden,—not erased. She would have yielded again with rapture to the scourge, but she would fain have been spared this.

Lord Eadhma and Count Clotaire were conversing together in low, earnest tones when the Lady Bernice and Mona came in. The last bright glare of day still lingered in the west; and in the uncertain and translucent shadow Mona looked like an ethereal being who had lost her way in the realms of space and paused a moment in this isle-world to rest. In graceful lines and rich folds the white gleaming draperies fell around her, giving out here and there a flash and glow as they caught the lingering day-beams.

"Welcome, child of God, our friend and sister," said Eadhma of Innistore, with gentle reverence.

"Welcome, Mona," said the Count Clotaire, while his heart bounded and his cheeks glowed with the fair and chaste hopes her presence awakened. But a feeling which was impelled by some interior power, and which he could not define, held him back: he did not approach her.

"I owe thee many thanks, Lord of Innistore," she said, very gently, and with sweet gravity, "for the protection of thy house; and to thee, noble stranger, blessings and thanks, for the poor life thou didst so courageously save."

"More thanks, Mona, are a poor reward for such an act," whispered Bernice. "Thy words are as cold as marble."

"I fear thou hast forgotten me, Mona, in the terror of the incident; but I—thy image has never left me a moment since the hour it occurred," said Count Clotaire.

"Nay, gentle sir! I could!"—began Mona; then she paused, lest some word might fall to wound. "A transitory glimpse could not insure remembrance! But my deliverer has not been forgotten. I have prayed for Heaven's most precious graces for him. If I seem ungrateful, pardon me; for I am not skilled in the language of the world."

"In the presence of these thy noble friends and mine, I beseech thee, Mona, tell me: could I not win thee to a warmer feeling than gratitude?" said the young count, earnestly.

"I grieve to pain thee," said Mona, whose face grew very white. "Heaven knows, if I dared, I would spare any word which might wound thee. But I am not my own! My feelings, my hopes, my loves, sir count, are no longer mine to give: they are pledged to ONE from whom I would not withdraw them to obtain the empire of worlds, of such priceless value is the reward I hope to win."

Count Clotaire bowed his face and covered it with his hands. Strong emotion shook his frame; they could hear his quick-heaving breath, and the sharp throbbing of his heart, all was so breathless and still.

"Mona," he said, at last, in low and tremulous tones,— "Mona, when I thought thou wert slumbering beneath the sea, thy image, like a veiled angel, led me to aspire after the perfection of morality and a pure height of philosophy. Now that thou art living, and, though lost to my love, a Christian, a servant of Christ, even as I wish to be, thou shalt help me heavenward. Thy words have gone like a keen, sharp blade through my heart, hewing asunder fibers and chords that bound me in sweet memories and bright visions of hope to thee; but—go: I would not rob Heaven of its vestal! My love for thee was deep and strong; but from this moment I give thee up,

—my offering for the love of Christ," he continued, as he approached her, and, bending on one knee, lifted her hand reverently to his lips. "May Christ be thy reward evermore!" she murmured, while a single tear rolled over her pale cheek.

"Per Nerf Naom! It is enough to drive one mad!" cried the Lady Bernice. "But hark, my lord! there is a great tumult below!" Just then one of the esquires—now a Christian—rushed in, with terror depicted on his countenance, and, in hurried and confused words, informed the noble company that the Druids, with a large company of the officials of the temple and men-at-arms, were on their way up to the presence-chamber. With a single cry of alarm, the Lady Bernice threw her strong arm around Mona and bore her swiftly through a side entrance into a circular apartment, which was hung round with curious tapestry representing the ceremonies and processions of Nerf. Lifting this, she pressed a spring in the oak paneling under it, which slid back, giving them ingress to a dark and narrow passage. She paused an instant to adjust and secure the spring, then, without speaking, ran swiftly along, winding and turning, until at last, out of breath, she paused, and whispered, "Thou art safe, but this night, Mona, thou must stay. Tarry here. After midnight I will bring Deigo, the fisherman's son; fly with him, and, if it be possible, seek the safety of Finian's cave until the pursuit is over." Then, folding Mona to her noble and generous heart, she returned, and, letting herself through the secret door with great caution, she went to confront and defy the Druids.

CHAPTER XIV.—HEAVEN RECEIVES ITS VESTAL.

It was past midnight when the Lady Bernice returned with Deigo.

"They are infuriated; they rave and threaten us all with dreadful vengeance," she whispered. I defied them to the last; but now the party is dispersed. Those who remain at Innistore sleep; the Druids have returned to the temple; and this is the hour for thy escape. Thou hast been betrayed by the Saxon stranger, Mona—may curses light on him. But see: here are a flask of wine and some wheaten cakes. Gather up thy robe, it is thine,—my gift; fasten it under thy girdle. Now wrap this gray mantle, which I have brought, around thee. Ere long thou wilt see Finian: here is the letter from Patricius—curses on him! it is he alone who has brought such woe on me."

"I cannot even thank thee, lady: words fail; but there is ONE who is watching, and who will reward thee tenfold. I shall see the holy Bishop Finian. Once more, through all perils, I must see him, to partake, if God wills it, of that mystic feast, which giveth life to the soul. But for this, I would not fly!"

"Not fly! Nay, Mona, do not provoke me to spur thee on with the point of my dagger," exclaimed the lady. "I suppose this insane love for Christ would make thee willing to be slain by the Druids before my very eyes!"

"My life is His! Eternal thanks! My life is His! He has given it; let Him recall it when it suits His holy will," she said, in her low, musical tones. "He calls for thee, lady. He, the Lord and Master of Life, awaits humbly at the door of thy heart. His divine head is wet with the dew of night, while He implores thee to receive salvation. He points to His wounded temples, His streaming forehead, His torn hands, His lacerated feet, He opens the purple wound in His side, to prove that the love which bore such torments to save thee will not rest, will not be satisfied, until thou art His; for, alas! He who with His breath can create worlds, cannot save the meanness of creatures He has made, without their free consent."

"Silence, Mona!" cried Bernice of Innistore, in a voice of anguish. "I will hear no more. I would not be a Christian to be the mistress of the universe. Begone! This passage will lead thee, Deigo, through a subterranean way, far out beyond the walls of Innistore."

"Panthea, dear lady! Panthea!" whispered Mona.

"Panthea! I shall have her killed if thou dost not begone. Take this key, Deigo, and on the morrow bring it to me," she said, half wild with excitement, as she turned suddenly, and, folding Mona to her breast, impressed a kiss on her forehead. "Never fear for Panthea," she whispered; and Mona felt two warm tears drop on her head. And they parted,—the lady to her silken pillows and sleepless couch, Mona to her midnight flight.

After walking an hour or two, they at length found the end of the subterranean passage.—Deigo adjusted the key to the lock, and it turned easily. In another moment they were out beneath the gray and silent heavens, in the solitude of the night, where only the rustling wind among the foliage of the forest, and the far-off moaning of the sea, were heard. Pausing a moment to rest, and lift their hearts to God, they sped along towards the distant shore. There was a calm smile on Mona's cheek.—Over her spirit, like the ebbing and flowing of prisoned tides,—holy thoughts descended and ascended, until, in sweet and close communion

with Heaven, she thought not of the perils of the way.

At last they reached the shore. The broad white sands and rugged cliffs were before them. The first gray light of dawn spread dimly over the scene. The morning star, like a patient saint, pale and obedient, awaited amid the shadows for the bright day-beam to kindle and then absorb its waning fires, in a greater and more perfect glow. The ocean tides were flowing in, rising, and moaning, and wailing, like TIME, inexorable and strong. Still lost to outward scenes, in blest anticipations, Mona neither saw nor heard the scenes around her, until a shrill cry and a heavy fall startled her away from the bright visions which Hope and Faith were weaving about her. She turned quickly, and saw Deigo lying lifeless on the sands, where he had fallen, transfixed by a bearded arrow. She held his head; she felt his heart; all were still forever. Then she saw dark forms issuing from the woods, tossing their arms, and uttering wild cries, as they rushed down towards the shore. She saw Semo. She heard the frightful howl of the beagles as their keepers unleashed them. It was enough! Claspng her hands over her head, she sprang, like a hunted fawn, up over the slippery rocks, along the narrow ledges, over a steep and precipitous path overlooking the sea, until at last she gained the cavern.—She entered its friendly arch, and was flying back into its deep recesses, when she discovered that it was not Finian's cave, but one which was connected with the mainland by a narrow ledge of rocks which, except during a very short interval when the tide was out, was covered with surf and foam. Already the billows were dashing their spray over the ledge, and Mona knew that ere long the roaring waves would climb higher and higher, until they reached and filled the cavern. Escape was impossible. death inevitable. In a moment she understood it all, and, folding her hands meekly together, she knelt, and in hope awaited her transition. She had not expected it so soon; but, now that it was so near, she felt that the promises of God were not vain. Strength and hope brightened together in her soul, and, looking beyond this mortal life, the thought of death's brief agony dismayed her not; neither was she afraid of the mystery of a new and unknown life, because her trust was in Him who is mighty and strong to deliver.

The Druids and their pagan followers found themselves baffled, but exulted that her doom was sealed. They knew the cave well. It had served their purposes more than once, when some dark deed was to be perpetrated at midnight, which they desired the sea to wash off from the earth. Slow and mighty flowed in the reverberating billows; but swiftly flew the news of the peril of the Christian maiden, and, by the time the sun arose like a golden flame amid the purple and gold of the orient, the shore, the cliffs, the heights around, were thronged with living beings. All the Christians who heard it hastened thither. The Lord of Innistore, the Count of Bretagne, with men and ropes, flew to the rescue; but a glance convinced them that no human arm could save her. The Lady Bernice, on her black barb, attended by her maidens, was also there, stern, pale, and full of an anguish which she had never known before. In unclouded splendor shone the sun on the strange scene. The sea-birds, with light gleaming on their white wings, whirled and shrieked amid the tossing spray. The wind tossed the leaves of the trees with a joyous motion, and from the rolling lands above flowed down the mingled odors of newly-mown hay and the scent of wild flowers, while the summer birds warbled their clear, wild songs as they floated in the sunshine.

Presently a loud wail arose above the roar of the surges. It was the cry of a mother over the slain body of her first-born; it was Lena, the fisherman's wife, who, hearing of the peril of Mona, had rushed out from her cabin, without kirtle or hood, with her strong-limbed boys, to try and save her. But on her way she stumbled and nearly fell over the stark corpse of her son,—her Christian child!

"Is he thine?" asked the Lady Bernice of Lena.

"Mine? Mine?" she asked, roused by the question. "He belonged to God. He gave him. He has taken him. The mortal has put on immortality, and, through JESUS CHRIST, inherits eternal life. Thanks!—thanks! Then no more grief, no more tears, Lena, over this cast-off garb of clay; but, grateful that thy course is finished and the race won so early, my son, I will give thanks that thou hast passed to the regions of hope, to the Land of the living." Then, stooping over, she kissed the pale lips, and, covering the body with her mantle, she knelt to pray for his repose, and Mona's safe transit to the eternal rapture of the Beatific Vision!

"A mother!" murmured the lady,— "a mother rejoices that her child is with Christ! I can conceive that a mistaken heroism might suggest all else that I have seen; but this,—a mother's love offered up with joy to their Deity,

—it surpasses all I have yet witnessed; for that love is stronger than death itself."

While this was passing, the wild billows were dashing in with great velocity. The wind rode in on the waves with a thundering and bellowing that shook the earth with its reverberations. The water was now within a foot of the cavern, beneath whose arch the vestal of Christ knelt, while the sun, slanting into its depths, rested about her calm, pallid face, and white, glittering robes, like a glory. The wind had torn the fastenings from her hair, and it flowed back, with her veil, from her beautiful countenance, which already wore the ineffable repose of eternal peace; and she looked like an angel watcher amid the storms of life. As the billows rose nearer and nearer, her head in deep humility sank lower on her breast; and while her soul wrestled with its last foes,—the pleadings and throes of nature,—a torpor crept over her frame. Her passing away would be sudden and bright; the billows would engulf her for a moment, then bear her up, free and rejoicing, to that shore which is washed by the waters which flow from the Throne of the Lamb.

In vain Semo directed his archers to aim their swift, bearded arrows at her breast, as she knelt, a bright mark for their keen eyes; vainly flew the sharp flints from the slings of the soldiers; idly were sped the long, glittering spears from the stalwart arms of the men-at-arms. None reached her, but fell ringing against the rocks, and dropped without a sound into the boiling waves.

Like a maniac, Dairene now ran shrieking and tearing her gray hair along the shore. The crowd made way for her; for she was a vestal of Nerf. Her wild shrill cries rose piping above the roar of the bursting billows, as, heedless of peril, she climbed, tearing out her nails against the sharp rocks, until she reached the highest ledge of rocks, and stood panting and sobbing over Finian's cave. The rocks which contained Finian's cave ran out parallel with the ledge on which Mona, in the terror of the moment, had taken shelter, when, confused by the dim light and the pursuit of the Druids and their minions, she ran up in her vain endeavor to reach a place of safety. The two caverns were nearly opposite to each other, and the two ledges, running out seaward, in the form of an angle, leaving a narrow strait for the sea to enter, commanded a full view of the shore. A man was seen to enter Finian's cave, and after a short interval reappear, and take his station on the rocks beside its entrance. Then, while all were gazing, the holy bishop in his sacerdotal robes came forth and stood in full view. He spoke to the man, Lena's husband, who uttered such a shrill, piercing shout that Mona heard it above the howling of the waves, and started up. The fluttering of Dairene's veil first arrested her attention; then, with a look of sudden hope, her glance was lowered, and she saw the aged priest of God, standing with outstretched arms, to give her the last absolution. She could not kneel; the waves had reached her waist; but she bowed her head once more, after making a gesture of joy by lifting up her hands toward heaven, with a smile of rapture.

Then she lifted her eyes up no more, until another shrill signal reached her. She understood it now; and, when she looked up, she saw the holy bishop standing, holding up high, in view of all, a crystal case, framed in gold, which contained a consecrated Host! Every Christian on the shore, inspired with courage by the sight, knelt, humbly adoring. The Druids, gnashing their teeth with rage, felt awed, and were silent. The very beagles ran whining and crouching about the feet of their keepers, as that PRESENCE, which was lifted a sign and promise to those who believed, flowed out in solemn and mighty influences over those whose souls still slept in the shadow of death. Mona saw it. She stretched out her arms, while a glow like as of the brightest sunrise lit her face. Then they could see no more; for the spray covered her like a veil, and a huge billow sweeping in with a mad roar engulfed her. Those on the shore heard a wail and shriek, they saw the fluttering of white torn garments, they saw something plunge from the rocks down into the sea, and they knew that when the vestal of Christ yielded up her life to the relentless wave a vestal of Nerf Naom perished with her. It was over. The Druids and bards, with their vassals, were turning homeward. The people stood or knelt in groups on the shore. The Lord Eadhma and the Lady Bernice, with Count Clotaire, whose countenance wore the hue of death, stood together, awaiting the good Finian, to whom they had dispatched a message, beseeching him to come with them to Innistore. Lena and her sons were bearing away their dead, when, lo! a sound like thunder rolled out upon the calm morning air, a despairing wail went up from the Druids and their band, and Semo was seen to fall prostrate to the earth. All turned toward the place whence the sound issued; and Bernice, who had seen one perish for Christ, now saw the great marble statue of Nerf Naom tottering on its high pinnacle on the summit of the temple, she beheld it topple and reel, then fall, crashing through the roof, and burying beneath its own fragments, and

the ruins, the holy or inner shrine, and the statues of Nerf, Ethis, and Latona. With clasped hands she stood rigid and pale, gazing up into the empty air, where but a few moments before the statue of Nerf Naom had stood, an image of beautiful strength; then, with a deep sob, she flung herself on the earth, offering her life, her liberty, her state, her love, her children, her all to the true and living God. When the holy bishop, from whose eyes tears still flowed, reached the spot, she ran, and, heedless of those who gazed on her, throwing off her pride and self-love, she knelt humbly at his feet, and, lifting the hem of his garment to her lips, implored baptism.

When the Druids lifted Semo from the earth, they discovered that he was dead; and five of their number, with three bands and one learned ollamah, returned, and prostrating themselves at Finian's feet, sought to be initiated into the mysteries of the creed of the Christians.

As the throng gathered around the holy man to hear his words, Ulric the Saxon, with a fiendish smile, rode up, and whispered in the ear of the Count of Bretagne,—

"Did my eyes deceive me, or was that maiden who perished in reality Mona the vestal?"

"Ha, Ulric!" shouted Clotaire, directing his hand toward his dagger, "thou here?—But no!—rest, if thou canst, in thy iniquity. Vengeance belongeth to God. She whom thou hast so basely betrayed—Mona, my first and last earthly love—is beyond thy malice now; and the thought that she is interceding for thee—ay, even for thee—stays my arm.—Away, now, nor ever molest me again with thy presence."

"What lambs these Christians become!" exclaimed the Saxon, with a sneer; but he saw a kindling light in Clotaire's eye, a bracing up of the muscular form, and a quick upheaving of the chest, which warned him off in time; and, after a gesture of mock courtesy, he galloped away with speed toward the temple.

That night the noble young Christian wandered alone along the shore. It was cloudy and dark, and a deep calm had settled on the sea. He thought of Mona; he wished that the waves might wash her body to the shore; in the tumult of his grief, he wept and prayed by turns, until, thinking of her as one of the radiant virgins who, clothed in raiment like the sun, surrounded the Throne, giving glory to Him who sits thereon, his sorrow was turned to joy, his weeping to gladness. Then, kneeling on the lonely shore, he vowed himself to the service of God, and offered up at the foot of the cross his nature, his humanity, his soul, his life;—a free offering, a holocaust, to Him who suffered thereon.

"Come hither, Christian stranger; behold a marvellous sight," said a man, who, wrapped in a dark mantle, had come near him, and stood unnoticed and unseen. "I am a Christian: therefore have no fear."

Clotaire of Bretagne followed him till they came to a place so closed in by rocks that one could scarcely enter the narrow opening leading to it. The tide was out, leaving a calm, deep pool, and they penetrated the gloomy recesses of the rocky path which surrounded it, the man leading, until a faint, luminous appearance in the distance guided their steps.

"There it is: let us approach it," he said.

They did so, and saw floating on the shallow water, as if in calm slumber, the body of Mona the vestal. Her robes were folded around her, and her hands crossed on her breast in sweet composure. A smile rested on her lips, and a look of unutterable calm on her brow. A fair luminous halo flickered around her head, revealing every lineament of her face. They lifted her gently; they dared not leave her there another hour, lest the waves should bear her out to the fathomless sea. Far up on the shore they hurried with the sacred remains; and while Clotaire watched beside them, filled with awe, and giving thanks to God, Lena's husband, the fisherman, went to Innistore to inform the good Finian of the event.

In a few years, a large and splendid church was erected near the palace of Innistore, beneath the altar of which, in a shrine of silver, Mona the vestal slept.

Aileen had betrayed her; but, repenting, she was converted to Christianity, and became the most humble and austere of that household, all of whom were so truly devoted to God.—Panthea became her most tender care; and it was a touching sight to see her watching and serving one whom she had so persecuted. The bard Abaris, Clotaire of Bretagne, and a number of converted Druids and bards, retired to Innisfallen's Isle, in Lough Tore, where in cloistered aisles and solitary cells they sought perfection as the safe road to eternal joys.

Our task is done. Let those who doubt the narrative of Mona turn to the old archives of Erin, where they will read of greater wonders than any which we have related, not only of numberless saints, but of holy and wise kings, Christian sages, and heaven-inspired bards, whose memory and lives the Church cherishes like a sweet odor, who were, while living, her strength and succor, and, who, amid the glories of the better laid, are her fairest jewels.

T. H. END.