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MONA THE VESTAL.

A TALE OF THE TIMES OF ST. PATRICK.

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CHAPTER I.

"Thus shall memory often, in dreams sublime,
Catch a glimpse of the days that are o'er;
Thus sighing look through the waves of time
For the long-faded glories they cover."
Moore.

It is a tale of Erin—of Erin in her pride and the glory of her strength,—of the bright dawn of the day-star of her salvation,—of her sages and learning,—of her apostles and martyrs—that we tell. Let us leave the Present, with its fetters and gyves, its tears and lamentations,—let us turn our eyes away from those scenes whose glories, so faded by ruin and devastation, mar the fair face of Nature, and look far away through the dim ages of the Past,—from the twilight and shadow, toward the morning light of a happier day.

A scene full of splendor and repose, which lay like a jeweled crown thrown off by a tired monarch, sparkled and glowed in the sunset.—Stretching away toward the south and west from the beautiful valley, mountains whose sides were covered with a luxuriant growth of white-thorn and fir, and a thick undergrowth of heath, whose purple flowers stirred beneath the south wind like the ripples of a summer sea, lifted their summits to the clouds.—Through a narrow valley, or rather gorge, of the Tore Mountain, whose rocky sides, overgrown by flaunting vines and rich mosses, presented unsmooth outlines to the eye, the red and golden light of the setting sun flowed in on a lough * whose gently-ebbing waves were crowned by two isles of matchless beauty. Around their shores, through reeds and willows, the waters, tinted with crimson and sapphire and burnished with gold, broke with a gentle murmur, scattering long lines of foam like circlets of gems on the sands. There was then no lofty Abbey of Innisfallin, no massive towers and the groves of its sister isle. There was then no stronghold on the crags and rocks beyond; for the clans of the Kennaraes and Herberts, at this early period, had not conquered the territory over which they afterward reigned. A low rippling murmur broke on the hushed stillness of the scene, and glancing through a rich growth of arbutus and fern, a bright stream threaded its way from its mountain-tarn, down over rocks and mosses, now flashing in tides of splendor in the sunshine, now lost in shadow, and ever singing in silvery notes, until, obstructed by masses of granite and accelerated in its progress by a steeper declivity, it dashed, a wild and splendid cascade, into the lough below. Here lingered the sunbeams, multiplied by prismal lights into a thousand glowing shades,—every drop of spray a living gem, every bubble of foam an embodied rainbow,—until it looked as if some spirit of old had, in a moment of poetry, crushed diamonds and pearls and rubies and scattered the precious dust over the foaming waters.

On an overhanging rock a wild deer poised its feet, and looking out of its great soft eyes with timid glances, stooped to drink,—the only sign of life in the whole fair scene. But, suddenly starting, it threw back its head, nerved its slender legs for a perilous leap, and disappeared amid the shadows of the overhanging trees of the cliff beyond. A sound of oars dashing rapidly in the waters of the lough, disturbed the quiet repose, and in another instant a curragh, rowed by a single boatman, shot round Innisfallin's Isle. Two youths of noble aspect, and richly appareled, sat in the stern, and looked with eager curiosity toward the shore. One was slender and graceful, with a complexion of olive, and hair of raven blackness, which was confined under a fillet of gold, that sat like a coronet over his broad, polished forehead. He was arrayed in a silken tunic, and robes of Tyrian purple embroidered with gold. He held in one hand an unstrung bow, richly ornamented, while he shaded his eyes with the other from the slanting sunbeams.—His companion was a perfect contrast in form and feature. Heavily but not ungracefully built, his light flowing hair, his large blue eyes, ruddy complexion, and less aquiline but singularly handsome features, announced his Saxon origin. Suddenly the oarsman paused and left his oars in rest, while the curragh slowly drifted on the tide toward the middle of the lough.

"Lay on thy oars and speed us to yon shore, serf," exclaimed the dark one, with flashing eyes.
"I may not, noble," replied the man, pointing toward a grove, which, gloomy and almost impenetrable, receded from the eastern shore of the lough. Then he bowed his head low upon his breast in an attitude of adoration. The strangers turned their eyes in the direction he indicated, and beheld a long and solemn procession of men crowned with wreaths of oak, and arrayed in white tunics, over which flowed ample robes of splendid and gorgeous dyes, with jeweled clasps, and broidery of gems, which

flushed back the sunlight as brightly as did the spray which spanned the distant waterfall.

They were led by one of tall and noble stature, but bowed with age. His white hair flowed back from a face already paled by the last shadows of life, while over his breast his beard hung like drifts of snow. His eyes, black, piercing, and brilliant, gazed with a rapt and seer-like expression toward the west. He carried, folded on his bosom, something wrapped in a cloth of gold, which he regarded with reverence and awe. In solemn and measured tones they chanted lofty strains, which, blending together in their different parts, formed a wondrous melody, which was wafted in sonorous and mournful cadence across the waters of the lough, and repeated in weird echoes among the glens and rocky clefts of the mountains.

When at last they came in full view of the setting sun, which through the distant and narrow gorge looked like a deity on an altar of flame, they bowed their heads in adoration, while their white-haired leader stretched out his hands and, with impassioned words and gestures, addressed the object of their worship. And while he stood thus—his rapt countenance still uplifted—the light faded, soft shadows of purple and gold floated over the scene, and in silence the procession returned toward the grove.

"Dius Fidius!" exclaimed the stranger, with enthusiasm: "that was solemn and grand! Dost thou know, Sir Saxon, who those are?"

"The Druids!" replied the young Saxon, while a scornful smile wreathed his handsome mouth: "these are the Druids and bards of Munster, under the Arch-Druid Semo, famed throughout Western Europe for his wisdom and learning."

"He is also much revered in Gaul,—so much so," said the youth, "that my father, the Lord Count of Bretagne, has sent me hither to learn the science of letters under him."

"I wish his fame had been confined to Gaul, then, and not traveled also to Germany; then my father, a palatine of the Empire, and of old Roman blood, would not have sent me hither to learn wisdom from Semo. I wished to study in Rome!"

"Rome!" exclaimed the other, with scorn: "what are the schools of Rome and Greece? They know but little of the lore of the Egyptians and Phœnicians, still less of the Etrurians; and who cares for modern learning?—Not I! So, hearing of the high repute of the Druids and bards of Erin, I have come hither to study jurisprudence and literature."

"Bah!" said the Saxon: "I have no taste for solitude and study. Give me spear and helm, sword and banner, to slay and burn and conquer. Then the arena—the games—for me! I was at Rome once with my father; but even Rome, under the new sect of a Nazarene called Christ, is not as it used to be under Diocletian, Maximinus, and Julian,—when the beasts of the amphitheatre—beasts from the jungles and deserts of Africa and India, fierce, burning, ravenous demons—fought, not with their kind, but with men, in noble and stirring contest. Bah! those emperors of the olden time knew how to find sport for the people!"

"By Prometheus!" said the other, laughing. "We must endeavor to be content in this our exile. This is a fair land,—this island school of Europe; and we can only pray the gods to give us fire from heaven for our brains, while we are chained to the rock."

"I like thy spirit, sir stranger. Thy name?" said the Saxon, as the prow of the curragh shot up on the yielding sands of the shore.

"Clotaire of Bretagne," he replied modestly.

"I am Ulric of Heidelberg," said the other, proudly, as they clasped hands. "Canst thou conduct us to Semo?" he continued, turning to the boatman. "We will reward thee generously."

"I demand no reward, nobles. It is my business to see you safely to your journey's end," replied the man.

"This is a strange land, by Thor!" exclaimed the Saxon, stamping his foot. "We are not beggars; we are nobles, with well-filled purses."

"All that may be; but ye are also guests," replied the man.

"Whose guests? Thine?" asked the Saxon, scornfully.

"The guests of Erin, nobles," was the reply.

"Per Apollo! Of all the countries I have visited, I have found nothing like this. It is a fine place for poor travelers, which we are not," replied Ulric of Heidelberg, standing still. "Here have I journeyed from Tuscar to Gougane-Barra, nor spent a coin. At every resting-place I find an inn and refreshments and servants and guides, and, what I care least of all for, volumes and treatises on the arts and sciences, * all at my service; and when, like an honest man, I take my purse from my girdle to pay the reckoning, I am told that one of the

* Abbe McGeoghegan's "History of Ireland."

most sacred laws of Erin is the law of hospitality; and that it would cost that man who should transgress it, his life. I am tired of it. I can't believe in such national perfectibility as it assumes. Here," he said, haughtily, while he snatched a heavy purse from the folds of his girdle; "take this gold, or I'll hurl it into the depths of yonder lake."

But the man folded his arms on his breast, and, smiling, replied, "There is no law against that, noble."

"Well, if I cannot break a law, it will be no pleasure to do it: so I'll keep my gold. It must be a rich country, forsooth, where a peasant refuses gold!"

"It is a rich country, sir noble. Throughout the broad land are prosperity and plenty. As to gold, we turn it up with our plowshares when we break the soil," replied the peasant, courteously but proudly.

"And do the peasants of Erin also speak the language of Rome?—or perhaps thou art the descendant of some old Roman legionary, who helped to conquer this isle, and speak the language for the love thou has for his father-land," asked Ulric, with less scorn in his tone and manner.

"Know, O noble," replied the man, drawing himself up proudly, "that this soil—this land—has never been polluted by the footsteps of Roman legions. They were driven from the frontiers of Erin, ere they crossed them, by the kings and chiefs of Tara, who swept down with their brave septa, like torrents from the rocks, on their flying cohorts. They conquered the barbarous hordes of Britain,—an ignoble conquest,—but their eagles found no perch and their legions no resting-place on our sacred shores. But pardon me, nobles. I am just what I seem,—a peasant; but, living with wise and learned men, and being the attendant on the teachers of the school, on the *Betagh* land which I helped to cultivate, I—well, I was neither deaf nor blind."

"So, so, Clotaire! This is a strange country, and a most strange people," said Ulric of Heidelberg; "where learning and science are held in such esteem by all classes. But he, here!" he cried out to the guide, who was leading the way. "Answer me! Is this thy vaunted land filled with priests and bards who do nothing but chant, and sing, and worship the sun and moon? Have ye no warriors?—no armies?—no triumphs?"

"My time is almost spent, nobles; neither does it become one in my station to hold argument with such as you are. Ask Semo; ask the bards: they will tell ye the tale of Erin's glories and Erin's heroes!" replied the man, speeding swiftly toward the grove, whither the two followed at a rapid pace.

CHAPTER II.—THE TEMPLE.

"Where in Pluto's name is our guide? This gloom is impenetrable; and, to tell thee the truth, Sir Clotaire of Bretagne, I do not think it safe for us, who are strangers and almost unarmed, to venture farther into this dismal wood," said Ulric of Heidelberg to his companion.

"We are as safe here, Sir Saxon, as if the broad sunlight shone upon us. This is one of the sacred groves of which I have heard, in the midst of which is a temple where the Druids perform their mysterious rites, and where the sages instruct youth in the sciences. But let us hail our guide. Ho! ho, there!—Ho!" shouted the young Frank.

"I am here, nobles," said the man, who was only a few steps in advance of them, but who was so concealed by the gloomy shadows of coming night, which crept through the great trees like dark-robed spirits, that they did not see him.

"Per Hercules! I did not know but that the earth had opened and swallowed thee.—This gloom is like Tartarus," said Ulric, while the red blood tingled in his cheeks. Just at that moment strains of choral music swept past them, modulated into a thousand softened echoes and cadences by the sweet south wind, which breathed at intervals through the leafy and silent aisles. They paused, awe-struck and amazed. A louder and more solemn strain of melody—a rolling anthem of adoration—burst through the grove, making the very leaves tremulous with its harmonious vibrations, while here and there, flitting like white fawns through the thickets, were veiled figures, graceful and agile, who sang wild-bird-like songs as they fled along. Then all was silent and motionless.

"Behold!" whispered the guide, pointing upward through an opening in the trees.—"The Vestals are engaged in the rites of Nerf, known in Greece as Athena, but worshiped in Erin as the goddess of Wisdom and purity."
The strangers lifted their eyes, and saw through the open space above them a purple vista stretched far up into the silent depths of heaven, from which the last soft beam of twilight had faded, in the midst of which hung the crescent moon, like a silver bark floating to bright but unknown shores, while the evening star, an opal-crowned spirit, followed,

* All references made in the course of this tale to the customs, habits, and conquests of the ancient Irish, to their religion and its rites, are strictly historic.

guarding its way through the deep,—images of purity and wisdom deified and worshiped in those earlier ages by nations who, dwelling in the shadow of darkness, understood nothing clearly of the existence of a first cause.

"It is a sacred hour," said the man, reverently. "We must approach in silence."

The Saxon looked scornful and impatient. Clotaire threw back his fine head with a light smile, and the group pursued their way. After treading narrow and intricate paths, they made an abrupt turn, and came in full view of a majestic and spacious marble temple, through whose windows of stained glass—stained in Tyrian dyes which far exceeded the imitations of these later ages—floods of crimson, green, purple, and golden light were streaming out on the shadows in such prodigal splendor that the old trees looked as if they were draped with rainbows. Running along the front was a spacious colonnade, supported by light pillars, with carved base and cornice, into which the wide folding doors of the principal entrance opened. Above rose stately arches, splendid sculptures, and lofty turrets, all blending together in one grand architectural harmony.—Walking to and fro the length of the tesselated marble floor of the colonnade was a noble-looking man, clad in flowing garments embroidered and clasped with gems. The fire of youth was in his large blue eyes, and the glow of life's spring-time on his cheeks, while a consciousness of innate superiority lent an imposing dignity to his aspect. His sandaled feet glistened as he walked, the straps of his sandals being wrought with precious stones, and the square cap, which declared his order, sat on his brow like a diadem.

"He is one of the princes of Munster," said their guide, in a low tone of voice, "who, being instructed by the Druids, has become a Bard."

Just then, seeing two strangers approaching, he stepped forward, and, holding out his hand, received them courteously.

"Bear witness, nobles," said the guide, "that I have conducted ye hither without bribe or reward, that I may return. This, noble strangers, is Abaris, prince and Bard of Munster."

"And we," said Clotaire of Bretagne, "are two strangers from Western Europe, who have come hither in the pursuit of knowledge. We have letters to Semo, the sage and Arch-Druid of Erin, from our fathers.—one of whom is a palatine of the great German Empire, the other, myself, a son of the Lord Count of Bretagne. For our guide we can safely say that he has performed the task assigned him in good faith and courtesy."

"It is well. He knows well how sacred are the laws of hospitality. But, noble sirs, while I bid ye welcome, I am sorry to inform ye that Semo is now engaged in the sacred rites of the temple. A number of Druids from other provinces have met him here to consult together in matters of high import; and, it being one of the festivals of *Tinne*, he will not be at liberty to give ye audience until to-morrow," replied the bard, with grave dignity. "But follow me. We have an apartment for strangers, where ye can partake of refreshments and rest, which ye must need after so long a journey."

He conducted them through lofty passages, through spacious halls of marble, where the grained ceilings were fretted with silver and checkered with azure,—where silken draperies swept around sculptured pillars in voluminous and gorgeous folds,—where the arches, which spanned deep niches in the wall, were heavy with carvings of grotesque foliage, and filled with parchment volumes, and rolls of Egyptian and Etrurian manuscripts. In more than one apartment through which they passed, they noticed high and finely-chiseled statues of the elate Nerf, before which, on tripods of silver, burned fires, which were tended by the neophytes of the temple, clad in robes of white and crowned with garlands of ivy. The way seemed intricate and interminable; but, as they went on, they noticed that they were winding around a circular corridor, which appeared to surround an inner temple; for, if afar off yet quite near, and only muffled by the intervention of thick walls, they again heard those wondrous strains of music, while from small loop-holes, high up near the ceiling, sharp rays of light from within streamed across. Silently and reverently the bard conducted his guests along until they reached an arched doorway set deep in the marble wall, which he opened, and ushered them in.

"Here rest, most welcome strangers. Here are refreshments; here are couches; here is a harp; here are books. But pardon my absence. My post of duty is where ye found me. More strangers might arrive,—for men of all nations seek our sages to hear from them lessons of wisdom,—and it would be a gross violation of our rules for me to be absent longer than necessary," said the bard.

"Thanks, noble Abaris, for the time already bestowed on us. There is only one more favor. Be pleased to take with thee our letters of introduction to Semo," said Clotaire of Bretagne, handing him a letter written on vellum and fastened with threads of gold.

"And mine," said Ulric the Saxon, impatient and hungry. "Abaris took both, and, bow-

ing his head, folded the letters to his heart, and was gone.

"Now, Clotaire, let us be merry. There are fowls and meats of which I know not the names; here are venison, salads, white bread and wines,—oh, glorious, generous wines! See how they sparkle and dance as the light gleams through them. And, per Bacchus! the service is of gold. This Druid temple is no bad quarters, after all!" exclaimed Ulric of Heidelberg, skipping around the table and inspecting every dish with the greedy eye of a gourmand.

"This is more like the Epicureanism of Greece, than the abstinence for which the Druids are celebrated. We only want garlands of roses and music to make us fancy we are in Athens," laughed the young Frank, filling his goblet with sparkling wine. "Let us eat, drink, and be merry."

After satisfying the first cravings of hunger and thirst, he threw himself back on his couch and surveyed the apartment. It was lofty and beautiful. The floor was tessellated with marble of various colors, and spread here and there with soft Persian mats of brilliant dyes.—Couches filled up with soft silken cushions invited repose; and silver lamps, whose flames threw up fragrant odors, hung suspended by links of silver from the ceiling.

"Look! look! Sir Saxon! look!" exclaimed Clotaire, starting up, and laying his hand on his companion's arm, as he was in the act of lifting another goblet, overflowing with wine, to his lips, while he pointed to a luminous sentence which had appeared to start out suddenly in letters of fire on the marble wall.

"THE WISE MAN SAYETH, TOUCH NOT WINE,
BE GOVERNED NOT BY SENSUALITY, BUT
BY THY NOBLE SELF."

"By Apollo! this is sham hospitality!" exclaimed the Saxon noble. "I thought we were invited to partake of these viands and refreshments?"

"I am thankful for the warning," said Clotaire. "I am refreshed, and shall eat and drink no more."

"And I shall drink another goblet of this delicious wine. By Bacchus! there is nothing in all Rhineland like it!" exclaimed Ulric of Heidelberg, drinking another draught. "Now I am so far from sleep that I feel like a young giant. I could fight a dragon, if I could only find one! Come, Sir Clotaire! let us explore beyond this, and not be mowed up like two refractory dandelions on a holiday. These casements open—yes! let us see—on a narrow parapet; a goat could scarcely stand on it; but I shall go and follow it whithersoever it leads me."

"Sir Saxon! thou wouldst not be guilty of this breach of hospitality! What right have we to scale the walls of those who have received us in good faith, or explore their dwellings uninvited?" exclaimed Clotaire, in an indignant tone.

But, heated with wine, and heedless as he was, bold, Ulric stepped forth from the window, out on the parapet, and, with the agility and swiftness of a cat, glided out of sight, while the other, shocked and indignant, turned away, and once more lay down upon his couch. The soft, subdued light, the solitude and perfect stillness around him, soothed his senses, and a deep slumber stole over him. A fair dream opened to his vision; his mother, still in the bloom of a stately beauty, was beside him; his father, in courtly attire, with a coronet on his brow, held out his hand with a proud look of joy toward him; he threw out his arm to clasp his mother, who was the idol of his life,—when, lo! a crash, a jar, aroused him, with a sense of something terrible. He sprang up. The casements had been dashed rudely open, and on the floor, ghastly and trembling, lay Ulric of Heidelberg.

"Ha! hast thou been wounded? hast thou been attacked? What means this, Sir Saxon? Rouse thee, rouse thee, and lie not there trembling like a craven, instead of a true knight," exclaimed the impetuous and noble Frank.

"This is an accursed place! Let us go hence," he replied, through his chattering teeth.

"Explain; but first rise up, and swallow some wine. I thought from thy valiant talk that there was nothing within the space of humanity that could alarm thee," said Clotaire, handing him wine.

"I defy every human power, Sir Frank; but there are terrible ones who belong to another and a blacker world, the princes of the realms of hell, whom I fear," he replied, with white lips.

"Hast thou met one of these?" inquired Clotaire, incredulously.

"Listen. I have known an age of horror since I left thee," said the Saxon, speaking in a low tone. "It was to gratify a foolish whim which seized me at the moment; but the cool night-winds, and the difficulties which beset my progress, exhilarated and excited me: so on I went. Clambering, hanging sometimes by my nails, swinging by boughs, and creeping where a bird could scarcely stand, I got along, until suddenly a steep wall arrested my progress. It was covered with ivy of so old a growth that the branches were like cables. As I could not go on, I vowed to go up; and up I climbed—"

* One of the Killarney lakes.