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MONA THE VESTAL.

A TALE OF THE TIMES OF ST. PATRICK.

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CHAPTER XI.—(Continued.)

"There was a wild perturbation in the lady's soul. Here, under her roof, in her very presence, noble, heroic beyond aught she had ever dreamed of, suffering scourges and glorying in death—a Christian stood before her!

"And how wilt thou be rewarded by this Christ, after death?" she asked, in a low, choking voice.

"With immortality, O lady; with new and eternal life; with the glorious vision of God, which fleeth those who are ransomed with exhaustless joy. Oh, Death! strong portal of Eternal rest! Oh, sweet Death!" exclaimed Mona, as if forgetful of the lady's presence.

"And how dost thou know this?" asked the Lady Bernice, in the same low tone.

"The great and infinite God—our Father—has himself revealed it, through His Divine Son. Oh, lady, believe! Turn thy soul away from the vain worship of false deities to the true and living God," exclaimed Mona, throwing herself at her feet.

"Maiden, thou hast proved thy faith by a heroism worthy of a better cause. I admit that there is something in it which is sublime and passes my comprehension. At some future time, as a curious study, I will investigate its philosophy. But thou art a Christian. One saw thee to-day, whose sharp eyes recognized thee under thy disguise. He is tarrying at the temple. Perchance thou dost deserve death for thine apostasy, and it may be difficult to protect thee, but I—yes, I will do my utmost to save thee, Mona. Remain thou here. I will speak with Aileen," said the lady, rising from her pillows and twisting her long tresses around a jeweled comb, which confined them to the back of her head.

Aileen was luxuriating in one of her usual fermentations. Her shrill voice rung out in commands and counter-orders, in threats and shrieks, varied by the sharp sound of a strap over the shoulders of some luckless domestic who crossed her path, or the crash of a tin flagon or a broom, which, falling short of its aim or going beyond the head at which it was thrown, fell clattering against the wall or lumbering along the floor. But the entrance of Lady Bernice calmed the storm in a moment. She was an unexpected and rare visitor in those regions where her foster mother had heretofore reigned supreme. Aileen stood aghast. She felt that her coming portended nothing good for her. The lady's stern brow and compressed lips convinced her that her star was no longer in the ascendant.

"My gracious lady," said the subdued virago, "take this chair. If I had known thou wert coming, things would have worn a different look, I trow."

"I wish but a few words with thee, Aileen," she said, standing cold and stern in her marvellous beauty, and waving back with her hand the proffered chair. "Thou mayest feel for me a sort of love, even,—but thou hast committed a fault which I would not brook from the mother who bore me, if she lived.—Thou hast set thyself up as the avenger of punishments: according to thy will the scourge is to fly on whose shoulders and breast thou pleasest. From this day thy power ceases.—Thou shalt have no one under thee; because thou art a tyrant. Thou shalt have no privileges or immunities beyond the other vassals of Innistore; and, if this does not suit thee, thou canst go away. Where is Panthea the slave?"

"Panthea?" gasped Aileen, pale and trembling, for she knew that inexorable will, or she would have raged and stormed and wept.—"She is up there,—in a small room under the roof."

"Where no air or light can penetrate,—where her pain-racked limbs, and feeble body waste on straw! Tigriss, I could tear thee and beat thee, were it not—but I have learned a lesson. Go this moment with some of thy fellow-servants, and bring,—as tenderly as if it were I,—bring Panthea here. Lay her on that bed. First shake up the pillows and turn back the sheets. There! begone!"

"But the children, lady,—the children!" faltered Aileen, almost gasping for breath.

"Shall be removed forthwith to the chamber near my own, where I—I, remember—will superintend their well-being; for I trust thee no longer."

After they left the room, she walked to and fro, while her face glowed and her eyes flashed like the eyes of some fierce and beautiful beast of the desert. A new life was stirring within her; new light was drawing through faculties and attributes but half developed in her nature. She began to feel and understand the pleading of her soul for better and higher things than she had ever known. "A mean Christian shall not outdo me, a princess of royal birth, in generosity," she murmured.

Just then the door opened, and they brought in the sick slave and laid her on Aileen's bed. The lady herself arranged the pillows, and, sending for one of her own fine linen garments, put it on her with her own hand.

"Bring me wine," she said to her wonder-stricken servants. The wine was brought in a silver goblet, and she herself held it to Panthea's lips, who, swallowing a small portion, soon recovered her strength.

"Thou art better now, Panthea," she said, gently.

"May Jesus Christ be thy reward!" whispered the slave.

A deep flush reddened the lady's face, and tears flashed for an instant over the light of her eyes, as she whispered, "Be quiet."

"Aileen," she said, turning to her, "this is no longer thy place. Go into the western chamber, near my own, and make it ready for the little ones and thyself. Panthea, one will be with thee in a little while, who has been thy best friend. Hereafter, thou shalt want nothing."

Aileen, ashamed, enraged, and humbled, could only submit; but she vowed in her inmost heart that the brown girl, as she called Mona, and who she imagined was the cause of her disgrace, should suffer for it. Life without vengeance would be a burthen, she thought, and from that hour, moody and silent, she brooded over plans of revenge. When Mona returned, all was changed. Panthea, breathless and grateful, recounted faithfully all that had occurred.

"See how soon Heaven flies to the succor of its poor children, my Panthea; and, as if to crown my joy, I see Lena, the holy woman, coming up from the park," said Mona, gently.

CHAPTER XII.—THE LOVER.

Panthea was asleep when the fisherman's wife came in. The fatigue she had undergone in being removed from her cell under the eaves combined with the unwonted luxuries of a soft bed and fresh linen, had lulled her into a deep and quiet slumber.

"I am glad to see thee, good Lena," whispered Mona, leading her to a chair.

"I have come up from the shore in great haste to-day," said Lena, with a sorrowful countenance, while she lifted Mona's hand tenderly to her lips. "I have ill tidings for thee, lady. There is a report abroad that the Druids, having learned that thou art living and a Christian, have sworn to get possession of thee once more, that they may wreak a horrible vengeance for what they call thy apostasy. It is said that their spies are everywhere. I thought this was evil enough; but at the very portals of Innistore I heard from Dathy a tale which has curled my blood. Is it true,—lady, is it the thing I have heard this day true?"

"Dathy? Tale? How should I know, good Lena. I, who never leave these apartments?" said Mona, looking down.

"No need, gentle lady, no need to have left these apartments to hear it. Dathy says thou hast been scourged by Aileen—scourged on thy naked shoulders—for the guilt of another," said Lena, almost choked by the effort she made to keep back her tears.

"Trouble not thyself, my Lena, about idle tales. Thy information is not as correct as it might be. As to Aileen,—poor Aileen!—Is she not groping in darkness? How can she see the lures which the evil one spreads along her way? Let us not judge Aileen harshly," said Mona, in a low voice.

"It is true, though, that thou wert scourged?" persisted Lena. "Tell me why, I beseech thee, sweet lady."

"If, on some day in thy life-journey thou shouldst see our divine Lord Jesus, faltering along, lame, sick, sorrowful, mocked, threatened, and treated like a felon, would not thy soul burn within thee to help Him,—to aid Him? Would it not fill thee with joy if thou couldst say, 'Here, dearest Lord, let me take Thy place: thou hast suffered enough: thou art fainting on the way; I am strong: let me lift that rugged burden from thy lacerated shoulders, let mine be the flesh that the scourge falls on?' And suppose He should say, 'Daughter, thy offer is precious and acceptable to me.'—Consider, my Lena. What wouldst thou do?"

"Hast thou had a vision, then?" asked Lena, in a low and agitated voice.

"No! No vision! In yonder suffering one—in Panthea, who, guiltless of offense, and racked with pain, was sentenced to be scourged, I beheld renewed the Passion of Jesus Christ. In her I saw a wounded member of His thorn-crowned head, and, for the love of Him, in this the creature for whom He suffered, I endured the punishment. Aileen—poor Aileen!—was ministering to Him, although she knew it not. Let us find no offense in her," said Mona, humbly.

"May God the mighty Father pity her blindness!" said Lena, weeping; "may her present humiliation prepare her soul to receive the light of Christ! But I must hasten away. I have other tidings to relate. Dathy says that yesterday a German noble who is tarrying at the temple, and who belongs to the schools, saw thee here, and asked him many strange questions concerning thee. He suspects thee to be other than thou seemest. He told Dathy

that, if his suspicions were correct, Semo would raze the foundations of Innistore to search for thee. But, should danger approach, my son Dego, who is under-gardner here, and also a Christian, will convey thee by secret ways back to the cavern on the shore, in which there is a hidden chamber where the sacred vessels are kept. The good Finian himself showed Dego the way of access to it; and there, he says, thou must fly for shelter, and remain until the pursuit and persecution is over."

"Thanks, my Lena! May Heaven be thy eternal reward!" replied Mona, with the far-away look of one who saw beyond the limits of human vision. "But stay one moment, good Lena: I must tell thee one thing. The Lady Bernice knows my secret—"

"Ay," interrupted Lena; "but even she cannot save thee from the Druids."

"No; but she can consent for one who understands the art of healing to come to Panthea. The holy Finian, I have heard, knows the secrets of herbs and medicines. Panthea is a Christian. Once, when she was in danger of death, I baptized her; but she has had no other help. Thou dost understand me?" said Mona.

"Yes. I will bear thy message, and send thee word by my son. Now adieu, my sweet child," said Lena, embracing her tenderly; "adieu! should we never meet again, remember me and mine."

"Thou meanest, if I should get home before thee," said Mona, with a bright smile.

"Well, if I should, forget not, O Lena, that it may be some time ere I shall be in those unclouded realms where those who have washed their robes white in the blood of the Lamb; and those who have gone up through much tribulation, ever intercede for those who wait in hope. Let, then, thy petitions be earnest and unceasing for my release: then, Lena,—then, my sister, amid that glory ever new, the brightness and splendor whereof fill the inhabitants of that land of life with rapture inexpressible, I shall not forget thee. Farewell, my Lena," she said, kissing the brown cheek of the fisherman's wife. Then they parted.

More than once was Mona summoned to the presence of Bernice of Innistore, who, well versed in books and the subtleties of false doctrines, made use of eloquence, argument, persuasions to shake her faith. But, like a rock, it stood strong and steadfast, the very waves that dashed against it recoiling back on themselves. Calm and gentle and humble, her constancy and faithfulness, the good and unanswerable reasons she gave for the hope she had, the proofs she brought, simple, clear, and strong, of an ETERNAL and ALMIGHTY GOD, not only startled the mind of the haughty woman, but when Mona, sitting at her feet, talked of Jesus Christ and the judgment to come, she trembled, and covered her face with her robe. But she still offered libations to Nerf Naom, and crowned her statue with cassia-leaves and roses; she still went to the temple to consult the Pythoness of the shrine of Nerf and threw spices into the sacred fires; she was still pagan,—as much so as a seed is a seed until its hidden life bursts forth in flower and fruit.

One night, when all were wrapped in deep and silent repose, a sudden clangor burst on the air. The braying of trumpets, the shouts of the men at arms, the shrill outcry of the sentries on the walls, the howling of chained beagles, and the clank of bolts and chains as the portcullis at the entrance to the castle was slowly lifted, mingled together in one confused and terrific din. Mona started up. Her heart bounded and throbbed almost to bursting.—The shadow and bitterness of doom fell darkly around her; the dread, and the weak whispering of nature appalled her. She thought that Semo and the Druids had come to tear her away to suffer in the darkness and mystery of the temple-dungeon, which she had heard was far down beneath the surface of the earth, having an outlet into the sea.

So thought the Lady of Innistore.

So thought Dego, the son of Lena.

"Thou must fly, Mona!—thou must fly this moment!" exclaimed the Lady Bernice, rushing in, with only her loose night robes around her, while her countenance wore a look of wild affright. "Kneel not there so calm while the Druids enter Innistore."

There was a single tap on the door. Mona opened it, and found Dego there.

"Lady," he said, "come, thou hast time. I will bear thee to a place of safety."

"Fly, Mona!" exclaimed the Lady Bernice, snatching up a gray woolen mantle and throwing it over the vestal's shoulders. "Already I hear the tramping of their horses, the ringing of their armed heels on the flags of the court—but hark! hark! That cry! As I live, I believe it is my lord Eadhna! They come this way! Nerf Naom!" she cried, flying to a window that overlooked the broad court below, "what do I see? By the torch-light I behold Eadhna,—my lord,—and Abaris, his brother, who holds aloft, instead of a banner, a cross,—who wears on his breast, instead of the harp, a cross,—the Christian symbol.—And—and oh, Nerf Naom! I see on Eadhna's bosom also a cross of gold! And there, near him, rides the young Gaulish count, who also

wears this sign of sorrow and ignominy and shame. Oh, woe!—oh, evil day! why hast thou come to Innistore?" she cried, wringing her hands.

"What troubles thee, dear lady? Dost thou see aught like calamity drawing near to Innistore?" asked Mona, lifting her hand gently to her lips.

"He has returned a Christian!" she shrieked, throwing off Mona's hand,—"a Christian!" then fled back to her apartments.

Mona slept no more that night; with Panthea, who still trembled with alarm, she gave thanks to God that salvation had come to Innistore, and together they prayed that the Lady Bernice might taste of the waters of life as they flowed past.

It was even so. Like the Arcopagite who sought Paul and returned believing in Christ, so the Lord Eadhna had gone to seek his hard brother in the camp of Patricius, to exhaust the eloquence of language,—to urge him by the hopes of his family, by the grief of his mother, the pride of his father, the credit of his house, to abjure these new errors, and once more, as one of the royal bards of Erin, take his place in the council of the nation and at the altar of the temple. Then, if all persuasion and argument should fail, he determined to slay him with his own hand at the very foot of Patricius. But he returned a Christian, accompanied by the bard Abaris and the Count of Bretagne, bringing with him a billet from the holy apostle Patricius to the Bishop Finian, beseeching him to go without delay to give baptism to the household of the Lord Eadhna of Innistore.

Christianity had developed in full splendor the spiritual and intellectual life of Abaris. Like a brilliant-plumaged bird whose wings, limp and powerless, had kept him from soaring up into the sunshine, whose notes, sweet but earth-born and earth-bound, had floated no higher than the cloud-drifts that bounded his vision, he now, healed and full of power, soared, as on eagle pinions, far into the sunbright regions of faith, where he sang of God and Christ in strains of such surpassing harmony that all who heard him paused to listen, entranced, first by the eloquence of his words, then by the promises of faith, which filled their souls, at last, with the treasures of the mystery of Divine Love, and a peace which breathed over them a foretaste of heaven. Like that fair and lovely gem of the Church, Francis Xavier, of a later age, Abaris had found at once the perfection and sanctification which so many toil after through penance and tears, yet so few attain; he had solved at once the difficult science which, even on earth, so elevates the spirit above the flesh that it has rapt visions of God. But Eadhna and Clotaire, more fettered by human ties and more filled with the thoughts and cares of life, followed at a slower pace,—humble neophytes, whose faith, though not less strong, was less developed by supernatural graces; who, while they adored in spirit and in truth the Divine attributes of the Triune God, felt determined, at whatever cost it might be, to fight the good fight and remain steadfast in Christ. The Lady Bernice stood truly between heaven and earth. The eloquence of Abaris melted her proud soul to tears; the persuasions of her husband shook her more than she would show; the gentle arguments of the young count filled her with admiration; while the example and prayers, the humility and sweetness, of Mona, and the patience of Panthea, convinced her that their faith was something more than human,—nay, almost holy; but, when half-persuaded to yield her proud nature to the yoke of JESUS CHRIST, her human friendships, the censure of the Druids, habits of superstition, veneration for fables, distrust, and the haughty love of power and regal splendor, dragged her back, and lifted high barriers between her heart and the inflowing of divine graces. She was soon the only one of the hundreds who filled the fortress of Innistore, who had asked for baptism.—Abaris was constantly out with the vassals, in the field, in their cabins, in their tents, in their barracks, teaching them day and night, forgetting food and rest in his zeal for their salvation, until old and young, the soldier and the serf, matrons and maids, the aged and little children, thirsted for the waters of life; and again he sought Patricius to beseech him to send a priest to them, for as yet they could find no trace of the Bishop Finian.

"It is strange," said Lord Eadhna, "passing strange, that we have no tidings of Finian. Hast thou ever heard of a Christian called Finian, Bernice?"

She paused,—opened her lips,—a deep flush dyed her cheeks; then she said, "I might deceive thee if I did not scorn a lie. I know not where this Finian is; but two of my household, who were Christians before ye arrived, may tell thee. I have heard the name pass between them."

"Two Christians! And didst thou, sweet wife, protect them?" said Lord Eadhna, tenderly.

"Their God protected them," said she, in a low voice, as she turned away to hide a starting tear.

"Who are these Christians? Where are they, Bernice?" he asked.

"One," she said, slowly, "is Panthea the slave; the other is Mona the vestal!"

"Mona the vestal!" cried he, with an expression of amazement on his face.

"Mona! Does Mona live?" exclaimed Clotaire of Bretagne, who was sitting in an embrasure of a deep window, reading. He threw down the roll of parchment, and, springing forward, knelt on a cushion at the feet of the Lady Bernice, half wild with emotion. "Does Mona live? or is it some other Mona?"

"First tell me, sir count, whence this strange interest in Mona? Where couldst thou have seen Mona? Answer me on thy honor as a knight and thy faith as a Christian. For I have heard strange rumors," she said, with proud reserve.

"Never but once, lady, did my eyes rest on Mona. I rescued her from a savage wolf, which had been driven, infuriate by the dogs, into the sacred grove. I, not knowing that its precincts were sacred, followed him with my spear, and came on him in time to save Mona, toward whom he was springing when my spear cleft his skull. She fell insensible, and for a few brief moments I held her on my bosom and gazed in her face—"

"I am a woman, sir count, and can understand the rest. Thou didst love her."

"Yes. I loved her as thou, lady, mightst love a white dove, or a lamb without blemish. But Lord Eadhna can tell thee how I was suddenly,—how in a brief moment I learned that she being a vestal, my love was utterly hopeless. When I heard that Mona had fallen into the sea, where I believed she slumbered, until these tidings greet me, that Mona lives and is a Christian! It is wondrous! It is too wild a thing to be true!" he said, striking his forehead.

"Thou hast never seen her, then, since the first time?" asked the lady, calmly.

"I have thought of her as dead! Seen her! No! In the wildest frenzy of hope, I never dreamed of Mona—living," he replied.

"And now that she lives,—that ye are both Christians,—does thy faith forbid a renewal of thy love?"

"No, lady: our faith lays no ban on a love like mine. I would wed Mona."

"Then listen, and learn her history," said the Lady Bernice. And with flashing eyes, a grave brow, and proud but truthful air, she told them all she knew of Mona,—of her being scourged, of her sweetness and patience, and of the meek innocence of her life. Both of those brave and noble men dashed tears from their cheeks as she proceeded. Then she told, without a shade of boasting, how she, by her heroic virtue, had protected and saved her. "I have heard her speak," she continued, "of one Finian,—a holy man; and she may perchance give thee the information thou dost desire concerning him. But tell me, Eadhna, what need have we of Finian?"

"Noble wife, Finian is a Christian priest and bishop,—one who baptizes and administers the divine sacraments of the Church to believers."

"But Abaris—our brother?"

"My brother is only a teacher: he is not yet a priest," he replied.

"And what dost thou want with this priest?" she insisted.

"To baptize my children, and those of my household who believe in Christ."

"My children!" she said, with a bewildered look. "Husband,—children,—household,—all Christians! But I will leave ye now, and this evening ye shall see Mona."

They left the room, and were soon out on the marble terraces of Innistore.

"Shall we fish, or ride? Dost thou prefer a gallop over the moors, or a sail on yon bright blue river?" said Lord Eadhna to his guest.

"I love the wave,—the bounding motion, and the sound of the tide sweeping along," said the young count. "It pleases me sometimes to think that the same billow that bears me up flows on toward my native land,—that perchance my mother looks on it, or touches it with her beautiful fingers, as she wanders on the shore."

"Let us out on the waves, then. Here, Malcho! bring the tackle and nets down to the shore: we need not be idle, while the Shannon swarms with fish," said Lord Eadhna.

CHAPTER XIII.—FOR CHRIST!

The Lady Bernice sought Mona. She found her sitting beside Panthea, singing a sweet Christian lay, while her busy fingers plied the needle on some fine handiwork which required taste and patience. She arose, and, with love and gratitude expressed in every look and movement, she offered the lady a chair. She would have remained standing, but the lady drew a low, cushioned stool beside her, and told her to sit there.

"And how is Panthea to-day?" she inquired, kindly.

"Better, noble lady. May the great God reward thee for thy kindness to a poor slave!" replied Panthea.

"Thou art no longer a slave, Panthea: thou art from this moment free."