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MONA THE VESTAL.

A TALE OF THE TIMES OF ST. PATRICK.

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CHAPTER X.—(Continued.)

"Lady, we are at the portals of Innistore; throw back thy veil a little way," said Lena, knocking at the wicket. "I am sorry to disturb thee, Dathy, at so early an hour," said Lena, when the porter opened it; "but I have come on a business errand to my sister, and also to bring a small present to thyself."

"Good Lena, thou art welcome. Wait until I take down the bars. Thou must not be kept standing after so long a trudge," said Dathy, who disappeared; and after a rattling of chains and the lumbering sounds of displaced bars, one side of the portal, iron-ribbed and grim, was thrown open, and the two women entered the lodge, where there was no want of substantial comfort.

"Say, good Lena, is this thy daughter?—If she is, she looks more like an Egyptian than thou dost."

"No, Dathy; she is not my child, except by adoption. She is a poor orphan who has been confided to my care. Sit here, my dear, and rest a moment while I get out the hose which I knit for my friend Dathy—may they fit thee as well as the good wishes that made them!" said Lena, turning out the contents of her basket, to direct the man's attention from Mona. "Aha! there they are—the brightest scarlet and purest white in Munster. Our monarch himself does not wear a finer or softer fleece."

"My good and excellent Lena!" cried Dathy, in an ecstasy of delight. "who of the good people set thee on this? The very thing I wanted! Now, Dathy! do thou wilt be invincible! In such hose thou wilt be invincible! We'll see if that jilting hussy Maia will turn up her pert nose at the wearer of scarlet and white. A thousand thanks, Lena! Here are wine and wheaten bread for thyself and daughter."

"I thank thee," said Lena, accepting the offered refreshment. "I have brought this young maiden to my sister, who wants an assistant in the nursery. I know that she is faithful and even tempered, and thought none would better suit the place. But I must hurry back, to be in time to pack up our produce for the fair," said Lena, in her quiet way.

"True," said Dathy, surveying his large, well-turned limbs and the brilliant hose with equal complacency; "she sent word down last night that she expected thee. Even-tempered didst thou say is the *Collen duu*? It is well for her. I'd rather be pitched naked into a thornbush, than have to serve under Aileen,—saving thy presence, Lena. I expect she's in a glorious snarl now! Old Panthea's been crippled these three weeks; and, in addition to the uproar caused by that,—for Aileen, never sick herself, thinks it is treason for any one to complain, however ill they may be,—we were all set wild last night by the arrival of a troop of guests, who brought such wonderful tidings from Tara that I have not slept a wink since letting them in. Hast heard aught extraordinary, good Lena?"

"Nothing," replied Lena. "Well, I might as well be the first to tell thee: for it has brought great sorrow to Innistore, and a black woe to the house of Munster! Thou hast doubtless heard of certain wretches called Christians? Yes, well, they are enchanters. I hear they can turn a lamb to a wolf, or a cuckoo to an eagle, by a look of their eye; and it is said there are many of them in these parts. Anyhow, one of them, named Patricius, was at Tara; and they say he stood on a hillock at *Firte-Fir-Tice*, on the banks of the Boyne, the day the Baal-fire was kindled on the plains of Mugh-Breagh, three miles off, and put it out by shutting his eyes and blowing his breath toward it. Only think! Then the people fled in confusion, pursued by a dragon, which devoured men, women, and children in their flight. The next day the idol appeared before the Parliament at Tara, and under the very nose of the Druids enchanted the monarch Lagare, the Arch-Poet Dubtach, two Druids, a young noble from Gaul, and, worst of all, the pride of Munster, our bard, our prince, the beautiful and noble Abaris." Here Dathy wiped off a genuine tear, but continued:—"After which he chained them all, and changed them into beasts and birds, and carried them off in iron cages to a bleak island, called Lough Derg, where he has locked them up in a cavern of fire."

"And they all became Christians?" asked Lena, scarcely able to keep down the exultation of her soul.—"all?"

"Every one. And they say that the Arch-Druid Semo has never spoken a word since,—that the curse of Patricius is upon him. Didst thou ever hear anything so absurd as their belief? They declare that the King of the Jews—the Jews are a foreign and detestable race—is God, and He and they are trying to subvert our free and glorious land to his dominions! That is their religion. That is the reason they are threatening our free institutions with disaster and ruin."

"It is terrible, if true," said Lena, with a quiet smile. "But, good Dathy, send me one with us now to the castle: the people are stirring, and it is passed sunrise, I have to hasten back."

Lena was anxious to get back, to dispatch a messenger to the saintly Finian with the news she had heard, that he might be on his guard, and use more than usual caution in coming to and fro.

"True, I had forgotten. Come hither, Malchy," he cried to a man-at-arms who was washing his face at the court fountain. "Sit here, my friend, until I go with this dame and her daughter to the castle. Here is wine; there hangs a rasher. Make thyself at home: when I return, we will breakfast together."

The man-at-arms, nothing loath to the enjoyment of an easy chair and good fare, came with a broad grin on his coarse features in obedience to the summons, and, as he passed Mona, gave her a tap with his great hirsute hand on her cheek. Almost fainting with terror, she clung to Lena, nor lifted her veil again until they were seated in the apartment that served as a play-room for the noble children of Innistore, and over which Lena's sister, an ill-favored and ill-tempered person, presided, it being one of the nursery suite.

"Is she good-tempered? is she active? is she willing? can she sweep? can she sew? can she sing? can she hold a child? can she feed a baby? can she make gruel? can she scrub?" Mona heard her asking, with such sharp volubility that it sounded like the pattering of hailstones on a shield. "Speak up, and tell us what thou canst do."

"I know but little," said Mona, with humble courage; "but I will be obedient, and endeavor to perform well whatever tasks are assigned me."

"Ha! thou hast a voice like the cuckoo, and thy speech shows gentle breeding; but, mind, there are no little *bravaies* here to wait on my lady," said the virago. "But I'll try thee; and I do think, if thy great wild eyes and yellow skin don't scare the baby into fits, we may do something with thee. So, Lena, thou canst leave her. I have my hands so full since that old wretch Panthea took to bed, that I get out of my senses a dozen times a day. I am tolerably patient, though, and will try to teach the girl something. But mind, young miss, no flouting with the grooms and soldiers, and, above all, no words when I scold!"

"Thou wilt find Correen modest, sister. I only beg thou wilt let her have her sup up here, that she may not have to be among the men in the servants' hall. And another thing. Sometimes I shall come for her, to spend a night at home. Promise me that she shall go," said Lena, with tingling cheeks and a glance at Mona, who was standing near her, with folded hands and downcast eyes.

"The Banishes fly off with ye, for putting such notions into the girl's head—but, by our mother's milk, I suppose I must say yes, for thy sake, Lena,—that is, if thou dost not come for her too often to spend a night, and if she gets back by sunrise. As for thy taking her sup here, she's welcome, as I like to go down sometimes myself. We're in a stew at Innistore, now I can tell thee; what with the witchcraft of the Christians, and the apostacy of the bard Abaris, the very winds blow us sorrow.—That old Roman slave, Panthea, pretends to be lame; my lady storms and threatens; the child's sick. Here—what's thy name?"

"Correen," said Lena. "Here, Correen, lay off thy veil, and fly round and clear this room; the children are shrieking," cried the termagant, rushing into another room.

"Be patient; have good courage, my child," whispered Lena, when they were alone.—"When the holy Finian returns, I will come for thee."

She kissed her hand, and Mona felt a tear drop on it. Lena went away; and Mona felt a chill and shudder pass over her.

"This is not death; there seems nothing great or heroic in it,—nothing worthy of offering to the Most High God," thought Mona.—"But it is suffering; yes, it is suffering; and what matters it, sweet Lord, how we suffer, if we suffer for and with Thee? Here will I think of Thee in Thy Passion, here will I learn the science of meekness and humility." Her instinctive neatness and innate love of order gave success to her task, and when the virago Aileen came to inspect the room she did not beat her.

And yet she was indispensable. Her sweet songs lulled the noisy children, and her winning voice lured them away from the indulgence of dangerous sports. She watched them while they slept, and met them with smiles when they awoke. Her cunning handiwork and skill in embroidery made her of priceless value to Aileen, who could now steal more rest. None asked a favor of her in vain, yet none returned to thank her or offered their assistance or good offices. She had but one friend among them all; and that was the poor slave Panthea. When she could be spared, she hid up to the little closet under the eaves, with warm broth or healing embrocations, rubbed the crippled, unsightly limbs, bathed her feet, and anointed them with unctuous oils, which Dairene had taught her how to prepare; and while the forlorn slave, grateful and relieved, leaned back on her pillow of straw, Mona told her, in low, sweet tones, of God, until it began to grow brighter in that darkened soul—until, freed from the fetters of its ignorance, at last it sighed after immortality through the Cross of Christ.

One evening Lena came for her, and together they sped away once more to the cavern on the shore. Once more Mona knelt in sacramental penance at the good Finian's feet, and once more did she receive, with a joy that angels can never know, the Lord in his sacred humanity and perfect Divinity, in her earthly tabernacle. And well was it for her that in the depths of her humility, she had left no venial stains to cloud the luster of her soul, well for her that the heavenly feast so inaugurated her with joy that earth's bitter trials were all unfeelt.—well for her; FOR IT WAS HER VIATICUM!

CHAPTER XI.—PANTHEA THE SLAVE.

In a lofty turret-chamber, which was enriched by all that was rare and luxurious, near an open casement, which commanded an extensive and magnificent prospect, sat the proud Lady of Innistore. A quantity of splendid silk lay across her knees, and swept the floor on either side, in rich folds. It was a banneret, which she was embroidering with golden threads and pearls, in heraldic devices and quaint patterns. Her face was a type of fearlessness and truth. There was that in her full, flashing eyes which would repel with scorn a mean or oppressive act, yet which would imperatively demand submission and respect for her position and state. The nostrils of her straight and beautiful nose were thin, and dilated with every breath; while her full lips, curved to the most perfect line of beauty, wore a look of more laudable than tenderness. Her raven hair was confined under a net-work of pearls, which was fringed with a glistening border of pearls, that drooped over her broad white forehead and blue-veined temples like snow-flakes on a lotus-leaf. A robe of lilac-colored silk, with flowing sleeves turned up with ermine and a girdle of twisted pearls, completed her attire.

The wind swept up from the sea in sweet and murmuring cadences, ever and anon touching the strings of a harp which stood uncovered near the casement, and yielded wild and music-breathing strains to its spirit-like fingerings.—The lady lifted her eyes from her brocade, and gazed out long and earnestly on the noble and sunlit view; then, with an impatient look and a quick sigh she threw aside the banneret, and tossed the threads of gold and strings of pearls in a glittering heap down with it.

"Bright, splendid, unclouded," she exclaimed, "are yonder scenes; but, viewed through the medium of a vexed and troubled heart, they are wanting in glory. Why is it that there is ever a longing—a void—in the soul? Why cannot we, like the birds of the air or the flowers of the meadow, who heed neither hunter's arrow nor midnight storm, after both are sped, revel and grow wild in the bliss of sunshine and flowers? Why doth sorrow, like a taskmaster, scourge us, as if we were slaves, away from all gladness? Why does disappointment embitter the very fountains of life? Is it because we are human, and that there is a something which we know not of, that would fill all the desires of an immortal nature? Is it because there is a balm, down-flowing to the earth, which our instincts long for, yet cannot find? O NERF NAOM, lead me true wisdom!"

An attendant entered,—one of the esquires of the anteroom,—and ushered in Count Ulric of Heidelberg, who, bowing with courtly reverence, lifted the long white fingers of the lady to his lips.

"Be seated, Count Ulric," she said, disengaging her hand with a queenly air; for she had heard somewhat of his treachery toward his friend at Tara. "Methought thou hadst gone to the schools at Lough-Tore."

"No, my Lady Bernice. Some unexpected

deliberations detain the Arch-Druid at yonder temple; and, weary of its monotony, to avoid hanging myself, I galloped over to Innistore, in hopes to find thy lord in a humor for hawking this fine day; but they tell me that he has gone a journey."

"Yes; he has gone to seek an interview with our brother Abaris, who so unwarily fell into the magic nets of Patricius," she replied, while a red spot glowed on her forehead.

"Those events have indeed become portentous, in which the monarch, the teachers of the schools, and the bravest chiefs, take the lead," said Count Ulric, with a sneer. "My creed is, to laugh at all doctrines and let them dance round their circle of folly unmolested, unless they interfere with me in some peculiar way. But what sayest thou, noble lady, to these strange doings?"

"Say, sir count! What can a weak woman say, when men forget their fidelity to all faith and honor? Had I been there, Patricius would have found me, at least, to defy and scorn his falsehoods," she said, while such a fierce light shot from her eyes that Ulric involuntarily lowered his, and thought it safer to change the subject.

"Hast thou heard the strange news from the temple?" he asked.

"No, sir count, I have heard nothing, since they returned from Tara. Methought that were enough to last one a lifetime," she said, with a quiet but concentrated air of wrath.

"Not heard it yet, my Lady Bernice?—Why there has been the wildest excitement there I ever witnessed. It was caused by an event of the most unexpected and startling character. At first I felt, as in duty bound, highly wrought up; but, as success now seems uncertain, all zest is gone, and, as I told thee, noble lady, I galloped hither to seek diversion."

He did not understand the quivering of those thin nostrils and the gathering flush on those oval cheeks; he did not know that her lips had opened to call him "Fool," but sat all unconscious, until she burst out with, "On my honor as the wife of a noble prince, thou hast not been an inmate of the temple so long without learning something. Thy words are as mysterious as the revelations of an oracle."

"I will speak more plainly, lady," he said, bowing. "Didst thou ever hear of Mona the vestal?"

"Mona, the Rose of the Temple?—She who was drowned in the sea?"

"The same. She was not drowned, as was supposed. Dairene, one of the older vestals, had seen and talked with her. She fled away from the temple, and sought refuge with some accursed Christians, who have converted her to their belief. Semo declares that the most awful penalties, the most horrid tortures, shall burn and rack her, when she is delivered into his hands. But no trace has been discovered as yet."

"Mona! Mona, the innocent and beautiful! Can it be so?" murmured the lady.

"The Count Clotaire of Bretagne once saw Mona unveiled, and formed a wild and passionate love for her. He has also become a Christian, and it is expected that when one is found the other will not be far off. She, of course, will have to die; he will be sent back in disgrace to his father's court at Bretagne," said Count Ulric, twirling his small jeweled dagger around his fingers.

"This crowns their triumphs. Druids, monarchs, bards, chiefs, and now a vestal of NERF NAOM! Let the honor of the temple be vindicated! Let her perish, were she ten times more lovely, were she ten times more gentle and sweet-voiced!—let her perish, a warning and spectacle to those who, like her, may be deluded!" exclaimed the Lady Bernice, with a dark flashing of the eye.

There was a quick sound of footsteps in the anteroom, a rustling of robes, and quick panting breath; then the drapery that covered the entrance was dashed aside, and Mona ran forward and knelt at the lady's feet, closely followed by Aileen, in such a tempest of fury that every limb quivered, and she could not speak.

"What means this intrusion? Aileen, how darrest thou come thus into my presence? and who is this dark stranger?"

"Gracious lady, she is but a servant,—one whom I employed a few weeks ago. It is she who has led me hither,—she who, because I wished to chastise Panthea, the slave, for laziness, almost tore my eyes out. And when she saw that I would do it, she flew off, like a mad cat, to appeal to thee," exclaimed Aileen, stammering and stammering.

"She did right, for aught I know, Aileen. But be silent. You have forced this quarrel into my presence, and I shall adjust it to suit myself. What wouldst thou, dark stranger?" said the Lady Bernice to Mona, who still knelt, with folded hands and downcast eyes, at her feet.

"Pardon me, lady, if I have presumed too far for one in my humble condition; but when Aileen would have stripped Panthea and laid the knotted scourge on the shoulders of one so ill and crippled as she is, I only besought her to spare Panthea and lay the stripes on me," said Mona, in low, trembling tones. "But she

would not relent. Then I dared to appeal to thee,—not against Aileen, but to beseech thee, noble lady, to order that I may be scourged instead of Panthea."

"Is Panthea of thy kith and kin?" inquired the Lady of Innistore, while a flood of strange and turbulent emotions swept through her mind.

"No, lady, she is a foreigner,—I am a native of Erin; but, oh, lady, her age, her sufferings, the slow approach of death to one so unoffended, has made her my sister,—my mother. I only beg for the stripes, that Panthea may be spared."

"So let it be," said the lady, after a pause of several minutes, during which she fixed her keen, flashing eyes on Mona's face, as if through its linements she would read the secrets of her inmost soul. "Aileen,—dost thou hear me?—spare Panthea. Let the scourge fall on the shoulders that are willing to bear it; and, remember, I shall require from thee a strict account of the old slave, whom I ever found faithful and true to my interests."

"Thanks, lady,—thanks!" whispered Mona, while her face grew radiant with the light within.

"Leave me," said the lady, more gently.—"This is so noble and heroic, sir count, that, although my heart pleaded loudly for that dark and beautiful maiden, I could not deprive her of the glory of it."

"And yet," said Count Ulric, with a sneer, "I make no doubt, most noble lady, that thou hast frustrated some deep design. She counted largely on thy generosity, and would have sacrificed her heroism to her safety."

"Thou art a disbeliever, then, in exalted heroism of mind,—in the truth of heroic generosity! I pity thee, Count of Heidelberg," said the lady, with a smile of scorn.

"I have surely seen that face before," he replied, half musingly; for he deemed it wiser in him to avoid a discussion on the attributes of exalted natures. "It is like a half-forgotten dream. Those wild, beautiful eyes! that voice! Lady, if it were not for the Egyptian hue of that skin, I should say she was Mona the vestal."

"Thou hast an imagination which certainly suggests strange conjectures. Mona the vestal! I would warn thee, however, not to let thy wild suspicions subject the maiden to insult and exposure,—perhaps danger from the infuriate Druids. She is under the protection of the Lord of Innistore, who knows how to avenge an injury offered to the mahest of his vassals," exclaimed the Lady Bernice, while a red spot glowed on her cheeks, and her dilated nostrils and flashing eyes gave her visitor silent but eloquent warning to pursue the subject no further. So, making his adieu, he snatched up his plumed cap, and, with a lowly reverence, in which there was something of mockery, withdrew.

"My vengeance," he muttered, as he ran down the marble stairway,—my vengeance is at hand, Sir Count of Bretagne. Thou didst rob me of a royal bride at Tara: I will in turn torture thee. Before day-dawn to-morrow thy vestal-love shall be in the hands of the Druids,—to suffer such pangs as shall tear thy heart asunder to hear of."

"The imperious dame was once more alone. But a darker shadow rested on her queenly brow. Through her soul strange tumults were surging. Every nobler impulse of her nature, every generous chord of her woman's heart, paid homage to the heroic courage, the divine charity, of that delicate and fragile maiden who had forced her way into her presence to implore a boon! And such a boon! To be scourged! And for whom? For one who might reward her for the sacrifice? For one to whom she owed fealty and obedience? Was it for the mother from whose breast she drank the stream of life? It was for none of these, but for a poor, despised slave,—a deformed and disgusting object, so very abject in her lowliness that the meanest of her servants felt themselves degraded by handing her a cup of water! There was a motive under it all, which she, noble and well-learned lady, could not comprehend. It could not be human affection. The mystery, whatever it was, might be good or bad. It should be tested. If bad, then the maiden deserved the scourge; if good, her sufferings should be amply rewarded by ease and affluence, to which she would elevate her; for then indeed,—thought the Lady of Innistore—shall I have found a being worthy of the love of a nature like mine."

Then she touched a small gold hand-bell, and two fair young maidens, her attendants, instantly came in from the anteroom, where they had been embroidering.

"Tell my equire to saddle my hunting barb, and my falconer to bring out the hawks; then don thy riding-gear to attend me in an hour's sport."

In a little while the gay cavalcade was coursing over the plains beyond Innistore.—The fragrance of shamrocks and new hay, with the scents of the wild wood, floated on the calm air, through which the sun poured his glory like showers of gold over the earth and sea. A gray heron and white dove soon appeared, floating high up,—soaring and bathing in the

* Dathy no doubt alluded to the cave of Lough Derg, known as Patrick's Purgatory, where the apostle used to retire to pray and do penance.