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MONA THE VESTAL.

A TALE OF THE TIMES OF ST. PATRICK.

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CHAPTER IX.—(Continued.)

"It is a bright myth; and death effaces the sacrifice," said Abaris, thoughtfully. "If, then, O Clotaire, my friend, the thought of the dead Mona inspires thee more fully with that active principle of good without which the longest life is valueless, cherish it. The softer emotions of our nature need discipline, equally with the baser passions: whatever feeds them insidiously exposes the noble soul to the dangers of sensuality," replied the bard, with an air of grave affection.

"Noble Abaris, let thy superior wisdom be my safeguard," replied the young noble, with proud humility. "Thou art always calm, and canst well guide the reins of my impetuous will."

"Calm! Am I calm now?" asked Abaris, abruptly.

"As calm and as cold as yonder sky," replied Clotaire.

"Thou art deceived. My impetuous nature is only chained by a powerful will, which makes the pursuit of virtue its chief aim. But that which passed to-day on the plains of Magh-Breagh has roused all my inner self to a fierce perturbation. I would have avenged by one fell blow the outrage of this daring Patrius, who now seeks by stratagem what the Romans of other days sought by violence. Even now those lights which dance mockingly from his tents over the dark waves of the Boyne, rouse up the chained menials of my will to tumult and violence. But what a comedy is individual wrath against such monstrous provocation! Erin shall never be dishonored in me. It shall not go down to posterity that one of her bards was the assassin of a defenceless stranger, although that stranger hath come with guile and insult to the foot of our throne and altar."

"But why heed so despicable an enemy, O Abaris? He is alone and defenceless. What is there to fear?"

"That which human power cannot sway," replied Abaris, gloomily. "You stranger fills my soul with trouble. Even now there is wailing and weeping in the temple for the woe his coming foreshadows. He must be possessed of knowledge beyond mortal sense; or how dare he, unattended except by a few fanatics, and unarmed, throw open contempt on the Bealtic rites? If he is a mere spy, all will be well. But come with me."

In another moment the Count of Bretagne was seated, with Abaris the bard, in a currage which lay moored among the sedges on the river bank. Abaris grasped the oars and pushed out from the shore. The oars boat beneath the sinewy strength of his arms, the light currage shot out across the mid-channel, riding the waves like a feather, and in a little while glided up on the sands of the opposite shore. Everything about the little camp of Patrius, toward which they directed their steps, was wrapped in silence and repose. After searching around in vain for some indications which might betray him as a spy or invader, and reconnoitering every inch of ground, without the least interruption, they retraced their steps in silence, when suddenly the curtain which hung before the entrance of the tent of Patrius was drawn aside, and a person came hastily out, who, forgetting to replace it, passed into one of the tents in the rear. Standing back in deep shadow, Abaris and Clotaire, without being themselves exposed to observation, saw all that was in the tent of Patrius. They saw him, and wondered at his majestic and benign aspect, his noble air and intellectual features, and the symmetry of his well proportioned frame. He was arrayed in the rich and flowing vestments of the Roman patricii, and wore, suspended by a chain of gold, an insignia of jewels and gold on his breast, which Abaris thought resembled those crosses which the Egyptians revered as emblems of immortality. He was refolding a parchment, which he secured carefully with cords of twisted silk, after which he knelt before a rude altar, on which stood a crucifix and taper, and folding his hands, bowed his head with an expression of great humility, after which he made a sign on his forehead, breast, and shoulders, which they could not comprehend, and uttered rapid and fervent words in a language which they could not distinguish, while his eyes, up-lifted, seemed to behold objects beyond mortal vision. They crept nearer, — for they see that he is so wrapped in adoration that he would not heed them if they stood before him, — and listen. — They both understand him now, as, in the chaste and majestic language of Rome, he pours out the eloquence of his pleading soul for Erin. How he beseeches his Lord, whom he calls Jesus, to enlighten their darkness, to strike off their fetters, to overthrow the idols and abolish the power of demons in this His own inheritance! How he implores the assistance of a Holy and Divine Spirit, of whose existence they have never heard, and beseeches him to

touch his lips with fire, that on the morrow he may preach salvation to the Gentiles, and, like Paul at Athens, make known to the rulers and princes of the people a crucified God.

Abaris, intent and silent, almost breathless, leaned forward, the fine lineaments of his face so motionless and pale that they looked like chiseled marble, while his large eyes glowed beneath his massive brows like living sparks. But Patrius uttered no more. His up-lifted face wore a look of wrapt contemplation, while his features shown with a light that was flowing back and forth, between heaven and him, like a tide of glory.

"It is time for us to be gone," whispered Abaris.

"Dost thou still feel troubled?" asked Clotaire, as they glided swiftly through the gloom towards the shore.

"More than before, — a thousandfold more than before," replied Abaris, in an agitated voice. "To whom does he pray? Whence the light that beamed around him, like the light of a new day beaming behind the eastern hills? He is some mighty enchanter or wondrous prophet! Already I feel the shadow of stupendous changes. Quick, Clotaire! — I am oppressed! I suffocate! — Away from this spot! — out, out on the foaming river! The wind rushes down on the flood tide — quick! out with the oars! — There — so! There!" he said, or rather gasped, as they threw themselves into the light currage, which, unmoored, was swept out by the violence of the tide, and danced about like a bubble on the foaming river. A few powerful sweeps of the oar steadied it, and turned its prow shoreward.

When they landed, it was nearly day-dawn. The herdsmen were already leading their flocks out toward the glades and pasture-lands, and the ways leading into Tara were filled with country-people, who were bringing their produce to market, in hopes of reaping a golden harvest in exchange for their commodities.

"We shall meet in a few hours in the hall of Tara," said Abaris, taking leave of Clotaire at the portals of his royal father's court. "Ha! here is my mother! Why abroad so early, my lady mother?"

"A happy and proud day to thee, Abaris, my son," said the lady, kissing his forehead, "and to thee, noble stranger, for whose coming I have watched since the departure of my guests. Pardon us if, too jealous of the honor of the vestals of NERF NAOM, of which order our fairest and dearest daughter is a member, we resented a slander which, at the time it was uttered, filled us with dread and horror. Pity our feelings when we thought that the sanctuary which shelters our daughter had been invaded by sacrilege."

"Royal lady, thou art too kind to a stranger. It is sufficient for me that I am justified, and cleared of a dishonorable imputation," replied the young noble, with a look of proud humility.

"We shall no longer be strangers, noble youth. Let me assume a mother's place in thy regard while thou art absent from the noble lady of Bretagne, who may well feel proud of her son. Abaris," said the lady, turning to speak to the bard. But he was gone; and, calling an attendant, she directed him to conduct the Count of Bretagne to the guest-chamber usually appropriated to royal visitors, and order refreshments.

At an early hour of the day, people began to throng up toward the hall of Tara. The minds of men were filled with vague apprehensions and expectations of some wonderful event, which for the time seemed to exclude all those sentiments of national pride which had heretofore governed them on these occasions. Murmurs and whispers ran from one to another, until the name of Patrius and the prophecy of the Arch-Druid were on every tongue.

At last a peal of martial music burst on the air, and the great portals of the hall of Tara were thrown open. To Clotaire of Bretagne, who had gone up in the suite of the King of Munster and obtained an advantageous position which commanded an uninterrupted view, the coup-d'œil was magnificent. The hall, five hundred feet long, was adorned with elegant pillars, which, like the walls, were incrustated with fine Italian marble. At the upper end was the throne, canopied over with rich silks heavily embroidered with gold, over which hung the shield and armorial quarterings of the monarch. This was surrounded by seats of honor, wrought of precious metals and ivory and decorated with jewels. The stalls or seats of the members of the Assembly were of highly-carved oak, and designated by the shields and insignia of the order of those to whom they were assigned.

The monarch has taken his seat; the princes of the Milesian blood-royal take their station near his person; the four provincial kings surround him; the Druids and royal bards file slowly in, and seat themselves in their places near the throne; then follow the senators and commons of the Assembly, who fill the grand hall to its utmost limits, all seated according to their order and rank. On this day the riches and resources of the kingdom were well represented by the magnificence of the spectacle, and its strength exhibited by the loyalty and wisdom of men who wore on their coun-

tenances a grave forethought and determined patriotism. The splendor of the royal robes, the grave magnificence of the Druids, the light yet costly attire of the bards, and the rich robing of the nobles glittering with gold and sprinkled thick with gems, threw a glory over the pageant which dazzled and bewildered the eye. When all was arranged for the opening of the Assembly, the peal and clangor of music were succeeded by a grand flourish of trumpets, after which all was silent, — so silent that a deep breath would have rippled the stillness which pervaded that immense hall. The monarch Laogare arose, and, resting his hand on his jeweled scepter and throwing the other out with a graceful and impressive gesture, addressed the Estates of Tara: —

"Kings, princes, priests, bards, nobles, and chiefs! Before the regular business of the Assembly opens, we wish to give audience to one Patrius, — the same who dared to throw contempt on the Bealtic rites on the plains of Magh-Breagh. He is here, we learn, under the sacred character of ambassador, and belongs to an order of the Roman nobility which ranks next to the imperial dignity. This fact is signified by his name. We should receive him with all the honors due to his rank, had he not infringed our laws and seduced our subjects. As it is, to signify our grave displeasure toward this impudent innovator, we command all who are here present to remain seated when he enters. Now, heralds, conduct Patrius before the Estates of Tara."

The eyes of Semo glared beneath his shaggy white brows, and the Druids turned fierce and vindictive glances toward the entrance, while the countenances of all expressed a profound and curious interest. Each one had formed his opinion of the aspect and bearing of Patrius; but none were prepared to see him enter unarmed, calm, and dignified in every gesture. Bare-headed, his noble and radiant countenance full of elevated and holy thought, his clear eyes truthful and beaming with the spirit of his mission, he walked slowly up the nave of the hall, and stood in serene majesty before the monarch and the Assembly.

"Noble stranger," exclaimed Ere the son of Dego, a chief of royal descent, while he sprang up from his seat, "such discourtesy were a disgrace to Erin. Sit thou here: I will stand, if needs be one must."

"The blessing of God and the stranger on thee, noble chief," replied Patrius, laying his hand on the head of Ere.

"Thou shalt answer for thy contumacy, thou degenerate son of a loyal sire," cried the monarch, in wrathful tones, to the noble and impulsive man, who stood with folded arms, unmoved and firm, by the side of Patrius, casting around him a defiant glance, which took in all from the monarch on his throne to the lowest individual present. "And thou, enchanter! how is it thou dares to practice thy seductive arts in our very presence? Whence come ye, and why?"

"I come, O king," replied Patrius, in strong, clear tones, which rang distinctly throughout the extent of the hall and reached every ear, — "I come, O king, from my Lord the Pope, Celestine, Sovereign of Rome, who deigned to bestow on me, a poor man, surname Succath, and an humble priest, the puissant and noble order of the *Patricii*, that his messenger might do no dishonor, by the meanness of his rank, to the splendor of the court which receives him. But, laying aside all considerations of earthly grandeur, I announce myself a priest of the Most High God, whose sole object in coming hither is to unfold to this nation the mighty plan of salvation, to make known to them the value and true destiny of their immortal souls, and preach to all one Lord, one faith, and one baptism."

A confused and wrathful murmur followed the speech of Patrius, blended strangely with assurances of protection and expressions of admiration: then all was silent expectation once more.

"Unarmed and defenseless," continued Patrius, "I have come with no other protection than that strength with which the grandeur of my divine mission invests me. I have come to bring to ye glad tidings of great joy; to direct those who pour out their souls in senseless worship to vain idols, to a true and mighty God, the Creator and sovereign Lord of heaven and earth, — to unseal rich treasures of grace, even to those who defile the earth by their idolatrous ministrations, and make known to all the immeasurable love and mercy of a God who immolated Himself for the salvation of His creatures."

"Thou art a very Salomoneus, O Patrius, — a base pretender, whom TIENNE consign in wrath to the righteous judgments of Bacus, when thy mad fallacies shall be washed away like the sands of the sea by the test of a mightier power than thy ignorance and presumption dream of," said Semo, with a bitter and sneering laugh.

But Patrius, inspired by divine light, spoke with holy eloquence to that royal, priestly, and noble throng. With such force and unctious, with such clearness and perspicuity,

he unfolded to them with such sublime simplicity the grandeur of the designs of God for man, he told the story of Bethlehem and Calvary with such pathetic force, that the boldest hearts quailed, the most superstitious felt an undefined terror and misgiving which made them tremble, while not a few sheltered themselves behind the pillars and covered their faces with their robes to conceal their emotion. The Druids gnashed their teeth and clinched their hands until the blood started beneath the nails, as the eloquence of divine truth rolled, like wrathful thunders, through the recesses of their souls. While Patrius discoursed on the sublime mystery of the Trinity, Semo, whose face was lurid with the wrath that raged within him, arose, and, with an air of triumph, exclaimed, —

"Thy story, O stranger, is full of wonders, which are strung together with rare and cunning power. The ignorant, who are not accustomed to the divination of mysteries, or well versed in that art which can detect a subtle error in pleasing novelties, might receive these dogmas which claim a divine superiority over those which we profess; but thou hast to do with men whose age and experience, whose wisdom and judgment, can discriminate between pretension and reality, — between falsity and truth. There is one point in thy vaunted doctrines so utterly absurd that the poorest hind in Erin would laugh it and thee to scorn, — a fallacy which will destroy the entire fabric of thy false system. I allude to this Trinity, concerning which thou hast poured out a flood of eloquent argument sufficient to drown us all — if it were not so utterly absurd. How can Three exist in one, and one in Three?"

Patrius paused. He lifted his eyes heavenward, then turned to his disciple, Benignus, who was with him, and whispered a few words in his ear. Benignus left the hall, unmolested, while Patrius stood silent and patient, awaiting his return. A smile of scorn passed from face to face. They thought that Semo had silenced Patrius. His downcast eyes and silence indicated defeat.

"He is preparing to escape," whispered one.

"He has sent the crazed son of Seaguan for some potent charm to aid him," said another.

"We shall this day see the glory of TIENNE vindicated!"

"I thought he was no match for Semo. But see! his messenger returns: he presents something to him: it looks like a handful of leaves. Hark! Patrius speaks."

"To prove, O sage," began Patrius, holding up to the view of all a *slamrock*, whose three leaves spread out in vigorous beauty from its slender stem, — "to prove that I utter no absurdity, and the reality and possibility of the existence of the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost in the unity of one Godhead, I have only shown you this humble plant on which ye have oftentimes trodden, to convince ye that the truth can be made manifest by the simplest symbol of illustration."*

So simple, yet so convincing, was this practical argument, that many who, having been almost persuaded, had yielded to the difficulties of the argument proposed by Semo, now declared themselves believers in the faith of Patrius.

Then arose a din and tumult. Like stormy surges dashing against a rock-bound shore, all words, all voices, combined to swell the discord and increase the tumult; and when Dubtach, the Arch-Poet of the monarch, left his seat and, pushing through the crowd, knelt at the feet of Patrius and asked for baptism, the Druids, covered with dread and confusion, clamored for his arrest, and prophesied ruin to the institutions of the land unless the Roman impostor suffered the extreme penalty of the law for sedition. But, lo! two of their order — two noble and virtuous men — two ollahms held in high repute in the temple and schools — rush forward and declare themselves disciples of Patrius; and now a youthful stranger, whose olive skin and black flashing eyes declare him to be a native of another land, whose noble bearing and manly beauty attract universal attention, throws himself before Patrius, asking to be initiated in the truths of salvation.

"Clotaire of Bretagne! thou art mad! Hence! hence!" shouted Semo, when he saw it. "Ha! what is this? Abaris! Abaris! Oh, my son! my son! Thou false, too, to the religion of thy fathers. O king, arrest this man, who is robbing thee of the gems of the chivalry and talent of Erin. I will slay him!" exclaimed the infuriate Druid, separating the crowd right and left with his arms, which beat wildly about him, to open the way to Patrius.

"Hold! hold!" said Laogare, springing before him and stretching his scepter over the head of Patrius, a sign of royal protection. "The hall of Temora shall be stained by no deed like this."

"Has the false tongue of the stranger beguiled thee also, O royal Laogare?" asked Semo, panting for breath, and pallid with impotent rage.

"It is better, O sage, to believe than perish,"† replied the monarch. Semo could bear no more, but, rushing out of the hall, he fled, as

fast as his aged limbs would bear him, away to the innermost recesses of the temple.

CHAPTER X.—DAIRENE.

The purple shadows of twilight lingered like a solemn dream over the earth. Like a veiled and silent angel the evening star waited beside the portals of night. Gentle dews descended like heavenly gifts, — all unseen until leaf and flower were wet with translucent gems, all unfelt until the lonely blossoms of the wild-wood, and tangled vines, creeping through mossy glens, lifted their heads in refreshment, as on its earth-mission the spirit of the night passed over them. The waves seemed hushed to rest, and swept against the rocks and through the abysses that lined the rugged shore, in soft and murmuring echoes. The marble temple of Nerf, on its wild and beautiful promontory, and the distant turrets of Innistore, where a beacon-light always burned from sunset to sunrise, over which fluttered the national ensign gleaming with green and gold, loomed up gray and indistinct through the gathering mist. Every sound except the voice of nature was hushed, while, clear and wild, the song of the night-tingle rang through the solitude in sweet reverberations.

But now, along the margin of the woods, through the dim and shaded avenues which skirted the beach, white-veiled forms began to flit like wraiths, so fleet and noiseless was their motion; and moon low sweet symphonies swelled on the night-winds like spirit-music, so soft, so ethereal, so solemn were their tones. The vestals of NERF NAOM were keeping vigils in the sacred grove until the moon arose, when they would return to the temple to open the mystic rites in honor of her who was afterward worshipped in Greece and Carthage as *Ifeate*.

Dairene, sad and drooping, wandered away from the rest, to watch alone for the first gleam of that golden disk over the distant hills, which formerly she was the first to greet with choral hymns. Along the cool and misty shore she wandered, until the sound of the waves brought to her heart low, sad, whispering thoughts of Mona. She had ever been grave and silent; but, since Mona had disappeared, she was never heard to speak, unless when her duties as guardian of the vestals compelled her to do so; and those who on rare occasions caught a glimpse of her face, which she kept constantly covered, declared that it was as the face of the dead. The younger vestals always hushed their laughter and ceased their jests when she came among them or passed through their midst. It was the only way in which they could show sympathy for so stern and silent a sorrow. Gradually she withdrew herself from all association with them, except in the solemn rites of the temple, where she was always the first and the last to come and to go. In her fastings and vigils, she seemed to forget that she was mortal; and it was no unusual thing for her to be found lying lifeless and cold on the marble pavement, where they had left her kneeling so rapt in the wild brooding of her anguish and the dark chimeras of her mistaken creed that they dared not call or touch her. — She was conscious that she had become like a troubled phantom among her kind; and it gave her no slight pang to feel that, wherever she moved, the shadow of her woe fell on over lives to which time would bring its own bitterness; but the feeling was buried deep down in her heart, and with few but gentle words she ever evaded all intercourse with the inmates of the temple. Her favorite haunts were along the shore, and over the wild, precipitous ledges of rock that, barrier-like, lifted their sharp but-tlements over the sea. Twice, in the shadowy twilight, — far down on the beach, while with folded hands and downcast eyes she walked in deep musing, — she heard the sound of garments trailing past her; and once, at midnight, when the moon, gibbous and pale, looked down through racks of white cloud, she distinctly saw a form, fitting near her, so like Mona that she stretched out her arms to clasp it, and fell fainting on the shore.

Now, gliding along with rapid motion, — but not so rapid were her steps as the wild throbbing of her heart, — casting her eyes now toward the far-off hills, now out on the shadowy sea, now upward where the star-spirits were lighting the golden fires on the altars of heaven, she found herself far away, in a wild and lonely place among the rocks, through whose narrow fissures the waters hissed like serpents. She paused to rest, while Memory the mocker lifted the pall from the shrine in her soul where lay the image of Mona. It touched the dead form, and it started into life and warmth and beauty. But what were such visions to her? She could not touch it; she could not fold it to her bosom as of yore; and, wringing her hands, she lifted up her voice, and, in her anguish, cried, —

"Could I only have pillowed thy head, — could I have kissed thy cold clay, while I decked it with flowers, — had I watched thy fleeting breath, and gathered into my soul thy last sigh, as it left thy bosom, — there would be some sweetness in the bitter draught. But to think of thee, sunlight of my life! torn by the jagged rocks, tossed and bruised by the cruel waves, thy joyous

* The words of Laogare.

† Historic.

* The words of St. Patrick.

† The words of Laogare.