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MONA THE VESTAL.

A TALE OF THE TIMES OF ST. PATRICK.

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CHAPTER VII.—(Continued.)

"He to whom the bards refuse those last offices is deemed accursed, and his spirit wanders in darkness and gloom, through woods, morasses, and fen, where the piping winds blend their lament, and the Banshee's moan in terrific sounds together. For these accursed ones the probation of transmigration of spirits is denied."

"Pardon me, noble Abaris," said Clotaire, reverently. "Thy vocation is indeed enviable. Thy order is indeed the genius of enlightened government,—a mighty magician, who swayeth the minds of men at will. Brute force and brute triumphs are admirable; but those who conquer and subdue without arms are worthy of all honor."

"Our functions do not disqualify us for the highest honors in the gift of the nation," continued Abaris. "The greatest and wisest of Erin's legislators and kings was *Eochaidh*, a bard, whose reign constitutes the most memorable epoch in our history. Being a prince of profound learning, and wishing to unite his reverence for his order with his royal dignities, he assumed the name of OILIAM FORULA.† But let us drop these grave matters, and divert ourselves with the scenes below."

"By Pallas! those throngs of mortals, who in every direction are moving toward Tara, with banners of green and gold, which gleam in the sunlight, only a degree brighter than the robes they wear, remind me of the great tournament I once saw at Paris," exclaimed the enthusiastic young noble.

"It is not only a fair pageant," said Abaris, proudly, while his cheeks glowed and his eyes flashed, "but in all the scene you behold evidences of a nation's glory and prosperity. But we linger here too long; let us hasten away to rejoice Semo, who is even now approaching the south gate of the city."

"Shall we, Ulric of Heidelberg and I, reside with Semo at Tara?" inquired the young count, anxiously.

"Nay, noble stranger: Semo will spend his time between the council-chamber and the temple. Thou and Count Ulric will be the guests of my father, the King of Munster."

"And thyself, Abaris:—we shall not be separated, I hope?"

"I belong to the temple also. My duties will leave me no time for social pleasures," he replied, gravely.

"I shall not be so churlish as to refuse the proffered hospitality of thy house, for I, like all my countrymen, am fond of the courtesies and refinements of life; but—pardon my forwardness—there are no daughters belonging to thy father's household?"

"I have five sisters, sir count, who are called the crown-jewels of Munster, because they are as good as they are fair, and a mother whose maternal virtues are the glory of her family," said the bard, with tender pride. "Of my five sisters two only are at home. One is the consort of the King of Ulster; one—the youngest and loveliest—is a vestal of Nerf; one is lady of honor to the Queen of Laogare. Under the auspices of my mother and the two maidens who remain with her, thou wilt see not only the beautiful maids of Erin, but the customs and manners of our highest classes. Now for a gallop over the plains of Magh-Breagh toward Tara."

When Semo, with his cortege, reached the gates of the city, he was met by a courier from the monarch, who handed him a vellum billet, and informed him that one of the royal chariots with an escort of honor, awaited his pleasure. He opened the note, which contained only a few words, and without a remark entered the chariot, and was driven rapidly off toward the palace of Tara.

In a lofty chamber, whose walls were incrustated with Italian marble and gold,—where the light flowed in through glass windows which were stained in gorgeous dyes,—where chairs and couches of carved oak, inlaid with silver and pearl and covered with the richest stuffs,—where from the slender pillars hung draperies from the looms of Egypt and Ind,—where, under shaded arches, set far back, like sacred things, were heaps of old Etruscan and Phoenician manuscripts,—where stood a table covered with charts, treaties, and Milesian books of law, with implements of writing in gold and silver,—where, in a place of honor, stood a harp studded with jewels,—was the monarch Laogare. He was a tall, majestic-looking personage, who wore his kingly robes with a royal air, and whose countenance indicated intelligence, frankness, and wisdom, with an occasional flash in his eyes which also told of an ardent and impetuous temperament. His usual expression was cheerful, dignified, and unclouded; but when Semo the Arch-Druid entered his cabinet,

his countenance wore a flushed and troubled look. He stepped forward, and, after saluting the aged Druid, led him to a seat beside his own. An attendant entered with refreshments; but Semo—rigid in all the observances of his order—partook only of a thin cake of wheaton bread and a goblet of water, then, turning to the king, awaited in grave silence the opening of the business which had brought him hither with such unusual speed.

"Thou wilt pardon me, venerable Semo," said the monarch, "that, having matters of grave import weighing on my mind,—matters which threaten the ancient institution of Erin with danger,—I have thus hastily sought thy counsel."

"Whatever bodes evil to Erin, O king, bodes it also to me; and whatever threatens her monarch touches the soul of mine honor," said Semo, slowly.

"But this foe aims directly at thy order.—It would overthrow the power of the temple, and crush the dogmas which we inherit from our forefathers and Phoenicians."

A shudder passed over Semo, which shook his robes; but, commanding himself, he replied, in calm, firm tones,—

"I am old and calm! Speak out, royal Laogare; speak out; and if this evil can be remedied by my counsels, they are thine. If they are powerless, let the *Rusga Catha* ring through Tara, and the foes of Erin be swept away by her chiefs, like chaff before the whirlwind."

"Know, then, that one who calleth himself Patricius has landed in Drogheda, where the Boyne falls into the sea, and is preaching his strange doctrines with such fervor that not only the people, but many of the nobles, have been converted to his novel creed. He declares that the religion taught by the Druids is vile and idolatrous, while the God whom he worships is powerful and alone worthy of the homage of mankind."

Just then the door opened, and the arch-pope of Laogare entered, with alarm and trepidation depicted on every feature. Not heeding the presence of Semo, in his impetuous haste, he knelt before Laogare, exclaiming,—

"Royal sir, Sesonon, the Lord of West-Meath, with all his family, has embraced the doctrines of the audacious stranger Patricius, who preaches an atonement through a crucified God, and pours libations in his honor on the heads of all who receive his word."

"Sesonon! sayst thou Sesonon is a traitor to the religion of his fathers? Sesonon, the bravest and most honored of our chiefs? Send hither the Grand Master of the Knights of Tara. But hold. Dabtach! where hath this infidel, this stirrer-up of sedition, concealed himself?" cried the indignant monarch.

"He scorns all concealment, royal Laogare, and is even now encamped at *Firta-Fir-Tiec*, on the banks of the Boyne, with his disciples," replied Dabtach.

"Summon the Knights of Tara and the Red Branch to the rescue!" cried the monarch, more than ever enraged. "I will in person lead them out to destroy this man, who beards us on our very throne."

"Monarch," said Semo, rising, "think not that I have traveled from the mouth of the Shannon to Tara without learning something of this man. A native of Gaul, he was in early youth sold by pirates to one Milocho, who appointed him to the care of his herds. After serving his seven years, he returned to the continent, from thence to Rome, where, by his address and great art he secured friends, who advanced his interests and fortunes at Court. He returns to Erin as the ambassador of Celestine, the sovereign of Rome, endowed with munificent gifts and a patent of nobility, which gives him a rank next to emperors. Hence we must be cautious. What we would withhold from the man must be conceded to the ambassador. The vengeance of our outraged and insulted order could not and should not crush the man, were he not invested with the robes of an imperial envoy. Let us wait. He has as yet only seduced men by false doctrines; but should he encroach a hair's breadth beyond the limits of his functions, let the gods be avenged."

"Speak on, venerable Semo: thy words are full of wisdom," said Laogare.

"Two days hence," continued the Arch-Druid, "the Baal-fire will be kindled on the plains of Magh-Breagh. Send a proclamation to Patricius, warning him that all fires must be extinguished, according to the ancient laws, on that day, and no spark kindled except the Baal-fire, from which alone it will be lawful for him, as well as the natives of Erin, to rekindle the blaze on his hearthstone. Then summon him to appear with his credentials, the following day, in the hall of Tara, where, before the assembled power and wisdom of Erin, he can declare his mission."

"Go, Dabtach, with two of the knights of Tara, and courteously give greeting to the stranger Patricius, inform him of our customs, and invite his attendance before the congress of Tara," said Laogare, throwing himself back, with a wearied look, in his chair. Semo, gathering up his robes, glided out, to be present at the rites of the temple, where they were waiting for him, and Dabtach, the bard, with-

drew to fulfill the commands of the monarch.

CHAPTER VIII.—THE BAAL-FIRE.

Through the gates of a broad marble court. Abaris, the bard, conducted his guests toward the vestibule of the royal palace of his father, the provincial King of Munster. Here he, in his father's name, welcomed them in courteous and affable terms, after which he spoke a few words of greeting to the numerous attendants, who thronged with reverential affection around him.

"We will now seek my mother and sisters, noble sirs," he said, inviting them, with a graceful gesture, to enter. Passing through an oblong hall, paneled with oak, they entered an apartment in the form of a peristyle, surrounded by slender pillars of polished marble. In the midst of the marble floor, whose inlaid pattern of colored stones vied with the painter's skill, was a fountain, which threw up toward the fretted ceiling two tiny jets of water, which, issuing from the throats of serpents whose scales were of gold, descended again in crystal gems over the mosses and flowers and winged myths which were arranged about the margin of its artificial basin. The products of Ind and Greece, statuary from the sculptors of the Cyclades, vases of silver and porphyry from Egypt, loaded with spices or rich flowers, hangings of silk, mirrors of steel, lamps of gold on pedestals of alabaster, enriched the scene.

The royal matron of Munster, hearing of her son's arrival with two strangers, hastened to welcome them. Indescribably tender and respectful was the demeanor of Abaris toward his mother, while hers to him was full of maternal pride, deference for his bardic character, and a deep, quiet air of love. She was a stately matron, who yet retained the brightness and freshness of youth, chastened by a dignified and graceful demeanor in line keeping with her age and station. She received the two foreign nobles, the friends of her son, the guests of the nation, with a welcome so kind and cheering that it at once placed them on the footing of friends. Won by the elegant grace of Clotaire, and not chilled by the sullen courtesy of Ulric, she went out, and returned with her daughters Eileen and Eva, to whom she made the strangers known with words of commendation, after which she led the way to the eating hall, where a table was ready spread with every delicacy and substantial dish which the culinary art of the day had introduced. Here Ulric of Heidelberg grew unctuous and bland, and convinced Clotaire,—who generally observed his movements, because he mistrusted his character,—by the dexterity with which he disposed of the viands, that his vaunted heroism was all bombast, and his ruling passion gluttony.

Conversation and music whiled the hours away until evening, when they went, with the King of Munster, to pay their court at Tara to the Queen of Laogare, after which they witnessed the midnight procession which opened the Bealtin mysteries. The next morning the mother of Abaris invited them to accompany herself and daughters to the opening of the council of the ladies at the *Grimnan-na-Niengham*, where they were dazzled by the beauty and splendor of the fair members of the council; from thence to the sacred grove, where the Druids and vestals performed solemn ceremonies in view of the people; after which they proceeded, in chariots, to the plains of Magh-Breagh, to witness the games and races of the Athlete.

Thus, in a continual whirl of pleasant novelty two days of the great festival sped by. But amid the pomps and pageants, the splendors and pleasures, of the scene, the thoughts of Clotaire wore one sad hue; his heart was shaded by its first grief; he had loved and lost in the same hour. As lightning sometimes impresses surrounding objects on the flesh of the victim it has stricken, so Mona's image, her wild, tender eyes, her splendid beauty, were indelibly stamped on his memory. In every scene, in sunshine and shadow, it walked with his inner life, and through its medium he saw all exterior things.

"Wilt thou accompany us to the procession of the vestals of Nerf to-night?" asked Eileen.

"By all means," quickly replied Ulric.—"Count Clotaire would rather lose his spurs than the sight of the pageant."

"It is very solemn and beautiful," replied Eileen, not perceiving the covert sneer, "though the vestals are all veiled, and we can only imagine the loveliness and youth they have vowed to Nerf."

"Are those vestals never seen unveiled, Count Clotaire?" urged Ulric, with a malicious sneer.

"It depends entirely on circumstances, I presume, Count Ulric. Thou art aware that there are sometimes imperative circumstances which will not even allow the chastisement of insolence. Inexorable events may also tear off the drapery from the vestal's brow," he replied pointedly.

"Are the vestals of noble birth; or are they chosen from the people?" inquired Ulric, turning to Eileen, to hide his confusion.

"Some are of noble birth,—a few of royal parentage. Many are the daughters of the people. We have a sister who is a vestal of Nerf Naom."

"A sister! It seems to my rude understanding that there are only three things in Erin to which all pay undivided homage,—religion, learning, and hospitality."

"Yes, we pay homage to these; but they are not, believe me, the only objects of our veneration," she replied, smiling. "But tell me," she continued, as the Count of Bretagne led her sister to the harp; "what is this mystery about the vestal?"

"Only a little amour of the Count of Bretagne's, of which he is ashamed. He managed to see one of the vestals of Munster without her veil, and became desperately enamored of her charms. Unfortunately for him she disappeared, and he has been wearing the cypress ever since," he replied, in a low, sarcastic tone.

An expression of horror shaded Eileen's face as she glanced toward Clotaire, who, all unconscious, stood beside her sister, turning over the music as she played; and, after a few remarks on indifferent subjects, she left the room to seek her mother, to whom she imparted the news she had just heard. Ere long a messenger came with a courteous apology to the two nobles, and a request to the Lady Eva to attend her mother, who was going to the palace of Tara on a visit to the Queen.—Chagrined and disappointed, Ulric cursed his stupidity and the malice which fell so speedily back on himself, while Clotaire, glad to be released, and happy in the prospect of solitude, hurried away to indulge his sadness by watching the vestals and thinking of Mona!

The next day was the grandest of the festival. Thousands and tens of thousands, in holiday attire, came in from hill and valley, from country-side and their homes by the distant sea, and congregated on the plains of Magh-Breagh. Tara emptied its thousands on the plain. From the banks of the Boyne, from the north and south, they still came, with pealing music and waving banners. With the braying of trumpets, the shrill scream of the *piobrach*, the softer notes of harps, and the anthems of human voices, they swept on,—a human ocean,—and surrounded the lofty altar, built of long narrow slabs of white marble, piled together, which towered like an isle of rock-crystal in the midst of the plain. The monarch, attended by his consort and family, the provincial kings and their families and retinues, the nobles and chieftains, in chariots whose adornments were of precious stones and the trappings of whose horses were links of silk, and gold, wound slowly—a splendid cortege—through the multitudes, toward it. There was a temporary throne, covered with cloth of gold, erected near the altar of Baal, on which the royal Laogare, surrounded by his court, took his station, in view of the vast concourse, who made the welkin ring with their shouts of fealty when they saw him standing crowned and robed in splendor, the protector of their own and their country's destinies.

Each individual carried either an unlighted taper of wax, or a torch of resinous wood.—Some of these were carved and twisted in grotesque forms; some were decked with flowers; some were moulded in the shape of birds, from whose peaks the oiled wick hung like a worm, others in the form of serpents, from whose open jaws it protruded like a tongue, while others, more elegant, were in the shape of flowers, the wick spread out in their cups like like delicate stamens. However much these tapers and torches differed, they were all intended for one object, which was to get light from the Baal-fire, to kindle the flame on their darkened hearth-stones.

The city was deserted, and more than a million of human beings were out in the plains of Magh-Breagh,—men of all ranks, ages, and climes,—to witness the solemnity. There was another feeling, besides reverence for the rites of their religion, which increased the interest of all present in the ceremonies. All had heard of Patricius and his doctrinal innovations. His tents on the banks of the Boyne were distinctly visible, and a rumor had gone abroad that he would in some signal manner show his contempt for the Bealtin ceremonies. At last, winding like a solemn current through the dense crowds, the Druids, bards, and brehons, led by the Arch-Druid Semo, moved along, to the sound of rolling anthems and deep-toned symphonies, toward the marble altar; while the human masses, pressed back on either side, like receding waves, made a clear pathway for them, paying them lowly homage as they passed. The Druids, arrayed in their magnificent robes, wrought with gold and blazoned with gems, their flowing locks crowned by the square caps of their order, with grave looks and majestic mien walked together in ranks of two and two.

The bards followed, arrayed in loose white *colthas*, confined about the waist by girdles, their limbs incased in a *truisse* of wet fitting closely and fastened about the ankles with stripes of the exact number of colors peculiar to their order, their beards flowing, and their long thick locks bound with fillets of gold, with their harps hanging pendant before them, and re-

ceived from the people, who believed them to be gifted with the powers of prophecy, a homage but little inferior to that they offered the Druids. After them came the brehons, or historians, clad in the distinctive dress belonging to their rank, and followed by the sacerdotal attendants and scholastics.

Meanwhile, Laogare, elevated by his position in full view of all, was observed to look pale and troubled, and threw more than one anxious glance toward the tents of the stranger, where all was silent and motionless.

Semo, bowed and faltering, assisted by two Druids, who bore between them, on a tray of gold, the fagots, tinder, and implements for kindling the sacred fire, ascended the steps of the altar, and, having reached the broad platform on top, stood with his head and hands uplifted, adoring the bright object of his worship. A hush, like the silence of the dead, fell on the hosts around, who with breathless awe watched his slightest movement. He held in his hand a framed crystal; and, after his assistants had arranged the fagots and tinder, he held it—uttering incantations all the while—so as to intercept the direct rays of the sun, now beaming on the scene in unclouded glory, and concentrate them into a powerful focus. In a few moments a light wreath of white smoke curled upward; it was wafted away, leaving in view a clear high flame of fire, which burned steadily and brightly. When the people saw it, a tremendous shout of exultation rent the air.—A burst of music, the clangor of trumpets, blended with the roar; but suddenly it was hushed: a wild fear and fury seemed to have fallen on all, when they saw Semo, ghastly, and shaking in every limb, with his arm outstretched toward the tents of Patricius, where, blazing fiercely and brightly, a large fire flamed up in the air.

"Behold, O son of Niall," exclaimed Semo, turning to Laogare,—"behold, sons of Heronun and Ir, how the daring stranger defies our sacred law and throws his infidel scorn on our most solemn rites. If those flames are not extinguished and trodden out, I tell thee, O king, that he who kindled it, and his successors, will hold the sovereignty of Erin forever."

"Venerable Semo," cried Laogare, in loud and distinct accents, "the fire thou hast drawn from heaven is sacred. That which hath been kindled by yon stranger is common flame, which imparteth neither curse nor blessing.—From its light the fires of Erin will not be rekindled. Therefore let it burn to ignoble ashes, while we light our torches at the sacred fires of Baal."

The Arch-Druid bowed his head, and another wild shout rolled upon the air, like thunder.

"To-morrow," continued the monarch, "this stranger shall answer for this insult to the representatives of all Erin, who will assemble in the great Hall of Tara, where he must either plead a good cause or suffer the penalty."

Laogare then gathered his robes about him, and, ascending the altar, adored for a moment, then held the point of his scepter, around which a taper of wax was twined, like a serpent, to the Baal-fire. When he withdrew it, and held it up, a small, strong flame was blazing on its point. This was the commencement of lighting up the hearth-stones of the kingdom from the Baal-fire. All who could, ascended and lit their tapers, or flambeaus, on the altar; those who were less fortunate contented themselves with the privilege of borrowing from a neighbor, quite satisfied to know that it all came from the same source; until the whole of that immense throng was supplied with a portion of the sacred fire, which they bore away rejoicing to their respective homes.

Meanwhile, the fire of Patricius burned low,—the white ashes were borne away like seeds on the wind; but it touched the roots of a dark mythology, whose branches it would wither and consume. In its ruddy light the Baal-fire had paled its demon glow; and, although the people knew it not then, it was to them as much a sign of promise as was the pillar of fire in the wilderness to the Israelites.

CHAPTER IX.—PATRICIUS.

There were to be no public processions that night. In the hidden recesses of the temple, before mysterious shrines, the awful and concluding rites of the festival, on which no profane eye might look, were to be celebrated.—But from the turrets and halls of Temora,* from the palace of Tara, and from the city festive lights blazed out on the night, while the light sounds of music and mirth floated in sweet, wild echoes through the air. The streets, garlanded with flowers and brilliantly illuminated, presented a scene of unequalled gaiety and splendor. Every door was thrown open, and every portal wreathed with evergreens and roses. Ladies attired in silken robes which blazed with jewels, and attended by groups of nobles, princes, and knights, all arrayed in the magnificent and distinctive insignia of their respective orders, thronged the streets, saluting each other with pleasant words of recognition and many a gay jest, as they visited from one house to another, remaining a short time at each, uniting in the dance or

*The palace of Laogare, the monarch.

† For a full description of the order of bards, see Mooney's very agreeable and instructive "History of Ireland."

* It must be remembered that Ireland, at this period, was the seat of civilization, learning, luxury, and refinement.