

THE LIFE OF ST. MONICA

BY

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VICAR-GENERAL OF ORLEANS

TRANSLATED BY

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“READ ST. MONICA’S LIFE. YOU WILL SEE HER CARE FOR HER
AUGUSTINE, AND FIND MUCH TO CONSOLE YOU.”—*FROM A
LETTER OF ST. FRANCIS DE SALES TO ST. JANE FRANCES DE
CHANTAL*

FROM THE 1888 EDITION BY THOMAS BAKER



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To

THE MOST HOLY FACE

OF

OUR DIVINE REDEEMER,
OUTRAGED WITH BLOWS AND SPITTLE
IN
HIS DOLOROUS PASSION,
THIS LIFE
OF
ITS DEVOTED SERVANT AND ADORER
IS
PIOUSLY AND REVERENTLY DEDICATED

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CHAPTER 1

332-353

Birth and Parentage—Early Youth—Marriage

The road leading from the ruins of Carthage to those of Hippo, and passing by ancient Sicca Veneria, traverses one of the most beautiful countries in the world. The ancients extolled its fertility, and we have lately seen a few touches of the pickaxe suffice to re-cover it with gardens of olive, groves of orange and lemon trees, with roses, vines, and rich harvests. As little effort was required to bring to light—for they were scarcely covered by the sand—innumerable monuments of the most beautiful Roman art, fragments of statues, shafts of pillars, sarcophagi covered with inscriptions, ruins of theatres, baths, temples, Roman roads, all the vestiges of a high state of civilization. Then, after travelling for some hours, surrounded by this renaissance of nature and these beautiful ruins of art, we in thought go back to that time when nature and art nourished simultaneously, and re-people these vast horizons with that haughty race which in the persons of Hamilcar, Hannibal, and Jugurtha, caused the fortunes of Rome for a moment to waver in the balance; and who, later on, touched by divine grace, after spurning all other yokes, accepted that of our Lord Jesus Christ, gave Tertullian, St. Cyprian, Lactantius, Arnobius, St. Augustine, and among virgins and martyrs, St. Perpetua, St. Felicia,

and so many others, to the Church, we feel that we tread one of those fruitful soils where, as Virgil sang, the rapid growth and beauty of the harvests is surpassed by that of the inhabitants.

About midway along this road, not far from the famous battle-field of Zama, and on the declivities of two hills which greet the rising sun, and are shaded by clusters of olive trees, stands a simple village, called by the Arabs of the present day, Souk-Arras. The few white houses of which it consists occupy part of the site where stood the ancient Roman city of Tagaste. The remaining portion, which is of considerable extent, covers the adjacent table-land, on the surface of which extensive ruins lie sleeping in the sun, half buried in sand, and overshadowed by acanthus, locust-trees, and beautiful angelicas. At the foot of this plateau extend vast meadows, watered by many refreshing streams which empty themselves into the Medjerda, the ancient Bagradas of the Romans; beyond, lie barren sandy tracks, still unreclaimed from the desert, and the horizon is bounded by a forest of cork-trees, behind which is the sea with its storms and calms.

On those unknown hills—for notwithstanding the beauty of its site, Tagaste is alluded to by no writer of antiquity save Pliny, who only mentions the haughtiness of the race inhabiting it—on those hills, with their vast and brilliant horizon, God placed the cradle of the Saint whose life I am about to relate.¹ It seems that in selecting such a spot,

¹ There is no doubt as to Souk-Arras occupying the ancient site of Tagaste. Proofs of this will be found in the Appendix

God was already thinking of St. Augustine; for him was formed this lofty plateau, towering as an eyrie above the vast surrounding plain; but He also made it St. Monica's birthplace, in order to show us that in a mother's case God has her children in view in all He does, even in the selection of the spot where she first opens her eyes to the light.

It was the year of our Lord 332. For eighteen years St. Silvester had guided St. Peter's bark, and twenty years previously to the time to which we allude, Christianity had been established on the throne in the person of the Emperor Constantine, the conqueror of Maxentius.

The Church was emerging from the catacombs; and as nature after a long winter suddenly starts to life beneath the sun of May, so the Church, her three centuries of affliction and sorrow ended, was about to give birth to many of her most illustrious children. St. Monica and St. Jerome were born the same year; the one at Tagaste, the other at Strido in Dalmatia. St. Gregory of Nazianzen was in his fifth, St. Basil in his fourth, and St. Gregory of Nyssus in his third year. St. Hilary of Poitiers and St. Martin of Tours were a little older; the one just entering on his sixteenth year, and preparing for baptism; the other on the point of being ordained priest. St. John Chrysostom, and St. Paulinus of Nola, were not yet born, but the pious maidens for whom God had reserved the signal honour of giving them birth, were in their retirement unconsciously preparing themselves for their great mission.

St. Athanasius was the only one of this brilliant galaxy that had already reached to man's estate. Though scarcely twenty-seven, he had just ascended the episcopal throne

of Alexandria, where he was destined to remain for nearly half a century, erect, invincible, bearing the brunt of every attack, as if to afford those great men whom God was then sending into His Church leisure to arrive at maturity.

It was at this time, during the brief interval intervening between the death of those martyrs who had lost their lives in the local persecutions which even Constantine could not prevent, and the birth of the doctors, that there appeared in the bosom of a Christian family, (the abode of peace, honour, and virtue,) a child highly favoured, inasmuch as she was chosen of God to be the mother of the greatest doctor of that age, the mother of St. Augustine. She was named Monica, a name that no saint had borne till then, and which was about to be rendered by her such a touching symbol of hope and consolation. Her father, whose name is unknown, and her mother, who appears to have been called Faconda,² were devout Christians.³

It is not easy to ascertain their exact rank. They belonged, apparently, to one of those noble families, such as we see in revolutionary times, who, though poor, still retain somewhat of their former splendour; numerous servants, but straitened means; noble connections and relationships, but withal leading a life more and more retired, and this as much from necessity as from principle. Twenty years before, when nearly the whole of Tagaste had been seduced by the teaching of Donatus, St. Monica's family had remained

² Such is the general tradition in all the orders of the Rule of St. Augustine. She is called Faconda, or Facundia, in all the Augustinian Liturgies.

³ *Confessions*, book 9, chapter 8

staunch in the faith: this but increased their isolation, and the misfortunes of the empire accelerated their ruin. It is true that Constantine's accession had seemed to promise them, together with all the ancient and rich provincial families oppressed by taxation, some degree of relief; but this hope was now waning, and as Constantine's efforts were as vain as those of Diocletian, St. Monica's parents foresaw that of all their ancient splendour, they could bequeath her nothing but a memory and a name.⁴

It is doubtless to these circumstances, and to her early training, that St. Monica was indebted for her contempt of this transitory world, and her intense love of eternal things.

But St. Monica, in alluding to her early training, not only praises her mother's zeal, but also gratefully mentions the care bestowed on her by an old servant, to whom her childhood was entrusted. This servant had been nurse to St. Monica's father; had borne him aloft on her shoulders, as young mothers are wont to do;⁵ and after watching him grow to man's estate, and being present at his marriage, she, in virtue of her age, purity of manners, and the relation in

⁴ This is to be gleaned from a careful study of the *Confessions*, and the collating of several important passages, such, for instance, which speak of a numerous staff of servants in St. Monica's home, (lib. ix. cap. viii. ix.) their intercourse with the most distinguished families, and their noble connections, (St. Augustine's Letters, 39th in the first Benedictine edition.) St. Augustine's allusions to the smallness of his own patrimony, and the poverty of his family, (*Serm.* 356) must not be taken literally; such expressions were prompted by humility. It seems to us that St. Monica's family was noble, but ruined, as were all the other noble families of this epoch.

⁵ *Conf.* lib. IX. cap. viii.

which she stood to him, became attendant, or rather, second mother to his children. Zealous, prudent, austere, somewhat given to scolding, but devoted to her young mistress, a genuine type of those old domestics whom Christianity was beginning to exhibit to the world, and who were not the least beautiful of her creations, she surrounded with most watchful care the cradle where lay such holy and glorious destinies.

Guarded from every danger, the object of so many tender cares, never did child give fairer promise. When quite a little thing, she would, when unobserved, go alone to the church,⁶ seeking a quiet corner, and standing there with joined hands and modest down-cast eyes, found such a charm in conversing with God that she would forget it was time to return home. When she did return, timid and embarrassed, because it was late, and because she had gone out alone, she was severely corrected, and sometimes flogged; but neither blows nor reproaches elicited a single murmur, much less did they diminish the affectionate gratitude she cherished for her nurse.⁷

Sometimes also, when playing with her companions, she would suddenly disappear, and then would be found at the foot of a tree, motionless and absorbed in prayer. She often arose secretly at night, then, kneeling on the ground and folding her tiny hands, would recite, with a spirit of recollection and fervour unusual in one so young, the

⁶ *Breviarium canonicorum Regularium Ordinis sancti Augustini*. Paris, 1523; 16mo, in black letter. *Ad prim. Noct., lect. i.*

⁷ *Boll., Maii* 4

prayers her good mother had taught her.⁸ It seemed as if, in these moments of intimate communion, God intended to familiarize her from her infancy with the divine science of prayer, of which, later on, she would make such wonderful use; thus early did He train her in the use of that powerful weapon with which she was to gain such striking victories.

Another trait in St. Monica's character was her love of the poor.⁹ When at table, she would often hide a portion of her own bread, and when no one was watching, would post herself on the threshold of the door, seeking for some poor person on whom to bestow it.¹⁰ There were two classes to whom this pious child was most warmly attached; poor travellers, and the indigent sick. She spied out the former as they were approaching her father's hospitable roof, seated them on a bench, and, though so young, would claim, according to ancient usage, the honour of washing their feet. The latter she was accustomed to visit, and lavished on both such services as a child of her temperament and years could render.¹¹

At the same time St. Monica was noted for her sweet and peaceful disposition. When playing with her companions, a word from her sufficed to appease their little quarrels. There was so much repose in her countenance, voice, and manner, that, unconsciously to herself, she imparted it even to her elders, making others participate in her own peace.¹²

⁸ *Breviarium Canoniorum Regularium*, etc. ad prim, Noct. lect. ii.

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ *Boll.*, Maii 4

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² *Brev. Heremit. Divi Augustini*. 1 vol. 1475, black letter

To these heaven-sent gifts, whereby God was already fitting her to become the mother of a saint, were joined other virtues, the growth of which was due to her nurse's constant and careful supervision. St. Augustine says: "Wisely severe in correction, admirably prudent in instruction, she trained her early in the sternest virtues. However thirsty the child might be, she was never allowed to drink anything, not even a drop of water, between meals," in order to inure her to sobriety, penance, strength of soul, and spirit of self-sacrifice, without which there can be no true Christian, spouse, mother, or saint. "Thus didst Thou fashion her, O my God," exclaims St. Augustine; "and neither her father nor her mother surmised what she would one day become. But Thou didst prepare her cradle in the midst of a faithful family, one of the best regulated in Thy Church, where, under the guidance of Thy only Son, she grew up in that fear of God which is the beginning of wisdom."¹³

Amid this promising dawn of virtue there was visible in St. Monica, I do not say a blemish, but one of those light shadows permitted at times by God in order to render His saints more humble and more vigilant. As is customary when initiating young girls in the duties of housekeeping, this pious child was allowed to draw the wine for the day's consumption. "Now," says St. Augustine, "it happened sometimes that, before filling the flagon, she would put her lips to the edge of the vessel into which she had drawn the wine, not from the love of wine, for, on the contrary, she was rather averse to it, but from mischievousness and the

¹³ *Confessions*, book 9, chapter 8

delight children take in doing what is forbidden, a delight that soon vanishes before the weight of authority.”

“But whereas by slighting small failings one gradually falls into graver ones, it happened that from daily adding drop to drop, she ended by drinking nearly a little cupful. Where was her wise old guardian all this time? What of her strict prohibitions? And what possible remedy for a failing concealed so carefully, hadst not Thou, O Saviour, been watching over us? Her parents were absent, but Thou, ever omnipresent God, who rescuest souls even by the instrumentality of the wicked, didst save her. And how? A maid-servant always accompanied her to the cellar, and was consequently an unreprieving witness of her transgression. She it was whose cold and cutting sarcasm was the invisible instrument wherewith the divine hand cut this gangrene to the quick. For, quarrelling one day with her young mistress, she reproached her with this failing, and with the intention, not of correcting, but merely annoying, insolently called her a wine-bibber. Stung to the core, Monica blushed, and seeing the heinousness of her transgression, condemned herself severely, and never repeated the offence.”¹⁴

It is asserted that she then resolved never to drink anything but water. However this may be, we find that her fault, as in the case of most saints, was attended with the most happy results; it was the source of penitential tears, humility, and self-distrust, and, unconsciously to herself, thus early prepared her to guard with the most tender vigilance the glorious cradle which would one day be entrusted to her

¹⁴ *Confessions*, book 9, chapter 8

care.

About this time, that is, in the year 348 or 349, Monica witnessed an event which made a deep impression on her at the same time that it filled her with profound joy. Tagaste, as already said, had fallen a prey to the Donatist heresy, and this had involved her in many troubles during the last twenty years. So formidable and constant had these commotions grown, that the emperors were compelled to interfere, and Constantius issued an edict prohibiting the public profession of that heresy. Many cities returned to the Catholic faith, and among them the people of Tagaste, whose return was so prompt, unanimous, and sincere, that it was evident that fear of the schismatics had alone prevented their taking this step long before. St. Alypius says that a few years later it would have been vain to seek for a happier city, or one more obedient to the holy see, than was Tagaste.¹⁵

St. Monica was probably about sixteen at the time her native city escaped from the thralldom of a fanatical party which had robbed it of its religious freedom. It was doubtless with joy and deep enthusiasm that she witnessed the return of Tagaste to the true fold; and if, as some think, this was also the august moment of her baptism and first communion, she must indeed have experienced one of those profound and strong emotions which leave a lasting impress on the soul.

The gifts with which nature had endowed St. Monica, developed with her growth. One who certainly was best capable of judging, and who would never have praised even

¹⁵ August. Ep. 48. Labbe, conc., tom. ii., cap. cxxxvi.

his mother at the expense of truth, has tenderly eulogized her accurate, noble, and quick intellect, affirming often that it bordered on genius. Later on we shall behold her conversing on the deepest religious and philosophical questions, St. Augustine and his friends grouped around her, “thinking,” he says, “that we were listening to the teachings of some great man.” This wonderful intellect was already giving signs of its existence; her thirst for learning was insatiable, and when quite little she would leave her playmates, in order to follow the conversation of her elders, specially that of the educated and thoughtful. She would sit for hours at the feet of her grandmother, a woman venerable for her years and her faith, whose touching recitals, (for she had been the contemporary of martyrs,) filled the pious maiden with deep enthusiasm.¹⁶

To these intellectual gifts, with which God had endowed her for St. Augustine’s sake, were associated still higher qualities,—an untiring gentleness united with rare firmness; unruffled calmness, persevering and courageous disposition; a heart inclined to tenderness, and yet full of energy. In brief, one of those richly endowed natures one sometimes encounters, where the rarest harmonies are mingled with the most startling contrasts.

It is not so easy to satisfy the legitimate curiosity of our readers respecting the external gifts with which St. Monica was endowed. It seems that she was fairly tall, and very beautiful. At least, when about eighteen or twenty, faith, piety, modesty, love to God and man, so enhanced her beauty,

¹⁶ *De plurimis claris mulieribus*, a Fr. Jacobo Pbilippo Bergomensi, Ordinis Heremitarum Divi Augustiui; 1 vol. folio, 1493, black letter

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