

SAINT  
MONICA



Vision at Ostia

*Sotomajor*

# SAINT MONICA

c. 332-387

MODEL OF CHRISTIAN  
MOTHERS

*By*

F. A. Forbes

*“Who shall find a valiant woman? Far and from the uttermost coasts is the price of her. The heart of her husband trusteth in her, and he shall have no need of spoils. She will render him good, and not evil, all the days of her life...Her children rose up, and called her blessed: her husband, and he praised her.”*

—Proverbs 31:10-12, 28

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“Bury my body anywhere; it does not matter. Do not let that disturb you. This only I ask—that you remember me at the altar of God wherever you may be.”

—St. Monica to her sons  
as she lay dying  
far from home.



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This book is above all things the story of a mother. But it is also the story of a noble woman—a woman who was truly great, for the reason that she never sought to be so. Because she understood the sphere in which a woman's work in the world must usually lie and led her life truly along the lines that God had laid down for her; because she suffered bravely, forgot herself for others and remained faithful to her noble ideals, she ruled as a queen among those with whom her life was cast. Her influence was great and far-reaching, but she herself was the last to suspect it, the last to desire it, and that was perhaps the secret of its greatness. The type is rare at the present day, but, thank God! there are still Monicas in the world. If there were more, the world would be a better place.

# SAINT MONICA

*“Favour is deceitful, and beauty is vain: the woman that feareth the Lord, she shall be praised. Give her of the fruit of her hands: and let her works praise her in the gates.”*

—Proverbs 31:30-31



## Chapter 1

### A YOUNG CHRISTIAN GIRL

ON the sunny northern coast of Africa, in the country which we now call Algeria stood, in the early days of Christianity, a city called Tagaste. Not far distant lay the field of Zama, where the glory of Hannibal had perished forever. But Rome had long since avenged the sufferings of her bitter struggle with Carthage. It was the ambition of Roman Africa, as the new colony had been called by its conquerors, to be, if possible, more Roman than Rome. Every town had its baths, its theatre, its circus, its temples, its aqueducts. It was even forbidden to exiles as a place of refuge—too much like home, said the authorities.

It was about the middle of the fourth century. The Church was coming forth from her long imprisonment into the light of day. The successor of Constantine, in name a Christian, sat on the imperial throne. The old struggle with paganism, which had lasted for four hundred years, was nearly at an end, but new dangers

assailed the Christian world. Men had found that it was easier to twist the truth than to deny it, and heresy and schism were abroad.

In the atrium or outer court of a villa on the outskirts of Tagaste an old woman and a young girl sat together looking out into the dark shadows of the evening, for the hot African sun had sunk not long since behind the Numidian Mountains, and the day had gone out like a lamp.

“And the holy Bishop Cyprian?” asked the girl.

“They sent him into exile,” said the old woman, “for his father had been a Senator and his family was well known and powerful. At that time they dared not put him to death, though later he, too, shed his blood for Christ. It was God’s will that he should remain for many years to strengthen his flock in the trial.”

“Did you ever see him, Grandmother?” asked the girl.

“No,” said the old woman, “it was before my time, but my mother knew him well. It was when he was a boy in Carthage and still a pagan that the holy martyrs Perpetua and Felicitas suffered with their companions. It was not till years after that he became a Christian, but it may have been their death that sowed the first seed in his heart.”

“Tell me,” said the girl softly. It was an oft-told tale of which she never tired. Her grand-

mother had lived through those dark days of persecution, and it was the delight of Monica's girlhood to hear her tell the stories of those who had borne witness to the Faith in their own land of Africa.

"Perpetua was not much older than you," said the old woman. "She was of noble race and born of a Christian mother, though her father was a pagan. She was married and had a little infant of a few months old. When she was called before the tribunal of Hilarion the Roman Governor, all were touched by her youth and beauty. 'Sacrifice to the gods,' they said, 'and you shall go free.' 'I am a Christian,' she answered, and nothing more would she say, press her as they might.

"Her old father hastened to her side with the baby, and laid it in her arms. 'Will you leave your infant motherless?' he asked, 'and bring your old father's hairs in sorrow to the grave?'

"'Have pity on the child!' cried the bystanders. 'Have pity on your father!'

"Perpetua clasped her baby to her breast and her eyes filled with tears. They thought she had yielded, and brought her the incense.

"'Just one little grain on the brazier,' they said, 'and you are free—for the child's sake and your old father's.'

"She pushed it from her. 'I am a Christian,' she said. 'God will keep my child.'

“She was condemned with her companions to be thrown to the wild beasts in the amphitheatre, and they were taken away and cast into a dark dungeon. Every day they were tempted with promises of freedom to renounce the Truth. The little babe of Felicitas was born in the prison where they lay awaiting death. A Christian woman took the infant to bring it up in the Faith. The young mother never saw the face of her child in this world. One word, one little motion of the hand, and they would be free, restored again to their happy life of old and the homes that were so dear. There were many, alas! in those cruel days who had not courage for the fight—who sacrificed, and went their way. Not so these weak women.

“Once again they brought Perpetua her little child to try to shake her constancy. ‘The prison was like a palace,’ she said, while its little downy head lay on her breast. Her father wept, and even struck her in his grief and anger. ‘I am a Christian,’ she said, and gave him back the babe.

“They were thrown to the wild beasts. Felicitas and Perpetua, who had been tossed by a wild cow, though horribly gored, were still alive. Gladiators were summoned to behead them. Felicitas died at the first stroke, but the man’s hand trembled, and he struck at Perpetua again and again, wounding her, but not mortally. ‘You are

more afraid than I,' she said gently and, taking the point of the sword, held it to her throat. 'Strike now,' she said, and so passed into the presence of her God."

Monica drew a long breath. "So weak and yet so strong," she said.

"So it is, my child," said the old woman. "It is those who are strong and true in the little things of life who are strong and true in the great trials."

"It is hard to be always strong and true," said the girl.

"Not if God's love comes always first," answered the old woman.

Monica was silent. She was thinking of her own young life, and how, with all the safeguards of a Christian home about her, she had narrowly escaped a great danger. From her babyhood she had been brought up by her father's old nurse—not over-tenderly, perhaps, but wisely, for the city of Tagaste was largely pagan in its habits, and the faithful old servant knew well what temptations would surround her nursling in later years. Monica, though full of life and spirit, had common sense and judgment beyond her years. She had also a great love of God and of all that belonged to His holy service, and would spend hours kneeling in the church in a quiet corner. It was there she brought all her childish trou-

bles and her childish hopes; it was to the invisible Friend in the sanctuary that she confided all the secrets of her young heart, and, above all, that desire to suffer for Him and for His Church with which the stories of the martyrs had inspired her. When the time slipped away too fast, and she returned home late, she accepted humbly the correction that awaited her, for she knew that she had disobeyed—although unintentionally—her nurse's orders.

Monica had been willfully disobedient once, and all her life long she would never forget the lesson her disobedience had taught her. It was a rule of her old nurse that she should take nothing to drink between meals, even in the hot days of summer in that sultry climate. If she had not courage to bear so slight a mortification as that, the old woman would argue, it would go ill with her in the greater trials of life. Monica had become used to the habit, but when she was old enough to begin to learn the duties of housekeeping her mother had desired that she should go every day to the cellar to draw the wine for the midday meal. A maid-servant went with her to carry the flagon, and the child, feeling delightfully important, filled and refilled the little cup which was used to draw the wine from the cask and emptied it carefully into the wine jar. When all was finished, a few drops remain-

ing in the cup, a spirit of mischief took sudden possession of Monica and she drained it off, making a wry face as she did so at the strange taste. The maid-servant laughed, and continued to laugh when the performance was repeated the next day and the day after. The strange taste became gradually less strange and less unpleasant to the young girl; daily a few drops were added, until at last, scarcely thinking what she did, she would drink nearly the fill of the little cup, while the servant laughed as of old.

Monica was quick and intelligent and was learning her household duties well. Finding one day that a piece of work which fell to the lot of the maid who went with her to the wine cellar was very badly done, she reproved her severely. The woman turned on her young mistress angrily.

“It is not for a wine-bibber like you to find fault with me!” she retorted.

Monica stood horrified. The woman’s insolent word had torn the veil from her eyes. Whither was she drifting? Into what depths might that one act of disobedience so lightly committed have led her had not God in His mercy intervened? She never touched wine for the rest of her life unless largely diluted with water. God had taught her that “he who despises small things shall fall by little and little,” and Monica had learned the lesson. She had learned to distrust

herself, and self-distrust makes one marvellously gentle with others; she had learned, too, to put her trust in God, and trust in God makes one marvellously strong. She had been taught to love the poor and the suffering, and to serve them at her own expense and inconvenience, and the service of others makes one unselfish. God had work for Monica to do in His world, as He has for us all if we will only do it, and He had given her what was needful for her task.

That night on the way to her chamber, as the young girl passed the place where she had sat with her grandmother earlier in the day, she paused a moment and looked out between the tall pillars into the starlit night, where the palm trees stood like dark shadows against the deep, deep blue of the sky. She clasped her hands, and her lips moved in prayer. "O God," she murmured, "to suffer for Thee and for Thy Faith!" God heard the whispered prayer, and He was to answer it later. There is a living martyrdom as painful and as bitter as death, and Monica was called to taste it.