

Monica of Thagaste



Monica wiped her parched lips. 'I'm so thirsty,' she said. 'May I have some water?'

'You'll have water at dinner-time,' the maid told her. 'Move into the shade and you'll not feel so dry.'

The girl licked her lips. There was no point in arguing. As she couldn't be bothered getting to her feet in the heat, she crawled the short distance to the shade of a wall.

'You'll get your clothes in a mess if you do that,' the maid told her. But before the woman could do anything else, Monica distracted her in the way she knew always worked. 'Tell me a story of when you were young,' she begged.

'I'll tell you something about the history of this town. A girl should know about the place she comes from.'

'What are you going to tell me?' Monica asked.

'Thagaste, as you know, has about 2000 people living in it,' the maid began. 'When I

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was young it wasn't nearly as big. But the Romans were still in charge. I loved watching the Roman soldiers marching. And I never heard one of them complain about needing a drink, no matter how hot it was in the sun,' she said, looking at the girl pointedly. 'There were all kinds of things to see and do. But one thing I didn't like was the slave market. I once saw a couple with three children for sale. The parents were sold to one man and the children sold separately to three others. I've never forgotten that mother's cries as she was dragged away, or the look on her husband's face.'

'Where did the children go?' Monica asked.

'They were bought by traders on their way to the Mediterranean coast. They were probably sent to Italy.'

'Is that far away?' she asked.

'It's about two days' journey to the sea from here, then I don't know how far across the water,' said the maid. 'But you can be sure they would never see their parents again.'

'Slavery's cruel,' Monica said. The maid didn't comment as she wasn't a free woman. 'Go on,' the girl urged, wanting to hear more.

'Well,' said the maid, 'when I was twelve I went to work for your grandmother. I'd

heard strange stories about Christians but she was the first one I really knew. You don't remember her, but she was one of the best people who ever lived. She loved the Lord Jesus with all her heart. At first I thought that was odd because Jesus had died about 250 years before that. I couldn't understand how anyone could worship a man who had died when we had all the Roman gods to worship. But your grandmother told me that Jesus died on the cross to take away my sins. It was through her I became a Christian. It was also because of what he learned from his mother that your father became a believer too.'

'It's time for dinner,' a voice called from the house.

'Thank goodness for that,' Monica said, 'I'm so thirsty I could drink the whole Mediterranean Sea!'

'I think you'd be even thirstier if you tried that!' laughed the maid.

The girl looked puzzled. 'Why?' she demanded.

'Because the seas are full of salty water,' her companion explained.

Monica looked at the old woman. 'Rubbish!' she said, and ran into the house for her dinner and a long drink. After her first glass of water she asked for another. 'You're thirsty today,' her father said. Monica

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started to giggle. 'Tell us all the joke,' he said. The girl repeated what her maid had said about salt water in the sea, though she could hardly do so for laughing.

'What did you say when she told you that?' her dad asked.

'I told her it was rubbish!' giggled the girl.

'Well, you were wrong and she was right. And as soon as you've eaten you'll go and apologise.'

'But Father, she's just a maid!'

'Don't you ever say that again,' he demanded. 'She may be a maid but she's also a child of God.'

'Why don't you let me drink water between meals?' Monica asked the maid the following afternoon.

'If you drank on and off all day you'd get into the habit of it. That's all very well now when all you drink is water and milk, but think what a state you'd get into when you're grown up and able to drink wine.'

'I promise I won't,' Monica pled.

The maid shook her head. 'I'm not taking any chances.'

'Could you bring some wine up from the cellar?' Monica's father asked, some months later. Monica ran to do what he asked.

Taking some wine from a cask she poured it into a flagon.

'What does it taste like?' she wondered.

When the flagon was full she lifted it to her lips, sniffed, and took a tiny mouthful. 'It tastes funny,' she told the young maid who was with her, before coughing and spluttering as she swallowed. The maid wasn't at all pleased.

Monica couldn't wait for the next day when she could take another little drop. However, as the days passed the little drops became bigger. It wasn't long before Monica was drinking quite a lot of her father's wine.

'Please don't drink any more,' the young maid said one day as they went into the cellar together.

'What's it got to do with you?' Monica demanded.

'It's not good for you,' the other girl explained. 'And, apart from that, when your father discovers his wine is going missing he'll think I've been stealing it and drinking it myself.'

'It would serve you right!' spat Monica. 'Who do you think you are speaking to me like that? I could have you sold!'

The maid felt as though she'd been punched. But she couldn't stop herself

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replying. 'You're just an alcoholic,' she said. 'Every time you come down you take a drink. You can't help yourself. You're just an alcoholic!'

Monica's anger rose. But instead of hitting the maid what the maid had said hit out at her. A lesson was learned in the cellar that day.

'I've found a husband for you,' Monica's father told her some years later. 'Patricius is a decent man and he'll make a good husband.'

'But he's not a Christian,' the girl said, for by then she was a believer.

'Well it's up to you to be such a godly wife that he'll want to become one,' she was told.

That's exactly what Monica tried to do, though her mother-in-law didn't make things easy. Patricius was not the best of husbands, but Monica lived at peace with him and was a fine mother to their children.

'When I was a girl,' she told her son Augustine, 'we had a maid from whom I learned such a lot.'

'What did she teach you?' the boy asked, hoping she'd tell him once again the story of the salty seawater. That was one of his favourites.

'She told me the stories of Jesus,' Monica

said, 'about him feeding great crowds of people, about him walking on the water and healing people who were sick and blind and deaf and those who had leprosy too.'

'Nonsense!' scoffed Patricius, who was just passing by, 'your god can't heal lepers any more than the Roman gods can.' He laughed. 'Don't believe all your mother tells you,' he said, slapping the boy on the back. 'Half of what she says is fairy stories.'

Without saying anything to disagree Monica rose and went into the house. When Augustine followed her he found his mother on her knees praying for her husband and children.

'The boy's badly ill,' Patricius said, as he left their home with two chickens dangling from his hand.

'Where are you going?' Monica asked.

'I'm going to sacrifice these to the gods and ask them to make him better. Instead of just praying you should sacrifice something to your god too,' he snapped as he left.

Augustine moaned with the pain in his stomach. 'Will you make a sacrifice, Mum?' he asked.

'I don't need to, son,' she said. 'Jesus made all the sacrifice that will ever be needed when he died on the cross.' She knelt beside him, praying that he'd get better.

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Augustine believed he was dying and thought about becoming a Christian. But he made an amazing recovery and decided not to bother. 'There will be plenty of time when I grow up,' he thought.

'Where is she?' yelled Patricius, as he came near his home.

'Mum's praying,' replied Augustine, who was now a boy in his teens.

'Poor woman!' the man laughed. 'For years she's been praying for you to become a Christian but you've become just like your dad; you know a pretty girl when you meet one. No wonder your mother's at her prayers.'

Monica heard what was said. 'Lord Jesus,' she prayed. 'Please may the boy become a Christian. Do whatever you need to do to make him realise that he needs his sins forgiven.'

'Will you not trust in Jesus?' she asked Augustine, when she rose from her knees.

'One day,' he said, 'but not yet.'

It wasn't easy for Monica to watch the life her son led. He didn't pay much attention to anything she'd taught him. But this made her pray all the more for his conversion, especially after he went off to study in Carthage and then when he left Africa

in 383 on his way to Italy. Not long after Monica followed him there.

'How long will it be till he comes to faith?' she asked God, over and over and over again. 'Please make it soon. Please don't let him get into an even bigger mess than he's in just now.'

On the outside it seemed that Augustine was doing well because he was a very clever man, but he still led an immoral life that hurt his mum terribly. Every time they talked about Christianity he said the same thing, 'One day, but not yet.'

When Augustine was thirty-two years old he knew in himself he couldn't go on the way he was.

'When I was going along the street today,' he once told Monica, 'I saw a beggar laughing and I thought to myself he has nothing and I have everything but he's happier than I am.'

Monica's heart filled with hope. Was Augustine finally thinking seriously about life? How delighted she was when he started going to church occasionally.

'Where are you two off to?' Monica asked Augustine and his friend one day.

'Just out to the garden,' they said. She

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noticed they had a book with them. It was some time before the men came in, and when they did she saw her son's face. He was smiling as he'd not smiled for years. His eyes shone and he threw his arms around her.

'I was in the garden and I heard a child's voice saying "Take it up and read it." At first I thought it was a nursery rhyme but then I realised it was God telling me to read the Bible. I opened this and read where it opened.' He held up the Bible book of Romans. 'It spoke right to me, telling me that I had to look to Jesus and leave my immoral life behind. And suddenly I knew it was true, that what you'd told me all these years was true!' Monica's heart was singing. 'I'm a Christian, Mum. Your prayers are answered.'

Augustine and Monica planned to leave Italy and go back to North Africa but she died before they could leave. It didn't matter that she never knew her son became the most famous Christian of his day, one of the most famous Christians of all time. All that mattered to Monica was that her prayers had been answered - Augustine was a child of God and she would see him again in the Kingdom of Heaven.