

Here beginneth Táin Bó Cúalnge

The Cualnge Cattle-raid

I THE PILLOW TALK

Once of a time, that Ailill and Medb had spread their royal bed in Cruachan, the stronghold of Connacht, such was the pillow talk that befell betwixt them:

Quoth Ailill: "True is the saying, lady, 'She is a well-off woman that is a rich man's wife.' "

"Aye, that she is," answered the wife; "but wherefore opin'st thou so?"

"For this," Ailill replied, "that thou art this day better off than the day that first I took thee."

Then answered Medb: "As well-off was I before I ever saw thee."

"It was a wealth, forsooth, we never heard nor knew of," Ailill said; "but a woman's wealth was all thou hadst, and foes from lands next thine were used to carry off the spoil and booty that they took from thee."

"Not so was I," quoth Medb; "the High King of Erin himself was my sire, Eocho Fedlech ('the Enduring') son of Finn, by name, who was son of Findoman, son of Finden, son of Findguin, son of Rogen Ruad ('the Red'), son of Rigen, son of Blathacht, son of Beothacht, son of Enna Agnech, son of Oengus Turbech. Of daughters, had he six: Derbriu, Ethne and Ele, Clothru, Mugain and Medb, myself, that was the noblest and seemliest of them. 'Twas I was the goodliest of them in bounty and gift-giving, in riches and treasures. 'Twas I was best of them in battle and strife and combat. 'Twas I that had fifteen hundred royal mercenaries of the sons of aliens exiled from their own land, and as many more of the sons of freemen of the land. And there were ten men with every one of these hirelings, and nine men with every hireling, and eight men with every hireling, and seven men with every hireling, and six men with every hireling, and five men with every hireling, and four men with every hireling, and three men with every hireling, and two men with every hireling, and one hireling with every hireling. These were as a standing household guard," continued Medb; "hence hath my father bestowed one of the five provinces of Erin upon me, even the province of Cruachan; wherefore 'Medb of Cruachan' am I called. Men came from Finn son of Ross Ruad ('the Red'), king of Leinster, to seel me for a wife, and I refused him; and from Carbre Niafer ('the Champion') son of Ross Ruad ('the Red'), king of Temair, to woo me, and I refused him; and they came from Conchobar son of Fachtna Fathach ('the Mighty'), king of Ulster, and I refused him in like wise. They came from Eocho Bec ('the Small'), and I went not; for 'tis

I that exacted a singular bride-gift, such as no woman before me had ever required of a man of the men of Erin, namely, a husband without avarice, without jealousy, without fear. For should he be mean, the man with whom I should live, we were ill-matched together, inasmuch as I am great in largess and gift-giving, and it would be a disgrace for my husband if I should be better at spending than he, and for it to be said that I was superior in wealth and treasures to him, while no disgrace would it be were one as great as the other. Were my husband a coward, 'twere as unfit for us to be mated, for I by myself and alone break battles and fights and combats, and 'twould be a reproach for my husband should his wife be more full of life than himself, and no reproach our being equally bold. Should he be jealous, the husband with whom I should live, that too would not suit me, for there never was a time that I had not my paramour. How be it, such a husband have I found, namely in thee thyself, Ailill son of Ross Ruad ('the Red') of Leinster. Thou wast not churlish; thou wast not jealous; thou wast not a sluggard. It was I plighted thee, and gave purchase price to thee, which of right belongs to the bride — of clothing, namely, the raiment of twelve men, a chariot worth thrice seven bondmaids, the breadth of thy face of red gold, the weight of thy left forearm of silvered bronze. Whoso brings shame and sorrow and madness upon thee, no claim for compensation nor satisfaction hast thou therefor that I myself have not, but it is to me the compensation belongs," said Medb, "for a man dependent upon a woman's maintenance is what thou art."

"Nay, not such was my state," said Ailill; "but two brothers had I; one of them over Temair, the other over Leinster; namely, Finn, over Leinster, and Carbre, over Temair. I left the kingship to them because they were older but not superior to me in largess and bounty. Nor heard I of provincein Erin under woman's keeping but this province alone. And for this I came and assumed the kingship here as my mother's successor; for Mata of Muresc, daughter of Magach of Connacht, was my mother. And who could there be for me to have as my queen better than thyself, being, as thou wert, daughter of the High King of Erin?"

"Yet so it is," pursued Medb, "my fortune is greater than thine."

"I marvel at that," Ailill made answer, "for there is none that hath greater treasures and riches and wealth than I: yea, to my knowledge there is not."

II THE OCCASION OF THE TÁIN

Then were brought to them the least precious of their possessions, that they might know which of them had the more treasures, riches and wealth. Their pails and their cauldrons and their iron-wrought vessels, their jugs and their keeves and their eared pitchers were fetched to them.

Likewise, their rings and their bracelets and their thumb-rings and their golden treasures were fetched to them, and their apparel, both purple and blue and black and green, yellow, varicoloured and gray, dun, mottled and brindled.

Their numerous flocks of sheep were led in from fields and meeds and plains. These were counted and compared, and found to be equal, of like size, of like number; however, there was an uncommonly fine ram over Medb's sheep, and he was equal in worth to a bondmaid, but a corresponding ram was over the ewes of Ailill.

Their horses and steeds and studs were brought from pastures and paddocks. There was a noteworthy horse in Medb's herd and he was of the value of a bondmaid; a horse to match was found among Ailill's.

Then were their numerous droves of swine driven from woods and shelving glens and wolds. These were numbered and counted and claimed. There was a noteworthy boar With Medb, and yet another with Ailill.

Next they brought before them their droves of cattle and their herds and their roaming flocks from the brakes and wastes of the province.

These were counted and numbered and claimed, and were the same for both, equal in size, equal in number, except only there was an especial bull of the bawn of Ailill, and he was a calf of one of Medb's cows, and Finnbennach ('the Whitehorned') was his name. But he, deeming it no honour to be in a woman's possession, had left and gone over to the kine of the king. And it was the same to Medb as if she owned not a pennyworth, forasmuch as she had not a bull of his size amongst her cattle.

Then it was that macRoth the messenger was summoned to Medb, and Medb strictly bade macRoth to learn where there might be found a bull of that likeness in any of the provinces of Erin. "Verily," said macRoth, "I know where the bull is that is best and better again, in the province of Ulster, in the hundred of Cualnge, in the house of Darè son of Fiachna; even Donn Cualnge ('the Brown Bull of Cualnge') he is called."

"Go thou to him, macRoth, and ask for me of Darè the loan for a year of the Brown Bull of Cualnge, and at the year's end he shall have the meed of the loan, to wit, fifty heifers and the Donn Cualnge himself. And bear thou a further boon with thee, macRoth. Should the border folk and those of the country grudge the loan of that rare jewel that is the Brown Bull of Cualnge, let Darè himself come

with his bull, and he shall get a measure equalling his own land of the smooth Plain of Ai and a chariot of the worth of thrice seven bondmaids and he shall enjoy my own close friendship.”

Thereupon the messengers fared forth to the house of Darè son of Fiachna. This was the number wherewith macRoth went, namely, nine couriers. Anon welcome was lavished on macRoth in Darè’s house — fitting, welcome it was — chief messenger of all was macRoth. Darè asked of macRoth what had brought him upon the journey and why he was come. The messenger announced the cause for which he was come and related the contention between Medb and Ailill.

“And it is to beg the loan of the Brown Bull of Cualnge to match the Whitehorned that I am come,” said he; “and thou shalt receive the hire of his loan, even fifty heifers and the Brown of Cualnge himself. And yet more I may add: Come thyself with thy bull and thou shalt have of the land of the smooth soil of Mag Ai as much as thou ownest here, and a chariot of the worth of thrice seven bondmaids and enjoy Medb’s friendship to boot.”

At these words Darè was well pleased, and he leaped for joy so that the seams of his flock bed rent in twain beneath him.

“By the truth of our conscience,” said he; “however the Ulstermen take it, whether ill or well, this time this jewel shall be delivered to Ailill and to Medb, the Brown of Cualnge to wit, into the land of Connacht.” Well pleased was macRoth at the words of the son of Fiachna.

Thereupon they were served, and straw and fresh rushes were spread under them. The choicest of food was brought to them and a feast was served to them and soon they were noisy and drunken. And a discourse took place between two of the messengers. “’Tis true what I say,” spoke the one; “good is the man in whose house we are.”

“Of a truth, he is good.”

“Nay, is there one among all the men of Ulster better than he?” persisted the first.

“In sooth, there is,” answered the second messenger. “Better is Conchobar whose man he is, Conchobar who holds the kingship of the province. And though all the Ulstermen gathered around him, it were no shame for them. Yet is it passing good of Darè, that what had been a task for the four mighty provinces of Erin to bear away from the land of Ulster, even the Brown Bull of Cualnge, is surrendered so freely to us nine footmen.”

Hereupon a third runner had his say: “What is this ye dispute about?” he asked.

“Yon runner says, ‘A good man is the man in whose house we are.’”

“Yea, he is good,” saith the other.

“Is there among all the Ulstermen any that is better than he?” demanded the first runner further.

“Aye, there is,” answered the second runner; “better is Conchobar whose man he is; and though all the Ulstermen gathered around him, it were no shame for them. Yet, truly good it is of Darè, that what had been a task for four of the grand provinces of Erin to bear away out of the borders of Ulster is handed over even unto us nine footmen.”

“I would not grudge to see a retch of blood and gore in the mouth whereout that was said; for, were the bull not given willingly, yet should he be taken by force!”

At that moment it was that Darè macFiachna’s chief steward came into the house and with him a man with drink and another with food, and he heard the foolish words of the runners; and anger came upon him, and he set down their food and drink for them and he neither said to them, “Eat,” nor did he say, “Eat not.”

Straightway he went into the house where was Darè macFiachna and said: “Was it thou that hast given that notable jewel to the messengers, the Brown Bull of Cualnge?”

“Yea, it was I” Darè made answer.

“Verily, it was not the part of a king to give him. For it is true what they say: Unless thou hadst bestowed him of thine own free will, so wouldst thou yield him in despite of thee by the host of Ailill and Medb and by the great cunning of Fergus macRoig.”

“I swear by the gods whom I worship” spoke Darè “they shall in no wise take by foul means what they cannot take by fair!”

There they abide till morning. Betimes on the morrow the runners arise and proceed to the house where is Darè. “Acquaint us, lord, how we may reach the place where the Brown Bull of Cualnge is kept.”

“Nay then” saith Darè; “but were it my wont to deal foully with messengers or with travelling folk or with them that go by the road, not one of you would depart alive!”

“How sayest thou?” quoth macRoth.

“Great cause there is” replied Darè; “ye said, unless I yielded in good sort, I should yield to the might of Ailill’s host and Medb’s and the great cunning of Fergus.”

“Even so” said macRoth “whatever the runners drunken with thine ale and thy viands have said, ‘tis not for thee to heed nor mind, nor yet to be charged on Ailill and on Medb.”

“For all that, macRoth, this time I will not give my bull, if ever I can help it!”

Back then the messengers go till they arrive at Cruachan, the stronghold of Connacht. Medb asks their tidings, and macRoth makes known the same: that they had not brought his bull from Darè. “And the reason?” demanded Medb. MacRoth recounts to her how the dispute arose. “There is no need to polish knots over such affairs as that, macRoth; for it was known” said Medb “if the Brown Bull of Cualnge would not be given with their will, he would be taken in their despite, and taken he shall be!”

To this point is recounted the Occasion of the Táin.

III THE RISING OUT OF THE MEN OF CONNACHT AT CRUACHAN AI

A mighty host was now assembled by the men of Connacht, that is, by Ailill and Medb, and they sent word to the three other provinces, and messengers were despatched from Medb to the Manè that they should gather in Cruachan, the seven Manè with their seven divisions; to wit: Manè “Motherlike,” Manè “Fatherlike,” and Manè “All-comprehending,” ’twas he that possessed the form of his mother and of his father and the dignity of them both; Manè “Mildly-submissive,” and Manè “Greatly-submissive,” Manè “Boastful” and Manè “the Dumb.”

Other messengers were despatched by Ailill to the sons of Maga; to wit: to Cet (‘the First’) son of Maga, Anluan (‘the Brilliant Light’) son of Maga, and Maccorb (‘Chariot-child’) son of Maga, and Bascell (‘the Lunatic’) son of Maga, and En (‘the Bird’) son of Maga, Dochè son of Maga; and Scandal (‘Insult’) son of Maga.

These came, and this was their muster, thirty hundred armed men. Other messengers were despatched from them to Cormac Conlongas (‘the Exile’) son of Conchobar and to Fergus macRoig, and they also came, thirty hundred their number.

Now Cormac had three companies which came to Cruachan. Before all, the first company. A covering of close-shorn black hair upon them. Green mantles and many-coloured cloaks wound about them; therein, silvern brooches. Tunics of thread of gold next to their skin, reaching down to their knees, with interweaving of red gold. Bright-handled swords they bore, with guards of silver. Long shields they bore, and there was a broad, grey spearhead on a slender shaft in the hand of each man. “Is that Cormac, yonder?” all and every one asked.

“Not he, indeed” Medb made answer.

The second troop. Newly shorn hair they wore and manes on the back of their heads, fair, comely indeed. Dark-blue cloaks they all had about them. Next to their skin, gleaming-white tunics, with red ornamentation, reaching down to their calves. Swords they had with round hilts of gold and silvern fist-guards, and shining shields upon them and five-pronged spears in their hands. “Is yonder man Cormac?” all the people asked.

“Nay, verily, that is not he” Medb made answer.

Then came the last troop. Hair cut broad they wore; fair-yellow, deep-golden, loose-flowing back hair down to their shoulders upon them. Purple cloaks, fairly bedizened, about them; golden, embellished brooches over their breasts; and they had curved shields with sharp, chiselled edges around them and spears as long as the pillars of a king’s house in the hand of each man. Fine, long, silken tunics with hoods they wore to the very instep. Together they raised their feet,

and together they set them down again. “Is that Cormac, yonder?” asked all.

“Aye, it is he, this time” Medb made answer.

Thus the four provinces of Erin gathered in Cruachan Ai. They pitched their camp and quarters that night, so that a thick cloud of smoke and fire rose between the four fords of Ai, which are, Ath Moga, Ath Bercna, Ath Slissen and Ath Coltna. And they tarried for the full space of a fortnight in Cruachan, the hostel of Connacht, in wassail and drink and every disport, to the end that their march and muster might be easier. And their poets and druids would not let them depart from thence till the end of a fortnight while awaiting good omen. And then it was that Medb bade her charioteer to harness her horses for her, that she might go to address herself to her druid, to seek for light and for augury from him.

IV THE FORETELLING

When Medb was come to the place where her druid was, she craved light and augury of him. "Many there be," saith Medb, "who do part with their kinsmen and friends here to-day, and from their homes and their lands, from father and from mother; and unless unscathed every one shall return, upon me will they cast their sighs and their ban, for it is I that have assembled this levy. Yet there goeth not forth nor stayeth there at home any dearer to me than are we to ourselves. And do thou discover for us whether we ourselves shall return, or whether we shall never return."

And the druid made answer, "Whoever comes not, thou thyself shalt come."

"Wait, then," spake the charioteer, "let me wheel the chariot by the right, that thus the power of a good omen may arise that we return again." Then the charioteer wheeled his chariot round and Medb went back again, when she espied a thing that surprised her: A lone virgin of marriageable age standing on the hindpole of a chariot a little way off drawing nigh her. And thus the maiden appeared: Weaving lace was she, and in her right hand was a bordering rod of silvered bronze with its seven strips of red gold at the sides. A many-spotted green mantle around her; a bulging, strong-headed pin of gold in the mantle over her bosom; a hooded tunic, with red interweaving, about her. A ruddy, fair-faced countenance she had, narrow below and broad above. She had a blue-grey and laughing eye; each eye had three pupils. Dark and black were her eyebrows; the soft, black lashes threw a shadow to the middle of her cheeks. Red and thin were her lips. Shiny and pearly were her teeth; thou wouldst believe they were showers of white pearls that had rained into her head. Like to fresh Parthian crimson were her lips. As sweet as the strings of lutes when long sustained they are played by master players' hands was the melodious sound of her voice and her fair speech.

As white as snow in one night fallen was the sheen of her skin and her body that shone outside of her dress. Slender and very white were her feet; rosy, even, sharp-round nails she had; two sandals with golden buckles about them. Fair, yellow, long, golden hair she wore; three braids of hair she wore; two tresses were wound around her head; the other tress from behind threw a shadow down on her calves. The maiden carried arms, and two black horses were under her chariot.

Medb gazed at her. "And what doest thou here now, O maiden?" asked Medb.

"I impart to thee thine advantage and good fortune in thy gathering and muster of the four mighty provinces of Erin against the land of Ulster on the Raid for the Kine of Cualnge."

"Wherefore doest thou this for me?" asked Medb.

"Much cause have I. A bondmaid 'mid thy people am I."

“Who of my people art thou and what is thy name?” asked Medb.

“Not hard, in sooth, to say. The prophetess Fedelm, from the Sid (‘the Fairy Mound’) of Cruachan, a poetess of Connacht am I.”

“Whence comest thou?” asked Medb.

“From Alba, after learning prophetic skill” the maiden made answer.

“Hast thou the form of divination?”

“Verily, have I” the maiden said

“Look, then, for me, how will my undertaking be.” The maiden looked. Then spake Medb: —

“Good now,

“Tell, O Fedelm, prophet-maid,
How beholdest thou our host?”

Fedelm answered and spoke:

“Crimson-red from blood they are;
I behold them bathed in red!”

“That is no true augury” said Medb. “Verily, Conchobar with the Ulstermen is in his ‘Pains’ in Emain; thither fared my messengers and brought me true tidings; naught is there that we need dread from Ulster’s men. But speak truth, O Fedelm: —

“Tell, O Fedelm, prophet-maid,
How beholdest thou our host?”

“Crimson-red from blood they are;
I behold them bathed in red!”

“That is no true augury. Cuscraid Mend (‘the Stammerer’) of Macha, Conchobar’s son, is in Inis Cuscraid (‘Cuscraid’s Isle’) in his ‘Pains.’ Thither fared my messengers; naught need we fear from Ulster’s men. But speak truth, O Fedelm: —

“Tell, O Fedelm, prophet-maid,
How beholdest thou our host?”

“Crimson-red from blood they are;
I behold them bathed in red!”

“Eogan, Durthacht’s son, is in Rath Airthir (‘the Eastern Rath’) in his ‘Pains.’ Thither went my messengers. Naught need we dread from Ulster’s men. But speak truth, O Fedelm: —

“Tell, O Fedelm, prophet-maid,
How beholdest thou our host?”

“Crimson-red from blood they are;
I behold them bathed in red!”

“Celtchar, Uthechar’s son, is in his fort at Lethglas in his ‘Pains,’ and a third of the Ulstermen with him. Thither fared my messengers. Naught have we to fear from Ulster’s men. And Fergus son of Roig son of Eochaid is with us here in exile, and thirty hundred with him. But speak truth, O Fedelm: —

“Tell, O Fedelm, prophet-maid,
How beholdest thou our host?”

“Crimson-red from blood they are;
I behold them bathed in red!”

“Meseemeth this not as it seemeth to thee,” quoth Medb, “for when Erin’s men shall assemble in one place, there quarrels will arise and broils, contentions and disputes amongst them about the ordering of themselves in the van or rear, at ford or river, over who shall be first at killing a boar or a stag or a deer or a hare. But, look now again for us and speak truth, O Fedelm: —

“Tell, O Fedelm, prophet-maid,
How beholdest thou our host?”

“Crimson-red from blood they are;
I behold them bathed in red!”

Therewith she began to prophesy and to foretell the coming of Cuchulain to the men of Erin, and she chanted a lay: —

“Fair, of deeds, the man I see;
Wounded sore is his fair skin;
On his brow shines hero’s light;
Victory’s seat is in his face!

“Seven gems of champions brave
Deck the centre of his orbs;
Naked are the spears he bears,
And he hooks a red cloak round!

“Noblest face is his, I see;
He respects all womankind.
Young the lad and fresh his hue,

With a dragon's form in fight!

"I know not who is the Hound,
Culann's hight, of fairest fame;
But I know full well this host
Will be smitten red by him!

"Four small swords — a brilliant feat —
He supports in either hand;
These he'll ply upon the host,
Each to do its special deed!

"His Gae Bulga, too, he wields,
With his sword and javelin.
Lo, the man in red cloak girt
Sets his foot on every hill!

"Two spears from the chariot's left
He casts forth in orgy wild.
And his form I saw till now
Well I know will change its guise!

"On to battle now he comes;
If ye watch not, ye are doomed.
This is he seeks ye in fight
Brave Cuchulain, Sualtaim's son!

"All your host he'll smite in twain,
Till he works your utter ruin.
All your heads ye'll leave with him.
Fedelm, prophet-maid, hides not!

"Gore shall flow from warriors' wounds;
Long 'twill live in memory.
Bodies hacked and wives in tears,
Through the Smith's Hound whom I see!"

Thus far the Augury and the Prophecy and the Preface of the Tale, and the Occasion of its invention and conception, and the Pillow talk which Ailill and Medb had in Cruachan. Next follows the Body of the Tale itself.