

V THIS IS THE ROUTE OF THE TÁIN

and the Beginning of the Expedition and the Names of the Roads which the hosts of the four of the five grand provinces of Erin took into the land of Ulster. On Monday after Summer's end they set forth and proceeded:

South-east from Cruachan Ai, by Mag Cruimm, over Tuaim Mona ('the Hill of Turf'), by Turloch Teora Crich ('the Creek of three Lands'), by Cul ('the Nook') of Silinne, by Dubloch ('Black Lough'), by Fid Dubh ('Black Woods'), by Badbgna, by Coltain, by the Shannon, by Glune Gabur, by Mag Trega, by Tethba in the north, by Tethba in the south, by Cul ('the Nook'), by Ochain, northwards by Uatu, eastwards by Tiarthechta, by Ord ('the Hammer'), by Slaiss ('the Strokes'), southwards, by Indeoin ('the Anvil'), by Carn, by Meath, by Ortrach, by Findglassa Assail, ('White Stream of Assail'), by Drong, by Delt, by Duelt, by Delinn, by Selaig, by Slabra, by Slechta, where swords hewed out roads before Medb and Ailill, by Cul ('the Nook') of Siblinne, by Dub ('the Blackwater'), by Ochonn southwards, by Catha, by Cromma southwards, by Tromma, eastwards by Fodromma, by Slane, by Gort Slane, to the south of Druim Liccè, by Ath Gabla, by Ardachad ('Highfield'), northwards by Feorainn, by Finnabair ('White Plain'), by Assa southwards, by Airne, by Aurthuile, by Druim Salfind ('Salfind Ridge'), by Druim Cain, by Druim Caimthechta, by Druim macDega, by the little Eo Dond ('Brown Tree'), by the great Eo Dond, by Meide in Togmaill ('Ferret's Neck'), by Meide in Eoin, ('Bird's Neck'), by Baille ('the Town'), by Aile, by Dall Scena, by Ball Scena, by Ross Mor ('Great Point'), by Scuap ('the Broom'), by Imscuap, by Cenn Ferna, by Anmag, by Fid Mor ('Great Wood') in Crannach of Cualnge, by Colbtha, by Crond in Cualnge, by Druim Cain on the road to Midluachar, from Finnabair of Cualnge. It is at that point that the hosts of Erin divided over the province in pursuit of the bull. For it was by way of those places they went until they reached Finnabair. Here endeth the Title. The Story begineth in order.

## VI THE MARCH OF THE HOST

On the first stage the hosts went from Cruachan, they slept the night at Cul Silinne, where today is Cargin's Lough. And in that place was fixed the tent of Ailill son of Ross, and the trappings were arranged, both bedding and bed-clothes. The tent of Fergus macRoig was on his right hand; Cormac Conlongas, Conchobar's son, was beside him; Ith macEtgaith next to that; Fiachu macFiraba, the son of Conchobar's daughter, at its side; Conall Cernach at its side, Gobnenn macLurnig at the side of that. The place of Ailill's tent was on the right on the march, and thirty hundred men of Ulster beside him. And the thirty hundred men of Ulster on his right hand had he to the end that the whispered talk and conversation and the choice supplies of food and of drink might be the nearer to them.

Medb of Cruachan, daughter of Eocho Fedlech, moreover, was at Ailill's left. Finnabair ('Fairbrow'), daughter of Ailill and Medb, at her side, besides servants and henchmen. Next, Flidais Foltchain ('of the Lovely Hair'), wife first of Ailill Finn ('the Fair'). She took part in the Cow-spoil of Cualnge after she had slept with Fergus; and she it was that every seventh night brought sustenance in milk to the men of Erin on the march, for king and queen and prince and poet and pupil.

Medb remained in the rear of the host that day in quest of tidings and augury and knowledge. She called to her charioteer to get ready her nine chariots for her, to make a circuit of the camp that she might learn who was loath and who eager to take part in the hosting. With nine chariots she was wont to travel, that the dust of the great host might not soil her. Medb suffered not her chariot to be let down nor her horses unyoked until she had made a circuit of the camp.

Then, when she had reviewed the host, were Medb's horses unyoked and her chariots let down, and she took her place beside Ailill macMata. And Ailill asked tidings of Medb: who was eager and who was loath for the warfare. "Futile for all is the emprise but for one troop only, namely the division of the Galian ('of Leinster')" quoth Medb.

"Why blamest thou these men?" queried Ailill.

"It is not that we blame them" Medb made answer.

"What good service then have these done that they are praised above all?" asked Ailill.

"There is reason to praise them" said Medb. "Splendid are the warriors. When the others begin making their pens and pitching their camp, these have finished building their bothies and huts. When the rest are building their bothies and huts, these have finished preparing their food and drink. When the rest are preparing their food and drink, these have finished eating and feasting, and their harps are playing for them. When all the others have finished eating and

feasting, these are by that time asleep. And even as their servants and thralls are distinguished above the servants and thralls of the men of Erin, so shall their heroes and champions be distinguished beyond the heroes and champions of the men of Erin this time on this hosting. It is folly then for these to go, since it is those others will enjoy the victory of the host."

"So much the better, I trow" replied Ailill; "for it is with us they go and it is for us they fight."

"They shall not go with us nor shall they fight for us." cried Medb.

"Let them stay at home then," said Ailill.

"Stay they shall not" answered Medb. "They will fall on us in the rear and will seize our land against us."

"What shall they do then?" Finnabair asked "if they go not out nor yet remain at home?"

"Death and destruction and slaughter is what I desire for them" answered Medb.

"For shame then on thy speech" spake Ailill; " 'tis a woman's advice, for that they pitch their tents and make their pens so promptly and unwearily."

"By the truth of my conscience" cried Fergus "not thus shall it happen, for they are allies of us men of Ulster. No one shall do them to death but he that does death to myself along with them!"

"Not to me oughtest thou thus to speak, O Fergus" then cried Medb "for I have hosts enough to slay and slaughter thee with the division of Leinstermen round thee. For there are the seven Manè, that is, my seven sons with their seven divisions, and the sons of Maga with their seven divisions, and Ailill with his division, and I myself with my own bodyguard besides. We are strong enough here to kill and slaughter thee with thy cantred of the Leinstermen round thee!"

"It befits thee not thus to speak to me" said Fergus "for I have with me here in alliance with us Ulstermen, the seven Underkings of Munster, with their seven cantreds. Here we have what is best of the youths of Ulster, even the division of the Black Banishment. Here we have what is best of the noble youths of Ulster, even the division of the Galian ('of Leinster'). Furthermore, I myself am bond and surety and guarantee for them, since ever they left their own native land. I will give thee battle in the midst of the camp, and to me will they hold steadfast on the day of battle. More than all that" added Fergus "these men shall be no subject of dispute. By that I mean I will never forsake them. For the rest, we will care for these warriors, to the end that they get not the upper hand of the host."

“The number of our force is seventeen cantreds, besides our rabble and our womenfolk — for with each king was his queen in Medb’s company — and our striplings; the eighteenth division is namely the cantred of the Galian. This division of Leinstermen I will distribute among all the host of the men of Erin in such wise that no five men of them shall be in any one place.”

“That pleaseth me well” said Medb: “let them be as they may, if only they be not in the battle order of the ranks where they now are in such great force.”

Forthwith Fergus distributed the cantred of the Galian among the men of Erin in such wise that there were not five men of them in any one place.

Thereupon, the troops set out on their way and march. It was no easy thing for their kings and their leaders to attend to that mighty host. They took part in the expedition according to the several tribes and according to the several stems and the several districts wherewith they had come, to the end that they might see one other and know one other, that each man might be with his comrades and with his friends and with his kinsfolk on the march. They declared that in such wise they should go. They also took counsel in what manner they should proceed on their hosting. Thus they declared they should proceed: Each host with its king, each troop with its lord, and each band with its captain; each king and each prince of the men of Erin by a separate route on his halting height apart. They took counsel who was most proper to seek tidings in advance of the host between the two provinces. And they said it was Fergus, inasmuch as the expedition was an obligatory one with him, for it was he that had been seven years in the kingship of Ulster. And after Conchobar had usurped the kingship and after the murder of the sons of Usnech who were under his protection and surety, Fergus left the Ultonians, and for seventeen years he was away from Ulster in exile and in enmity. For that reason it was fitting that he above all should go after tidings.

So the lead of the way was entrusted to Fergus. Fergus before all fared forth to seek tidings, and a feeling of love and affection for his kindred of the men of Ulster came over him, and he led the troops astray in a great circuit to the north and the south. And he despatched messengers with warnings to the Ulstermen, who were at that time in their ‘Pains’ except Cuchulain and his father Sualtaim. And he began to detain and delay the host until such time as the men of Ulster should have gathered together an army. Because of affection he did so.

Medb perceived this and she upbraided him for it, and chanted the lay: —

Medb:                   “Fergus, speak, what shall we say?  
                              What may mean this devious way?  
                              For we wander north and south;  
                              Over other lands we stray!”

Fergus:               “Medb, why art thou so perturbed?  
                              There’s no treacherous purpose here.  
                              Ulster’s land it is, O queen,

Over which I've led thy host!"

Medb: "Ailill, splendid with his hosts,  
Fears thee lest thou should'st betray.  
Thou hast not bent all thy mind  
To direct us on our way!"

Fergus: "Not to bring the host to harm  
Make these changing circuits I.  
Haply could I now avoid  
Sualtach's son, the Blacksmith's Hound!"

Medb: "Ill of thee to wrong our host,  
Fergus, son of Ross the Red;  
Much good hast thou found with us,  
Fergus, in thy banishment!"

"If thou showest our foemen love,  
No more shalt thou lead our troops;  
Haply someone else we'll find  
To direct us on our way!"

"I will be in the van of the troops no longer" cried Fergus; "but do thou find another to go before them." For all that, Fergus kept his place in the van of the troops.

The four mighty provinces of Erin passed that night on Cul Silinne. The sharp, keen-edged anxiety for Cuchulain came upon Fergus and he warned the men of Erin to be on their guard, because there would come upon them the rapacious lion, and the doom of foes, the vanquisher of multitudes, and the chief of retainers, the mangler of great hosts, the hand that dispenseth treasures, and the flaming torch, even Cuchulain son of Sualtaim. And thus he foreshowed him and chanted a lay, and Medb responded: —

Fergus: "Well for ye to heed and watch,  
With array of arms and men.  
He will come, the one we fear,  
Murthemne's great, deedful youth!"

Medb: "How so dear, this battle-rede,  
Comes from thee, Roig's son most bold.  
Men and arms have I enough  
To attend Cuchulain here!"

Fergus: "Thou shalt need them, Medb of Ai,  
Men and arms for battle hard,  
With the grey steed's horseman brave.  
All the night and all the day!"

Medb:                    “I have kept here in reserve  
                              Heroes fit for fight and spoil;  
                              Thirty hundred hostage-chiefs,  
                              Leinster’s bravest champions they.

                              Fighting men from Cruachan fair,  
                              Braves from clear-streamed Luachair,  
                              Four full realms of goodly Gaels  
                              Will defend me from this man!”

Fergus:                “Rich in troops from Mourne and Bann,  
                              Blood he’ll draw o’er shafts of spears;  
                              He will cast to mire and sand  
                              These three thousand Leinstermen.

                              With the swallow’s swiftest speed,  
                              With the rush of biting wind,  
                              So bounds on my dear brave Hound,  
                              Breathing slaughter on his foes!”

Medb:                    “Fergus, should he come ’tween us,  
                              To Cuchulain bear this word:  
                              He were prudent to stay still;  
                              Cruachan holds a check in store.”

Fergus:                “Valiant will the slaughter be  
                              Badb’s wild daughter gloats upon.  
                              For the Blacksmith’s Hound will spill  
                              Showers of blood on hosts of men!”

After this lay the men of the four grand provinces of Erin marched on the morrow over Moin Coltna (‘the Marsh of Coltain’) eastwards that day; and there met them eight score deer in a single herd. The troops spread out and surrounded and killed them so that none of them escaped.

But there is one event to add: Although the division of the Galian had been dispersed among the men of Erin, wherever there was a man of the Galian, it was he that got them, except five deer only which was the men of Erin’s share thereof, so that one division took all the eight score deer.

Then they proceed to Mag Trega and they unyoke there and prepare their food. It is said that it is there that Dubthach recited this stave: —

                              “Grant ye have not heard till now,  
                              Giving ear to Dubthach’s fray:  
                              Dire-black war upon ye waits,  
                              ’Gainst the Whitehorned of Queen Medb!

                              “There will come the chief of hosts,

War for Murthemne to wage.  
Ravens shall drink garden's milk,  
This the fruit of swineherds' strife.

"Turfy Cron will hold them back,  
Keep them back from Murthemne,  
Till the warriors' work is done  
On Ochainè's northern mount!

" 'Quick,' to Cormac, Ailill cries;  
'Go and seek ye out your son,  
Loose no cattle from the fields,  
Lest the din of the host reach them!'

"Battle they'll have here eftsoon,  
Medb and one third of the host.  
Corpses will be scattered wide  
If the Wildman come to you!"

Then Nemain, the Badb to wit, attacked them, and that was not the quietest of nights they had, with the noise of the churl, namely Dubthach, in their sleep. Such fears he scattered amongst the host straightway, and he hurled a great stone at the throng till Medb came to check him. They continued their march then till they slept a night in Granard Tethba in the north, after the host had made a circuitous way across sloughs and streams.

It was on that same day, after the coming of the warning from Fergus to the Ulstermen, that Cuchulain son of Sualtaim, and Sualtaim Sidech ('of the Fairy Mound'), his father, when they had received the warning from Fergus, came so near on their watch for the host that their horses grazed in pasture round the pillar-stone on Ard Cuillenn ('the Height of Cuillenn'). Sualtaim's horses cropped the grass north of the pillar stone close to the ground; Cuchulain's cropped the grass south of the pillar stone even to the ground and the bare stones. "Well, O master Sualtaim," said Cuchulain; "the thought of the host is fixed sharp upon me tonight, so do thou depart for us with warnings to the men of Ulster, that they remain not in the smooth plains but that they betake themselves to the woods and wastes and steep glens of the province, if so they may keep out of the way of the men of Erin."

"And thou, lad, what wilt thou do?"

"I must go southwards to Temair to keep tryst with the maid of Fedlimid Nocruthach ('of the Nine Forms') Conchobar's daughter, according to my own agreement, till morning." "Alas, that one should go on such a journey," said Sualtaim, "and leave the Ulstermen under the feet of their foes and their enemies for the sake of a tryst with a woman!"

"For all that, I needs must go. For, an I go not, the troth of men will be held for false and the promises of women held for true."

Sualtair departed with warnings to the men of Ulster. Cuchulain strode into the wood, and there, with a single blow, he lopped the prime sapling of an oak, root and top, and with only one foot and one hand and one eye he exerted himself; and he made a twig-ring thereof and set an ogham script on the plug of the ring, and set the ring round the narrow part of the pillar stone on Ard ('the Height') of Cuillenn. He forced the ring till it reached the thick of the pillar stone. Thereafter Cuchulain went his way to his tryst with the woman.

Touching the men of Erin, the account follows here: They came up to the pillar-stone at Ard Cuillenn, which is called Crossa Coil to-day, and they began looking out upon the province that was unknown to them, the province of Ulster. And two of Medb's people went always before them in the van of the host, at every camp and on every march, at every ford and every river and every gap. They were wont to do so that they might save the brooches and cushions and cloaks of the host, so that the dust of the multitude might not soil them and that no stain might come on the princes' raiment in the crowd or the crush of the hosts or the throng; — these were the two sons of Nera, who was the son of Nuathar, son of Tacan, two sons of the house-stewards of Cruachan, Err and Innell, to wit. Fraech and Fochnam were the names of their charioteers.

The nobles of Erin arrived at the pillar-stone and they there beheld the signs of the browsing of the horses, cropping around the pillar, and they looked close at the rude hoop which the royal hero had left behind about the pillar stone. Then sat they down to wait till the army should come, the while their musicians played to them. And Ailill took the withy in his hand and placed it in Fergus' hand, and Fergus read the ogham script graven on the plug of the withy, and made known to the men of Erin what was the meaning of the ogham writing that was on it. When Medb came, she asked "Why wait ye here?"

"Because of yonder withy we wait," Fergus made answer; "there is an ogham writing on its binding and this is what it saith: 'Let no one go past here till a man be found to throw a withy like unto this, using only one hand and made of a single branch, and I except my master Fergus.' Truly" Fergus added "it was Cuchulain threw it, and it was his steeds that grazed this plain." And he placed the hoop in the hands of the druids, and it is thus he began to recite and he pronounced a lay: —

"What bespeaks this withe to us,  
What purports its secret rede?  
And what number cast it here,  
Was it one man or a host?"

"If ye go past here this night,  
And bide not one night in camp.  
On ye'll come the tear-flesh Hound;  
Yours the blame, if ye it scorn!"

"Evil on the host he'll bring,

If ye go your way past this.  
Find, ye druids, find out here,  
For what cause this withe was made!”

A druid speaks:

“Cut by hero, cast by chief,  
As a perfect trap for foes.  
Stayer of lords — with hosts of men —  
One man cast it with one hand!

“With fierce rage the battle ‘gins  
Of the Smith’s Hound of Red Branch.  
Bound to meet this madman’s rage;  
This the name that’s on the withe!

“Would the king’s host have its will —  
Else they break the law of war —  
Let some one man of ye cast,  
As one man this withe did cast!

“Woes to bring with hundred fights  
On four realms of Erin’s land;  
Naught I know ‘less it be this  
For what cause the withe was made!”

After that lay: “I pledge you my word” said Fergus “if so ye set at naught yon withy and the royal hero that made it, and if ye go beyond without passing a night’s camp and quarterage here, or until a man of you make a withy of like kind, using but one foot and one eye and one hand, even as he made it, certain it is, whether ye be under the ground or in a tight shut house, the man that wrote the ogham hereon will bring slaughter and bloodshed upon ye before the hour of rising on the morrow, if ye make light of him!”

“That, surely, would not be pleasing to us” quoth Medb “that any one should straightway spill our blood or besmirch us red, now that we are come to this unknown province, even to the province of Ulster. More pleasing would it be to us, to spill another’s blood and redden him.”

“Far be it from us to set this withy at naught” said Ailill “nor shall we make little of the royal hero that wrought it, rather will we resort to the shelter of this great wood, that is, Fidduin, (‘the Wood of the Dûn’) southwards till morning. There will we pitch our camp and quarters.”

Thereupon the hosts advanced, and as they went they felled the wood with their swords before their chariots, so that Slechta (‘the Hewn Road’) is still the by-name of that place where is Partraige Beca (‘the Lesser Partry’) south west of Cenannas na Rig (‘Kells of the Kings’) near Cul Sibrille.

According to other books, it is told as follows: After they had come to Fidduin they saw a chariot and therein a beautiful maiden. It is there that the conversation between Medb and Fedelm the seeress took place that we spoke of before, and it is after the answer she made to Medb that the wood was cut down: "Look for me," said Medb, "how my journey will be."

"It is hard for me" the maiden made answer "for no glance of eye can I cast upon them in the wood."

"Then it is ploughland this shall be" quoth Medb; "we will cut down the wood." Now, this was done, so that this is the name of the place, Slechta, to wit.

They slept in Cul Sibrille, which is Cenannas. A heavy snow fell on them that night, and so great it was that it reached to the shoulders of the men and to the flanks of the horses and to the poles of the chariots, so that all the provinces of Erin were one level plane from the snow. But no huts nor bothies nor tents did they set up that night, nor did they prepare food nor drink, nor made they a meal nor repast. None of the men of Erin wot whether friend or foe was next him until the bright hour of sunrise on the morrow.

Certain it is that the men of Erin experienced not a night of encampment or of station that held more discomfort or hardship for them than that night with the snow] at Cul Sibrille. The four grand provinces of Erin moved out early on the morrow with the rising of the bright-shining sun glistening on the snow and marched on from that part into another.

Now, as regards Cuchulain: It was far from being early when he arose from his tryst. And then he ate a meal and took a repast, and he remained until he had washed himself and bathed on that day.

He called to his charioteer to lead out the horses and yoke the chariot. The charioteer led out the horses and yoked the chariot, and Cuchulain mounted his chariot. And they came on the track of the army. They found the trail of the men of Erin leading past them from that part into another. "Alas, O master Laeg" cried Cuchulain "by no good luck went we to our tryst with the woman last night. Would that we had not gone thither nor betrayed the Ultonians. This is the least that might be looked for from him that keeps guard on the marches, a cry, or a shout, or an alarm, or to call, 'Who goes the road?' This it fell not unto us to say. The men of Erin have gone past us, without warning, without complaint, into the land of Ulster."

"I foretold thee that, O Cuchulain" said Laeg. "Even though thou wentest to thy woman tryst last night, such a disgrace would come upon thee."

"Good now, O Laeg, go thou for us on the trail of the host and make an estimate of them, and discover for us in what number the men of Erin went by us."

Laeg came on the track of the host, and he went to the front of the trail and he came on its sides and he went to the back of it. "Thou art confused in thy counting, O Laeg, my master" quoth Cuchulain.

"Confused I must be," Laeg replied.

"It is not confusedly that I should see, if I should go" said Cuchulain. "Come into the chariot then, and I will make a reckoning of them." The charioteer mounted the chariot and Cuchulain went on the trail of the hosts and after a long while he made a reckoning of them.

"Even thou, it is not easy for thee. Thou art perplexed in thy counting, my little Cuchulain" quoth Laeg.

"Not perplexed" answered Cuchulain; "it is easier for me than for thee. For I have three magical virtues: Gift of sight, gift of understanding, and gift of reckoning. For I know the number wherewith the hosts went past us, namely, eighteen cantreds. Nay more: the eighteenth cantred has been distributed among the entire host of the men of Erin, so that their number is not clear, namely, that of the cantred of Leinstermen." This here is the third cunningest and most difficult reckoning that ever was made in Erin. These were: The reckoning by Cuchulain of the men of Erin on the Táin, the reckoning by Lug Lamfota ('Long-hand') of the host of the Fomorians in the Battle of Moytura, and the reckoning by Incel of the host in the Hostel of Da Derga.

Now, many and divers were the magic virtues that were in Cuchulain that were in no one else in his day. Excellence of form, excellence of shape, excellence of build, excellence in swimming, excellence in horsemanship, excellence in chess and in draughts, excellence in battle, excellence in contest, excellence in single combat, excellence in reckoning, excellence in speech, excellence in counsel, excellence in bearing, excellence in laying waste and in plundering from the neighbouring border.

"Good, my friend Laeg. Brace the horses for us to the chariot; lay on the goad for us on the horses; drive on the chariot for us and give thy left board to the hosts, to see can we overtake the van or the rear or the midst of the hosts, for I will cease to live unless there fall by my hand this night a friend or foe of the men of Erin."

Then it was that the charioteer gave the prick to the steeds. He turned his left board to the hosts till he arrived at Turloch Caille More ('the Creek of the Great Wood') northwards of Cnogba na Rig ('Knowth of the Kings') which is called Ath Gabla ('the Ford of the Fork'). Thereupon Cuchulain went round the host till he came to Ath Grenca. He went into the wood at that place and sprang out of his chariot, and he lopped off a four-pronged fork, root and top, with a single stroke of his sword. He pointed and charred it and put a writing in ogham on its side, and he gave it a long throw from the hinder part of his chariot with the tip of a single hand, in such wise that two thirds of it sank into the ground

and only one-third was above it in the mid part of the stream, so that no chariot could go thereby on this side or that.

Then it was that the same two striplings surprised him, namely, the two sons of Nera son of Nuathar son of Tacan, while engaged in that feat. And they vied which of the twain would be the first to fight and contend with Cuchuain, which of them would inflict the first wound upon him and be the first to behead him. Cuchulain turned on them, and straightway he struck off their four heads from themselves Eirr and Indell and from Foich and Fochlam, their drivers, and he fixed a head of each man of them on each of the prongs of the pole. And Cuchulain let the horses of the party go back in the direction of the men of Erin, to return by the same road, their reins loose around their ears and their bellies red and the bodies of the warriors dripping their blood down outside on the ribs of the chariots. Thus he did, for he deemed it no honour nor deemed he it fair to take horses or garments or arms from corpses or from the dead. And then the troops saw the horses of the party that had gone out in advance before them, and the headless bodies of the warriors oozing their blood down on the ribs of the chariots (and their crimsoned trappings upon them). The van of the army waited for the rear to come up, and all were thrown into confusion of striking, that is as much as to say, into a tumult of arms.

Medb and Fergus and the Manè and the sons of Maga drew near. For in this wise was Medb wont to travel, and nine chariots with her alone; two of these chariots before her, and two chariots behind, and two chariots at either side, and her own chariot in the middle between them. This is why Medb did so, that the turves from the horses' hoofs, or the flakes of foam from the bridle bits, or the dust of the mighty host or of the numerous throng might not reach the queen's diadem of gold which she wore round her head. "What have we here?" queried Medb.

"Not hard to say" each and all made answer; "the horses of the band that went out before us are here and their bodies lacking their heads in their chariots." They held a council and they felt certain it was the sign of a multitude and of the approach of a mighty host, and that it was the Ulstermen that had come and that it was a battle that had taken place before them on the ford. And this was the counsel they took: to despatch Cormac Conlongas, Conchobar's son, from them to learn what was at the ford; because, even though the Ulstermen might be there, they would not kill the son of their own king. Thereupon Cormac Conlongas, Conchobar's son, set forth and this was the complement with which he went, ten hundred in addition to twenty hundred armed men, to ascertain what was at the ford. And when he was come, he saw naught save the fork in the middle of the ford, with four heads upon it dripping their blood down along the stem of the fork into the stream of the river, and a writing in ogham on the side, and the signs of the two horses and the track of a single chariot driver and the marks of a single warrior leading out of the ford going therefrom to the eastward. By that time, the nobles of Erin had drawn nigh to the ford and they all began to look closely at the fork. They marvelled and wondered who had set up the trophy.

“Are yonder heads those of our people?” Medb asked.

“They are our people’s, and our chosen ones’ ” answered Ailill. One of their men deciphered the ogham writing that was on the side of the fork, to wit: ‘A single man cast this fork with but a single hand; and go ye not past it till one man of you throw it with one hand, excepting Fergus.’ “What name have ye men of Ulster for this ford till now, Fergus?” asked Ailill.

“Ath Grenca,” answered Fergus; “and Ath Gabla (‘Ford of the Fork’) shall now be its name forever from this fork,” said Fergus. And he recited the lay: —

“Grenca’s ford shall change its name,  
From the strong and fierce Hound’s deed.  
Here we see a four-pronged fork,  
Set to prove all Erin’s men!

“On two points — as sign of war —  
Are Fraech’s head and Fochnam’s head;  
On its other points are thrust  
Err’s head and Innell’s withal!

“And yon ogham on its side,  
Find, ye druids, in due form,  
Who has set it upright there?  
What host drove it in the ground?”

(A druid answers:)

“Yon forked pole — with fearful strength —  
Which thou seest, Fergus, there,  
One man cut, to welcome us,  
With one perfect stroke of sword!

“Pointed it and shouldered it —  
Though this was no light exploit —  
After that he flung it down,  
To uproot for one of you!

“Grenca was its name till now —  
All will keep its memory —  
Fork ford be its name for aye,  
From the fork that’s in the ford!”

After the lay, spake Ailill: “I marvel and wonder, O Fergus, who could have sharpened the fork and slain with such speed the four that had gone out before us.”

“Fitter it were to marvel and wonder at him who with a single stroke lopped the fork which thou seest, root and top, pointed and charred it and flung it the

length of a throw from the hinder part of his chariot, from the tip of a single hand, so that it sank over two-thirds into the ground and that naught save one third is above; nor was a hole first dug with his sword, but through a grey stone's flag it was thrust, and thus it is geis for the men of Erin to proceed to the bed of this ford till one of ye pull out the fork with the tip of one hand, even as he erewhile drove it down."

"Thou art of our hosts, O Fergus" said Medb; avert this necessity from us, and do thou draw the fork for us from the bed of the ford."

"Let a chariot be brought me" cried Fergus "till I draw it out, that it may be seen that its butt is of one hewing." And a chariot was brought to Fergus, and Fergus laid hold with a truly mighty grip on the fork, and he made splinters and scraps of the chariot. "Let another chariot be brought me" cried Fergus. Another chariot was brought to Fergus, and Fergus made a tug at the fork and again made fragments and splinters of the chariot, both its box and its yoke and its wheels. "Again let a chariot be brought me" cried Fergus. And Fergus exerted his strength on the fork, and made pieces and bits of the chariot. There where the seventeen chariots of the Connachtmen's chariots were, Fergus made pieces and bits of them all, and yet he failed to draw the fork from the bed of the ford.

"Come now, let it be, O Fergus" cried Medb; "break our people's chariots no more. For hadst thou not been now engaged on this hosting, by this time should we have come to Ulster, driving divers spoils and cattle-herds with us. We wot wherefore thou workest all this, to delay and detain the host till the Ulstermen rise from their 'Pains' and offer us battle, the battle of the Táin."

"Bring me a swift chariot," cried Fergus. And his own chariot was brought to Fergus, and Fergus gave a tug at the fork, and nor wheel nor floor nor one of the chariot poles creaked nor cracked. Even though it was with his strength and prowess that the one had driven it down, with his might and doughtiness the other drew it out — the battle-champion, the gap-breaker of hundreds, the crushing sledge, the stone-of-battle for enemies, the head of retainers, the foe of hosts, the hacking of masses, the flaming torch and the leader of mighty combat. He drew it up with the tip of one hand till it reached the slope of his shoulder, and he placed the fork in Ailill's hand.

Ailill scanned it; he regarded it near. "The fork meseems, is all the more perfect" quoth Ailill; "for a single stroke I see on it from butt to top."

"Aye, all the more perfect," Fergus replied. And Fergus began to sing praise of Cuchulain, and he made a lay thereon: —

"Here behold the famous fork,  
By which cruel Cuchulain stood.  
Here he left, for hurt to all,  
Four heads of his border foes!

"Surely he'd not flee therefrom,

‘Fore aught man, how brave or bold.  
Though the scatheless[a] Hound this left,  
On its hard rind there is gore!

“To its hurt the host goes east,  
Seeking Cualnge’s wild Brown bull.  
Warriors’ cleaving there shall be,  
‘Neath Cuchulain’s baneful sword!

“No gain will their[b] stout bull be,  
For which sharp-armed war will rage;  
At the fall of each head’s skull  
Erin’s every tribe shall weep!

“I have nothing to relate  
As regards Dechtirè’s son.  
Men and women hear the tale  
Of this fork, how it came here!”

After this lay: “Let us pitch our booths and tents” said Ailill “and let us make ready food and drink, and let us sing songs and strike up harps, and let us eat and regale ourselves, for, of a truth, never before nor since knew the men of Erin a night of encampment or of entrenchment that held sorer discomfort or distress for them than yester-night. Let us give heed to the manner of folk to whom we go and let us hear somewhat of their deeds and famous tales.”

They raised their booths and pitched their tents. They got ready their food and drink, and songs were sung and harping intoned by them, and feasting and eating indulged in, and they were told of the feats of Cuchulain.

And Ailill inquired of Fergus: “I marvel and wonder who could have come to us to our lands and slain so quickly the four that had gone out before us. Is it likely that Conchobar son of Fachtna Fatach (‘the Mighty’), High King of Ulster, has come to us?”

“It is never likely that he has” Fergus answered; “for a shame it would be to speak ill of him in his absence. There is nothing he would not stake for the sake of his honour. For if he had come hither to the border of the land, there would have come armies and troops and the pick of the men of Erin that are with him. And even though against him in one and the same place, and in one mass and one march and one camp, and on one and the same hill were the men of Erin and Alba, Britons and Saxons, he would give them battle, before him they would break and it is not he that would be routed.”

“A question, then: Who would be like to have come to us? Is it like that Cuscraid Mend (‘the Stammerer’) of Macha would have come, Conchobar’s son, from Inis Cuscraid?”

“Nay then, it is not; he, the son of the High King” Fergus answered. “There is nothing he would not hazard for the sake of his honour. For were it he that had come hither, there would have come the sons of kings and the royal leaders of Ulster and Erin that are serving as hirelings with him. And though there might be against him in one and the same place, in one mass and one march and one camp, and on one and the same hill the men of Erin and Alba, Britons and Saxons, he would give them battle, before him they would break and it is not he that would be routed.”

“I ask, then, whether Eogan son of Durthacht, King of Fernmag, would have come?”

“In sooth, it is not likely. For, had he come hither, the pick of the men of Fernmag would have come with him, battle he would give them, before him they would break, and it is not he that would be routed.”

“I ask, then: Who would be likely to have come to us? Is it likely that he would have come, Celtchai son of Uthechar?”

“No more is it likely that it was he. A shame it would be to make light of him in his absence, him the battle-stone for the foes of the province, the head of all the retainers and the gate-of-battle of Ulster. And even should there be against him in one place and one mass and one march and one camp, and on one and the same hill all the men of Erin from the west to the east, from the south to the north, battle he would give them, before him they would break and it is not he that would be routed.”

“I ask, then: Who would be like to have come to us?” asked Ailill.

“I know not” Fergus replied “unless it be the little lad, my nursling and Conchobar’s. Cuchulain (‘the Wolf-dog of Culann the Smith’) he is called. He is the one who could have done the deed” answered Fergus. “He it is who could have lopped the tree with one blow from its root, could have killed the four with the quickness wherewith they were killed and could have come to the border with his charioteer.”

“Of a truth” spake Ailill “I heard from ye of this little boy once on a time in Cruachan. What might be the age of this little boy now?”

“It is by no means his age that is most formidable in him” answered Fergus. “Because, manful were his deeds, those of that lad, at a time when he was younger than he now is. In his fifth year he went in quest of warlike deeds among the lads of Emain Macha. In his sixth year he went to learn skill in arms and feats with Scathach, and he went to woo Emer; in his seventh year he took arms; in his seventeenth year he is at this time.”

“How so!” exclaimed Medb. “Is there even now amongst the Ulstermen one his equal in age that is more redoubtable than he?”

“We have not found there a man at arms that is harder, nor a point that is keener, more terrible nor quicker, nor a more bloodthirsty wolf, nor a raven more flesh-loving, nor a wilder warrior, nor a match of his age that would reach to a third or a fourth the likes of Cuchulain. Thou findest not there” Fergus went on “a hero his peer, nor a lion that is fiercer, nor a plank of battle, nor a sledge of destruction, nor a gate of combat, nor a doom of hosts, nor a contest of valour that would be of more worth than Cuchulain. Thou findest not there one that could equal his age and his growth, his dress and his terror, his size and his splendour, his fame and his voice, his shape and his power, his form and his speech, his strength and his feats and his valour, his smiting, his heat and his anger, his dash, his assault and attack, his dealing of doom and affliction, his roar, his speed, his fury, his rage, and his quick triumph with the feat of nine men on each sword’s point[a] above him, like unto Cuchulain.”

“We make not much import of him” quoth Medb. “It is but a single body he has; he shuns being wounded; he avoids being taken. They do say his age is but that of a girl to be wed. His deeds of manhood have not yet come, nor will he hold out against tried men, this young, beardless elf-man of whom thou spokest.”

“We say not so” replied Fergus “for manful were the deeds of the lad at a time when he was younger than he now is.”

## VII THE YOUTHFUL EXPLOITS OF CUCHULAIN

“Now this lad was reared in the house of his father and mother at Dairgthech (‘the Oak House’), namely, in the plain of Murthemne, and the tales of the youths of Emain were told to him. For there are always thrice fifty boys at play there” said Fergus. “Forasmuch as in this wise Conchobar passed his reign ever since he, the king, assumed his sovereignty, to wit: As soon as he arose, forthwith in settling the cares and affairs of the province; thereafter, the day he divided in three: first, the first third he spent a-watching the youths play games of skill and of hurling; the next third of the day, a-playing draughts and chess, and the last third a-feasting on meat and a-quaffing ale, till sleep possessed them all, the while minstrels and harpers lulled him to sleep. For all that I am a long time in banishment because of him, I give my word,” said Fergus, “there is not in Erin nor in Alba a warrior the like of Conchobar.”

“And the lad was told the tales of the boys and the boy troop in Emain; and the child said to his mother, he would go to have part in the games on the playfield of Emain. ‘It is too soon for thee, little son’ said his mother; ‘wait till there go with thee a champion of the champions of Ulster, or some of the attendants of Conchobar to enjoin thy protection and thy safety on the boy troop.’ ‘I think it too long for that, my mother’ the little lad answered ‘I will not wait for it. But do thou show me what place lies Emain Macha.’ ‘Northwards, there; it is far away from thee’ said his mother ‘the place wherein it lies, and the way is hard. Sliab Fuait lies between thee and Emain.’ ‘At all hazards, I will essay it,’ he answered.

“The boy fared forth and took his playthings with him. His little lath shield he took, and his hurley of bronze and his ball of silver; and he took his little javelin for throwing; and his toy staff he took with its fire-hardened butt end, and he began to shorten the length of his journey with them. He would give the ball a stroke with the hurl bat, so that he sent it a long distance from him. Then with a second throw he would cast his hurley so that it went a distance no shorter than the first throw. He would hurl his little darts, and let fly his toy staff, and make a wild chase after them. Then he would catch up his hurl bat and pick up the ball and snatch up the dart, and the stock of the toy staff had not touched the ground when he caught its tip which was in the air.

“He went his way to the mound seat of Emain, where was the boy troop. Thrice fifty youths were with Folloman, Conchobar’s son, at their games on the fair green of Emain.

“The little lad went on to the playfield into the midst of the boys, and he whipped the ball between his two legs away from them, nor did he suffer it to travel higher up than the top of his knee, nor did he let it lower down than his ankle, and he drove it and held it between his two legs and not one of the boys was able to get a prod nor a stroke nor a blow nor a shot at it, so that he carried it over the brink of the goal away from them. Then he goes to the youths without binding them to protect him. For no one used to approach them on their

playfield without first securing from them a pledge of protection. He was weetless thereof.

“Then they all gazed upon him. They wondered and marvelled. ‘Come, boys!’ cried Folloman, Conchobar’s son ‘the urchin insults us. Throw yourselves all on yon fellow, and his death shall come at my hands; for it is geis among you for any youth to come into your game, without first entrusting his safety to you. And do you all attack him together, for we know that yon wight is some one of the heroes of Ulster; and they shall not make it their wont to break into your sports without first entrusting their safety and protection to you.’

“Thereupon they all set upon him together. They cast their thrice fifty hurl bats at the poll of the boy’s head. He raises his single toy staff and wards off the thrice fifty hurlies, so that they neither hurt him nor harm him, and he takes a load of them on his back. Then they throw their thrice fifty balls at the lad. He raises his upper arm and his forearm and the palms of his hands against them and parries the thrice fifty balls, [and he catches them, each single ball in his bosom. They throw at him the thrice fifty play spears charred at the end. The boy raises his little lath shield against them and fends off the thrice fifty play staffs, and they all remain stuck in his lath-shield. Thereupon contortions took hold of him. Thou wouldst have weened it was a hammering wherewith each hair was hammered into his head, with such an uprising it rose. Thou wouldst have weened it was a spark of fire that was on every single hair there. He closed one of his eyes so that it was no wider than the eye of a needle. He opened the other wide so that it was as big as the mouth of a mead cup. He stretched his mouth from his jawbones to his ears; he opened his mouth wide to his jaw so that his gullet was seen. The champion’s light rose up from his crown.

“It was then he ran in among them. He scattered fifty king’s sons of them over the ground underneath him before they got to the gate of Emain. Five of them” Fergus continued “dashed headlong between me and Conchobar, where we were playing chess, even on Cennchaem (‘Fair-head’) the chessboard of Conchobar, on the mound seat of Emain. The little boy pursued them to cut them off. Then he sprang over the chessboard after the nine. Conchobar seized the little lad by the wrists. ‘Hold, little boy. I see ’tis not gently thou dealest with the boy band.’ ‘Good reason I have’ quoth the little lad. ‘From home, from mother and father I came to play with them, and they have not been good to me. I had not a guest’s honour at the hands of the boy troop on my arrival, for all that I came from faraway lands.’ ‘How is that? Who art thou, and what is thy name?’] asked Conchobar. ‘Little Setanta am I, son of Sualtaim. Son am I to Dechtirè, thine own sister; and not through thee did I expect to be thus aggrieved.’ ‘How so, little one?’ said Conchobar. ‘Knewest thou not that it is forbidden among the boy troop, that it is geis for them for any boy to approach them in their land without first claiming his protection from them?’ ‘I knew it not,’ said the lad. ‘Had I known it, I would have been on my guard against them.’ ‘Good, now, ye boys’ Conchobar cried; ‘take ye upon you the protection of the little lad.’ ‘We grant it, indeed’ they made answer.

“The little lad went into the game again under the protection of the boy troop. Thereupon they loosed hands from him, and once more he rushed amongst them throughout the house. He laid low fifty of their princes on the ground under him. Their fathers thought it was death he had given them. That was it not, but stunned they were with front blows and mid blows and long blows. ‘Hold!’ cried Conchobar. ‘Why art thou yet at them?’ ‘I swear by my gods whom I worship’ (said the boy) ‘they shall all come under my protection and shielding, as I have put myself under their protection and shielding. Otherwise I shall not lighten my hands off them until I have brought them all to earth.’ ‘Well, little lad, take thou upon thee the protection of the boy troop.’ ‘I grant it, indeed’ said the lad. Thereupon the boy troop went under his protection and shielding.

“Then they all went back to the playfield, and the boys whom he had overthrown there arose. Their nurses and tutors helped them.

“Now, once upon a time ” continued Fergus “when he was a gilla, he slept not in Emain Macha till morning. ‘Tell me’ Conchobar said to him ‘why sleepest thou not in Emain Macha, Cuchulain?’ ‘I sleep not, unless it be equally high at my head and my feet.” Then Conchobar had a pillar stone set up at his head and another at his feet, and between them a bed apart was made for him.

“Another time a certain man went to wake him, and the lad struck him with his fist in the neck or in the forehead, so that it drove in the front of his forehead on to his brain and he overthrew the pillar stone with his forearm.”

“It is known” exclaimed Ailill “that that was the fist of a champion and the arm of a hero.”

“And from that time” continued Fergus “no one durst wake him, so that he used to wake of himself.

“Then, another time, he played ball on the play field east of Emain, and he was alone on one side against the thrice fifty boys. He always worsted in every game in the east in this way. Thereafter the lad began to use his fists on them, so that fifty boys of them died thereof. He took to flight then, till he took refuge under the cushion of Conchobar’s couch. The Ulstermen sprang up all around him. I, too, sprang up, and Conchobar, thereat. The lad himself rose up under the couch, so that he hove up the couch and the thirty warriors that were on it withal, so that he bore it into the middle of the house. Straightway the Ulstermen sat around him in the house. We settled it then” continued Fergus “and reconciled the boy troop to him afterwards.

“The broil of war arose between Ulster and Eogan son of Durthacht. The Ulstermen go forth to the war. The lad Setanta is left behind asleep. The men of Ulster are beaten. Conchobar and Cuscraid Menn (‘the Stammerer’) of Macha are left on the field and many besides them. Their groans awaken the lad. Thereat he stretches himself, so that the two stones are snapped that are near him. This took place in the presence of Bricriu yonder” Fergus added. “Then he gets up. I meet him at the door of the liss, I being severely wounded. ‘Hey, God

keep thy life, O Fergus my master,' says he; 'where is Conchobar?' 'I know not' I answer. Thereupon he goes out. The night is dark. He makes for the battlefield, until he sees before him a man and half his head on him and half of another man on his back. 'Help me, Cuchulain' he cries; 'I have been stricken, and I bear on my back half of my brother. Carry it for me a while.' 'I will not carry it' says he. Thereupon the man throws the load at him. Cuchulain throws it back from him. They grapple with one another. Cuchulain is overthrown. Then I heard something. It was Badb from the corpses: 'Ill the stuff of a warrior that is there under the feet of a phantom.' Thereat Cuchulain arises from underneath him, and he strikes off his head with his playing stick and proceeds to drive the ball before him over the field of battle.

" 'Is my master Conchobar on this battlefield?' That one makes answer. He goes towards him, to where he espies him in a ditch and the earth piled around him on both sides to hide him. 'Wherefore art thou come to the battlefield?' Conchobar asks; 'is it that thou mightst see mortal terror there?' Then Cuchulain lifts him out of the ditch. The six strong men of Ulster that were with us could not have lifted him out more bravely. 'Get thee before us to yonder house' says Conchobar 'to make me a fire there.' He kindles a great fire for him. 'Good now' quoth Conchobar 'if one would bring me a roast pig, I would live.' 'I will go fetch it' says Cuchulain. Thereupon he sallies out, when he sees a man at a cooking pit in the heart of the wood. One of his hands holds his weapons therein, the other roasts the pork. Ill favoured, indeed, is the man. For the which, Cuchulain attacks him and takes his head and his pig with him. Conchobar eats the pig then. 'Let us go to our house' says Conchobar. They meet Cuscraid son of Conchobar and there were heavy wounds on him. Cuchulain carries him on his back. The three then proceed to Emain Macha.

"Another time the Ulstermen were in their 'Pains.' Now, there was no 'Pains' amongst us,' Fergus continued 'in women or boys, nor in any one outside the borders of Ulster, nor in Cuchulain and his father. It was for this reason no one dared shed the blood of the men of Ulster, for that the 'Pains' fell on the one that wounded them. There came thrice nine men from the Isles of Faiche. They pass over our rear fort, the whiles we are in our 'Pains.' The women scream in the fort. The youths are in the playfield. They come at the cry. When the boys catch sight of the swarthy men, they all take to flight save Cuchulain alone. He hurls the hand stones and his playing staff at them. He slays nine of them and they leave fifty wounds on him and proceed thence on their journey.

"A youngster did that deed" Fergus continued "at the close of five years after his birth, when he overthrew the sons of champions and warriors at the very door of their liss and dún. No need is there of wonder or surprise, if he should do great deeds, if he should come to the confines of the land, if he should cut off the four pronged fork, if he should slay one man or two men or three men or four men, when there are seventeen full years of him now on the Cattle Lifting of Cualnge."

"In sooth, then, we know that youth" spoke out Conall Cernach ("the Victorious") "and it is all the better we should know him, for he is a fosterling of our own."