

Chapter III

§ 17. Bricriu, however, and his queen were in their sollar. From his couch the condition of the palace was observable to him, and how things were going on withal. He exercised his mind as to how he should contrive to get the women to quarrel as he had likewise incited the men. When Bricriu had done examining his mind, it just chanced as he could have wished that Fedelm-of-the-fresh-heart came from the palace with fifty women in her train, in mood hilarious. Bricriu observed her coming past him. "Hail to thee to-night, wife of Loigaire the Triumphant! Fedelm-of-the-fresh-heart is no nickname for thee with respect to thine excellency of form and of wisdom and of lineage. Conchobar, king of a province of Erin, is thy father, Loigaire the Triumphant thy husband; I should deem it but small honour to thee that any of the Ulster women should take precedence of thee in entering the banqueting hall; only at thy heel should all Ultonian women tread. If thou comest first into the hall to-night, the sovranty of queenship shalt thou enjoy for ever over all the ladies of Ulster." Fedelm anon takes a leap over three ridges from the hall.

§ 18. Thereafter came Lendabair, daughter of Eogan mac Derthacht, wife of Conall the Victorious. Bricriu addressed her and spake: "Hail to thee, Lendabair; for thee that is no nickname; thou art the darling and pet of all mankind on account of thy splendour and of thy lustre. As far as thy spouse hath surpassed all the heroes of mankind in valour and in comeliness, so far hast thou distinguished thyself above the women of Ulster." Though great the deceit he applied in the case of Fedelm, he applied twice as much in the case of Lendabair.

§ 19. Emer came out anon with half-a-hundred women [in her train]. "Greeting and hail to thee, Emer, daughter of Forgall Manach (F. the tricky or shifty), wife of the best wight in Erin! Emer of the Fair Hair is for thee no nickname; Erin's kings and princes contend for thee in jealous rivalry. As the sun surpasseth the stars of heaven, so far dost thou outshine the women of the whole world in form and shape and lineage, in youth and beauty and elegance, in good name and wisdom and address." Though great his deceit in the case of the other ladies, in that of Emer he applied thrice as much.

§ 20. The three companies thereupon went out till they met at one spot, to wit, three ridges from the hall. None of them wot that Bricriu had incited them one against another. To the hall they straightway return. Even and graceful and easy their carriage on the first ridge; scarcely did one of them raise a foot before the other. But on the ridge following, their steps were shorter and quicker. Moreover, on the ridge next the house it was with difficulty each kept up with the other; so they

raised their robes to the rounds of their limbs to compete in the attempt to go first into the hall. For what Bricriu said to each of them regarding the other was, that whosoever should first enter should be queen of the whole province. The amount of confusion then occasioned by the competition to enter the hall first was as it were the noise of fifty chariots approaching. The whole palace shook and the warriors sprang to their arms and made essay to kill one another within.

§ 21. “Stay,” quoth Sencha, “they are not enemies who have come; it is Bricriu who has set a-quarrelling the women who have gone out. By the god of my tribe, unless the hall be closed against them our dead will outnumber our living.” Thereupon the doorkeepers close the doors. Emer, daughter of Forgall the Wily, wife of Cuchulainn, by reason of her speed, outran the others and put her back against the door, and straightway called upon the doorkeepers ere the other ladies [came], so that the men within got up, each of them to open for his own wife that she might be the first to come within. “Bad [look-out] to-night,” quoth Conchobar. He struck the silver sceptre that was in his hand against the bronze pillar of the couch and the folks gat seated. “Stay,” quoth Sencha, “’tis not a warfare of arms that shall be held here; it will be a warfare of words.” Each woman went out under the protection of her spouse, and then followed the Ulster women’s war-of-words.

The Women’s War of Words.

§ 22. Fedelm of the fresh heart, wife of Loigaire the Triumphant, made speech:—

“Born of a mother in freedom, one in rank and in race mine elders;
Sprung from loins that are royal, in the beauty of peerless breeding;
Lovely in form I am reckoned, and noted for figure and comely,
Fostered in warrior virtues, in the sphere of goodly demeanour:
Loigaire’s hand, all-noble, what triumphs it scoreth for Ulster!
Ulster’s marches from foemen, ever equal in strength, ever hostile—
All by himself were they holden: from wounds a defence and
protection,

Loigair(e), more famous than heroes, in number of victories greater,
Why should not Fedelm the lovely step first in the mead-hall so
festive,

Shapelier than all other women, triumphant and jealous of conquest?”

§ 23. Thereupon spake Lendabair, daughter of Eogan mac Derthacht, wife of Conall Cernach, son of Amorgen:—

“Mine is a mien too of beauty, of reason, with grace of deportment,
Finely and fairly stepping in front of the women of Ulster,
See me step to the mead-hall, my spouse and my darling the Conall.
Big is his shield and triumphant, majestic his gait and commanding,
Up to the spears of the conflict, in front of them all as he strideth:
Back to me comes he proudly, with heads in his hands as his trophies;
Swords he getteth together for the clashing in conflict of Ulster;
Guardian of every ford-way, he destroyeth them too at his pleasure;
Fords he defendeth from foemen, the wrongful attack he avengeth,

Holdeth himself as a hero upon whom shall be raised a tombstone:
Son of Amorgen noble, his is the courage that speaketh;
Many the arts of the Conall and therefore he leadeth the heroes.
Lendabair, great is her glory, in every one's eye is her splendour;
Why not the first when she enters the hall of a king so queenly?"

§ 24. Emer, daughter of Forgall the tricky, wife of Cuchulainn, made speech:—

I am the standard of women, in figure, in grace and in wisdom;
None mine equal in beauty, for I am a picture of graces.
Mien full noble and goodly, mine eye like a jewel that flasheth;
Figure, or grace, or beauty, or wisdom, or bounty, or chasteness,
Joy of sense, or of loving, unto mine has never been likened.
Sighing for me is Ultonia,—a nut of the heart I am clearly—
(Now were I welcoming wanton, no husband were yours
to-morrow.) My spouse is the hound of Culann, and not a hound that is feeble;
Blood from his spear is spurting, with life-blood his sword is
dripping;
Finely his body is fashioned, but his skin is gaping with gashes,
Wounds on his thigh there are many, but nobly his eye looks
westward; [3]

Bright is the dome he supporteth and ever red are his eyes,
Red are the frames of his chariot, and red are also the cushions;
Fighting from ears of horses and over the breaths of men-folk,
Springing in air like a salmon when he springeth the spring of the
heroes, Rarest of feats he performeth, the leap that is birdlike he leapeth,
Bounding o'er pools of water, he performeth the feat cless nonbair; [4]
Battles of bloody battalions, the world's proud armies he heweth,
Beating down kings in their fury, mowing the hosts of the foemen.
Others to crôn [5] I liken, shamming [6] the travail of women,
Ulster's precious heroes compared with my spouse Cuchulainn.
He unto blood may be likened, to blood that is clear and noble,
They to the scum and the garbage, as crôn their value I reckon;
Shackled and shaped like cattle, [7]
as kine and oxen and horses,

§ 25. Thus did the men in the hall behave on having heard the
laudatory addresses of the women—to wit, Loigaire and Conall; each
sprang into his hero's light, and broke a stave of the palace at a like level
with themselves, so that in this way their wives came in. Moreover,
Cuchulainn upheaved the palace just over against his bed, till the stars of
heaven were to be seen from underneath the wattle. By that opening
came his own wife with half a hundred women attendants in her train, as
also half a hundred in waiting upon the other twain. Other ladies could
not be compared with Emer, while no one at all was to be likened unto
her spouse. Thereupon Cuchulainn let the palace down till seven feet of
the wattle entered the ground; the whole dún shook, and Bricriu's
balcony was laid flat to the earth, in such wise that Bricriu and his queen

toppled down till they fell into the fosse in the middle of the courtyard among the dogs. "Woe is me," cried Bricriu, as he hastily got up, "enemies have come into the palace." He took a turn round and perceived how it was lop-sided and inclined entirely to one side. He wrung his hands, then betook himself within, so bespattered that none of the Ulster folk could recognise him. From his manner of speech only did they do so.

§ 26. Then from off the floor of the house Bricriu made speech: "Alas! that I have prepared you a feast, O Ultonians. My house is more to me than all my other possessions. Upon you, therefore, it is geis to drink, or to eat, or to sleep till ye leave my house as ye found it on your arrival." Thereupon all the valiant Ulstermen went out of the house and tried to tug it, but they did not raise it so much as that even the wind could pass between it and the earth. That matter was a difficulty for the Ulstermen. "I have no suggestion for you," quoth Sencha, "save that ye entreat of him who has left it lop-sided to set it upright."

§ 27. Whereupon the men of Ulster told Cuchulainn to restore the house to its upright position, and Bricriu made speech withal: "Oh king of the heroes of Erin, if thou set it not straight and erect, none in the world can do so." All the Ulstermen then entreated of Cuchulainn to solve the matter. That the banqueters might not be lacking for food or for ale, Cuchulainn got up and anon tried to lift the house at a tug and failed. A distortion thereupon gat hold of him, whilst a drop of blood was at the root of each single hair, and he absorbed his hair into his head, so that, looked on from above, his dark-yellow curls seemed as if they had been shorn by scissors, and taking upon him the motion of a millstone he strained himself till a warrior's foot could find room between each pair of ribs.

§ 28. His natural resources and fiery vigour returned to him, and he then heaved the house aloft and set it so that it reached its former level. Thereafter the consumption of the feast was pleasant to them, with the kings and the chieftains on the one side round about Conchobar the illustrious, the noble, high-king of Ulster. Moreover, the queens were on the other side: Mugain Aitencaetrech, daughter of Eochaid Fedlech, wife of Conchobar mac Nessa, Fedelm of the nine-shapes, daughter of Conchobar,—nine "shapes" she could assume, and each shape more lovely than the other; also Fedelm of the Fair Hair, another daughter of Conchobar, wife of Loigaire the Triumphant; Findbec, daughter of Eochaid, wife of Cethirnd, son of Fintan; Brîg Brethach, wife of Celtchar, son of Uthichar; Findige, daughter of Eochaid, wife of Eogan mac Durthacht; Findchaem, daughter of Cathbad, wife of Amargin of the Iron Jaw, and Derborcall (Devorgilla), wife of Lugad of the Red Stripes, son of Tri Find Emna; Emer of the Fair Hair, daughter of Forcall Manach, wife of Cuchulainn, son of Sualdam; Lendabair, daughter of Eogan mac Durthacht, wife of Conall the Victorious; Niab, daughter of Celtchar mac Uthechar, wife of Cormac Condlongus, son of Conchobar. It would be overmuch to recount and to declare who of noble dames besides

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