

Chapter XV.

§ 79. On the morning of the morrow the three heroes, Cuchulainn, Conall and Loigaire, then set off to Fort Curoi. They unyoked their chariot at the gate of the hold, then entered the court. Whereupon Blathnat, Mind's daughter, wife of Curoi mac Dairi, bade them warm welcome. That night on their arrival Curoi was not at home. But knowing they would come, he counselled his wife regarding the heroes until he should return from his oriental expedition into Scythian territory. From the age of seven years, when he took up arms, until his demise, Curoi had not reddened his sword in Erin, nor ever had the food of Erin passed his lips. Nor could Erin contain him for his haughtiness, renown and rank, overbearing fury, strength and gallantry. His wife acted according to his wish in the matter of bathing and of washing, providing them with refreshing drinks and beds most excellent. And it liked them well.

§ 80. When bedtime was come, she told them that each was to take his night watching the fort until Curoi should return. "And, moreover, thus said Curoi—that ye take your turn watching according to seniority." In what airt soever of the globe Curoi should happen to be, every night o'er the fort he chaunted a spell, till the fort revolved as swiftly as a mill-stone. The entrance was never to be found after sunset.

§ 81. The first night, Loigaire the Triumphant took the sentry, inasmuch as he was the eldest of the three. As he kept watch into the later part of the night, he saw a giant (Scath) approaching him far as his eyes could see from the sea westwards. Exceeding huge and ugly and horrible he thought him, for in height, it seemed to him, he reached unto the sky, and the sheen (broad expanse) of the sea was visible between his legs. Thus did he come, his hands full of stripped oaks, each of which would form a burden for a waggon-team of six, at whose root not a stroke had been repeated after the single sword-stroke. One of the stakes he cast at Loigaire, who let it pass him. Twice or thrice he repeated it, but the stake reached neither the skin nor the shield of Loigaire. Then Loigaire hurled a spear at him and it hit him not.

§ 82. The giant stretched his hand towards Loigaire. Such its length that it reached across the three ridges that were between them as they were throwing at each other, and thus in his grasp he seized him. Though Loigaire was big and imposing, he fitted like a year old into the clutch of his opponent, who then ground him in his grasp^[19] as a chessman is turned in a groove. In that state, half-dead, the giant tossed him out over the fort, till he fell into the mire of the fosse at the palace-gate. The fort had no opening there, and the other men and inmates of the hold thought he had leapt outside over the fort, as a challenge for the other

men to do likewise.

§ 83. There they were until the day's end. When the night-watch began, Conall went out on sentry, for he was older than Cuchulainn. Everything occurred as it did to Loigaire the first night. The third night Cuchulainn went on sentry (lit. into the seat of watch). That night the three Goblins (Greys) of Sescind Uairbeoil, the three Ox-feeders (?) of Bregia and the three sons of Big-Fist the Siren met by appointment to plunder the hold. This too was the night of which it was foretold, that the Spirit of the Lake by the fort would devour the whole host of the hold, man and beast.

§ 84. Cuchulainn while watching through the night had many uneasy forebodings. When midnight was come he heard a terrific noise drawing nigh to him. "Holloa, Holloa, Cuchulainn shouted, "who is there? If friends they be, let them not stir; if foes, let them flee." Then they raised a terrific shout at him. Whereupon Cuchulainn sprang upon them, so that the nine of them fell dead to the earth. He heaped their heads in disorder into the seat of watching and resumed sentry. Another nine shouted at him. In like manner he killed the three nines, making one cairn of them, heads and accoutrements.

§ 85. While he was there far on into the night, tired and sad and weary, he heard the rising of the loch on high, as it were the booming of a very heavy sea. How deep soever his dejection, his spirit could not brook his not going to see what caused the great noise he heard. He then perceived the upheaving monster, and it seemed to him to be thirty cubits in curvature above the loch. It raised itself on high into the air, sprang towards the fort, opened its mouth so that one of the palaces could go into its gullet.

§ 86. Then he called to mind his swooping feat, sprang on high, and was as swift as a winnowing riddle right round the monster. He entwined his two arms about its neck, stretched his hand till it reached into its gullet, tore out the monster's heart, and cast it from him on the ground. Then the beast fell from the air till it rested on the earth, having sustained a blow on the shoulder. Cuchulainn then plied it with his sword, hacked it to atoms, and took the head with him into the sentry-seat along with the other heap of skulls.

§ 87. While there, depressed and miserable in the morning dawn, he saw the giant approaching him westwards from the sea. "Bad night," says he. "'Twill be worse for you, you uncouth fellow," quoth Cuchulainn. Then the giant cast one of the branches at Cuchulainn, who let it pass him. He repeated it two or three times, but it reached neither the skin nor the shield of Cuchulainn. Cuchulainn then hurled his spear at the giant, but it reached him not. Whereupon the giant stretched his hand towards Cuchulainn to grip him as he did the others. Cuchulainn leapt the hero's "salmon leap," and called to mind his swooping-feat,^[20] with his drawn sword over the monster's head. As swift as a hare he was, and in mid-air circling round the monster, till he confused it by making it giddy (lit. till he made a water wheel of him). "Life for life, O

Cuchulainn," he quoth. "Give me my triad of wishes," quoth Cuchulainn.

At a breath [21]

they are thine," he said.

"The Sovranty of Erin's Heroes be henceforth mine

The Champion's Portion without dispute

The Precedence to my wife o'er Ultonia's ladies forever."

"It shall be thine, he at once quoth. Then he who had been conversing with him vanished he knew not whither.

§ 88. He then mused within himself as to the leap his fellows leapt over the fort, for their leap was big and broad and high. Moreover, it seemed to him it was by leaping it that the valiant heroes had gone over it. He essayed it twice and failed. "Alas!" Cuchulainn quoth, "my exertions hitherto about the Champion's Portion have exhausted me, and now I lose it through being unable to take the leap the others took." As he thus mused, he essayed the following feats: He would keep springing backwards in mid-air a shot's distance from the fort, and then he would rebound from there until his forehead would strike the fort. Anon he would spring on high till all that was within the fort was visible to him, while again he would sink up to his knees in the earth owing to the pressure of his vehemence and violence. At another time he would not take the dew from off the tip of the grass by reason of his buoyancy of mood, vehemence of nature, and heroic valour. What with the fit and fury that raged upon him he stepped over the fort outside and alighted in the middle at the door of the palace. His two footprints are in the flag on the floor of the hold at the spot where was the royal entrance. He thereafter entered the house and heaved a sigh.

§ 89. Then Mind's daughter, Blâthnat, wife of Curoi, made speech:

"Truly, not the sigh of one dishonoured, but a victor's sigh of triumph."

The daughter of the king of the Isle of the Men of Falga knew full well of Cuchulainn's evil plight that night. They were not long there when they beheld Curoi coming towards them, carrying into the house with him the standard of the "three nines" slain by Cuchulainn, along with their heads and that of the monster. He put the heads from off his breast on to the floor of the stead, and spoke: "The gillie whose one night's trophies are these is a fit lad to watch a king's keep for aye. The Champion's Portion, over which you have fallen out with the gallant youths of Erin, truly belongs to Cuchulainn. The bravest of them, were he here, could not match him in number of trophies." Curoi's verdict upon them was:

"The Champion's Portion to be Cuchulainn's.

With the sovranty of valour o'er all the Gael.

And to his wife the precedence on entering the Mead Hall before all the ladies of Ultonia."

And seven cumals [22] of gold and of silver he gave him in reward for his one night's performance.

§ 90. They straightway bade Curoi farewell and kept on till they gat seated in Emain ere the day closed. When the spencers came to deal and

to divide, they took the Champion's Portion with its share of ale out of the distribution that they might have it apart. "Sooth, sure are we," quoth Duach of the Chafer Tongue, "ye think not to-night of contending as to the Champion's Portion? The man ye sought out mayhap has undertaken your adjudging." Whereupon quoth the other folk to Cuchulainn: "The Champion's Portion was not assigned to one of you in preference to the other. As to Curoi's judgment also upon those three, not a whit did he concede to Cuchulainn upon their arriving at Emain." Cuchulainn then declared he by no means coveted the winning of it. For the loss thence resulting to the winner would be on a par with the profit got from it. The championship was therefore not fully assigned until the advent of the Champion's Covenant in Emain.

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