

Part I

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There was a famous and noble king over Erin, named Eochaid Feidlech. Once upon a time he came over the fairgreen of Bri Leith, and he saw at the edge of a well a woman with a bright comb of silver adorned with gold, washing in a silver basin wherein were four golden birds and little, bright gems of purple carbuncle in the rims of the basin. A mantle she had, curly and purple, a beautiful cloak, and in the mantle silvery fringes arranged, and a brooch of fairest gold. A kirtle she wore, long, hooded, hard-smooth, of green silk, with red embroidery of gold. Marvellous clasps of gold and silver in the kirtle on her breasts and her shoulders and spaulds on every side. The sun kept shining upon her, so that the glistening of the gold against the sun from the green silk was manifest to men. On her head were two golden-yellow tresses, in each of which was a plait of four locks, with a bead at the point of each lock. The hue of that hair seemed to them like the flower of the iris in summer, or like red gold after the burnishing thereof.

There she was, undoing her hair to wash it, with her arms out through the sleeve-holes of her smock. White as the snow of one night were the two hands, soft and even, and red as foxglove were the two clear-beautiful cheeks. Dark as the back of a stag-beetle the two eyebrows. Like a shower of pearls were the teeth in her head. Blue as a hyacinth were the eyes. Red as rowan-berries the lips. Very high, smooth and soft-white the shoulders. Clear-white and lengthy the fingers. Long were the hands. White as the foam of a wave was the flank, slender, long, tender, smooth, soft as wool. Polished and warm, sleek and white were the two thighs. Round and small, hard and white the two knees. Short and white and rulestraight the two shins. Justly straight and beautiful the two heels. If a measure were put on the feet it would hardly have found them unequal, unless the flesh of the coverings should grow upon them. The bright radiance of the moon was in her noble face: the loftiness of pride in her smooth eyebrows: the light of wooing in each of her regal eyes. A dimple of delight in each of her cheeks, with a dappling (?) in them, at one time, of purple spots with redness of a calf's blood, and at another with the bright lustre of snow. Soft womanly dignity in her voice; a step steady and slow she had: a queenly gait was hers. Verily, of the world's women 'twas she was the dearest and loveliest and justest that the eyes of men had ever beheld. It seemed to King Eochaid and his followers that she was from the elfmounds. Of her was said: "Shapely are all till compared with Etain," "Dear are all till compared with Etain."

A longing for her straightway seized the king; so he sent forward a man of his people to detain her. The king asked tidings of her and said, while announcing himself: "Shall I have an hour of dalliance with thee?"

"'Tis for that we have come hither under thy safeguard," quoth she.

"Query, whence art thou and whence hast thou come?" says Eochaid.

"Easy to say," quoth she. "Etain am I, daughter of Etar, king of the cavalcade from the elfmounds. I have been here for twenty years since I was born in an elfmound. The men of the elfmound, both kings and nobles, have been wooing me: but nought was gotten from me, because ever since I was able to speak, I have loved thee and given thee a child's love for the high tales about thee and thy splendour. And though I had never seen thee, I knew thee at once from thy description: it is thou, then, I have reached."

"No 'seeking of an ill friend afar' shall be thine," says Eochaid. "Thou shalt have welcome, and for thee every other woman shall be left by me, and with thee alone will I live so long as thou hast honour."

"My proper bride-price to me!" she says, "and afterwards my desire."

"Thou shalt have both," says Eochaid.

Seven cumals^[2] are given to her.

Then the king, even Eochaid Feidlech, dies, leaving one daughter named, like her mother, Etain, and wedded to Cormac, king of Ulaid.

After the end of a time Cormac, king of Ulaid, "the man of the three gifts," forsakes Eochaid's daughter, because she was barren save for one daughter that she had borne to Cormac after the making of the pottage which her mother - the woman from the elfmounds - gave her. Then she said to her mother: "Bad is what thou hast given me: it will be a daughter that I shall bear."

"That will not be good," says her mother; "a king's pursuit will be on her."

Then Cormac weds again his wife, even Etain, and this was his desire, that the daughter of the woman who had before been abandoned [i. e. his own daughter] should be killed. So Cormac would not leave the girl to her mother to be nursed. Then his two thralls take her to a pit, and she smiles a laughing smile at them as they were putting her into it. Then their kindly nature came to them. They carry her into the calfshed of the cowherds of Etirscel, great-grandson of Iar, king of Tara, and they fostered her till she became a good embroideress; and there was not in Ireland a king's daughter dearer than she.

A fenced house of wickerwork was made by the thralls for her, without any door, but only a window and a skylight. King Etercel's folk espy that house and suppose that it was food the cowherds kept there. But one of them went and looked through the skylight, and he saw in the house the dearest, beautifullest maiden! This is told to the king, and straightway he sends his people to break the house and carry her off without asking the cowherds. For the king was childless, and it had been prophesied to him by his wizards that a woman of unknown race would bear him a son.

Then said the king: "This is the woman that has been prophesied to me!"

Now while she was there next morning she saw a Bird on the skylight coming to her, and he leaves his birdskin on the floor of the house, and went to her, and possessed her, and said: "They are

coming to thee from the king to wreck thy house and to bring thee to him perforce. And thou wilt be pregnant by me, and bear a son, and that son must not kill birds.."[3] And 'Conaire, son of Mess Buachalla' shall be his name," for hers was Mess Buachalla, 'the Cowherds' fosterchild

And then she was brought to the king, and with her went her fosterers, and she was betrothed to the king, and he gave her seven cumals and to her fosterers seven other cumals. And afterwards they were made chieftains, so that they all became legitimate, whence are the two Fedlimthi Rechtaidi. And then she bore a son to the king, even Conaire son of Mess Buachalla, and these were her three urgent prayers to the king, to wit, the nursing of her son among three households, that is, the fosterers who had nurtured her, and the two Honeyworded Maines, and she herself is the third; and she said that such of the men of Erin as should wish to do aught for this boy should give to those three households for the boy's protection.

So in that wise he was reared, and the men of Erin straightway knew this boy on the day he was born. And other boys were fostered with him, to wit, Fer Le and Fer Gar and Fer Rogein, three great-grandsons of Donn Desa the champion, an army-man of the army from Muc-lesí.

Now Conaire possessed three gifts, to wit, the gift of hearing and the gift of eyesight and the gift of judgment; and of those three gifts he taught one to each of his three fosterbrothers. And whatever meal was prepared for him, the four of them would go to it. Even though three meals were prepared for him each of them would go to his meal. The same raiment and armour and colour of horses had the four.

Then the king, even Eterscele, died. A bull-feast is gathered by the men of Erin, in order to determine their future king; that is, a bull used to be killed by them and thereof one man would eat his fill and drink its broth, and a spell of truth was chanted over him in his bed. Whosoever he would see in his sleep would be king, and the sleeper would perish if he uttered a falsehood.

Four men in chariots were on the Plain of Liffey at their game, Conaire himself and his three fosterbrothers. Then his fosterers went to him that he might repair to the bullfeast. The bull-feaster, then in his sleep, at the end of the night beheld a man stark-naked, passing along the road of Tara, with a stone in his sling.

"I will go in the morning after you," quoth he.

He left his fosterbrothers at their game, and turned his chariot and his charioteer until he was in Dublin. There he saw great, white-speckled birds, of unusual size and colour and beauty. He pursues them until his horses were tired. The birds would go a spearcast before him, and would not go any further. He alighted, and takes his sling for them out of the chariot. He goes after them until he was at the sea. The birds betake themselves to the wave. He went to them and overcame them. The birds quit their birdskins, and turn upon him with spears and swords. One of them protects him, and addressed him, saying: "I am Nemglan, king of thy father's birds; and thou hast been forbidden to cast at birds, for here there is no one that should not be dear to thee because of his father or mother."

"Till today," says Conaire, "I knew not this."

"Go to Tara tonight," says Nemglan; "'tis fittest for thee. A bull feast is there, and through it thou shalt be king. A man stark-naked, who shall go at the end of the night along one of the roads of Tara, having a stone and a sling - 'tis he that shall be king."

So in this wise Conaire fared forth; and on each of the four roads whereby men go to Tara there were three kings awaiting him, and they had raiment for him, since it had been foretold that he would come stark-naked. Then he was seen from the road on which his fosterers were, and they put royal raiment about him, and placed him in a chariot, and he bound his pledges.

The folk of Tara said to him: "It seems to us that our bullfeast and our spell of truth are a failure, if it be only a young, beardless lad that we have visioned therein."

"That is of no moment," quoth he. "For a young, generous king like me to be in the kingship is no disgrace, since the binding of Tara's pledges is mine by right of father and grandsire."

"Excellent! excellent!" says the host. They set the kingship of Erin upon him. And he said: "I will enquire of wise men that I myself may be wise."

Then he uttered all this as he had been taught by the man at the wave, who said this to him: "Thy reign will be subject to a restriction, but the bird-reign will be noble, and this shall be thy restriction, i.e. thy tabu.

"Thou shalt not go righthandwise round Tara and lefthandwise round Bregia.

"The evil-beasts of Cerna must not be hunted by thee.

"And thou shalt not go out every ninth night beyond Tara.

"Thou shalt not sleep in a house from which firelight is manifest outside, after sunset, and in which light is manifest from without.

"And three Reds shall not go before thee to Red's house.

"And no rapine shall be wrought in thy reign.

"And after sunset a company of one woman or one man shall not enter the house in which thou art.

"And thou shalt not settle the quarrel of thy two thralls.

Now there were in his reign great bounties, to wit, seven ships in every June in every year arriving at Inver Colptha,^[4] and oakmast up to the knees in every autumn, and plenty of fish in the rivers Bush and Boyne in the June of each year, and such abundance of good will that no one slew another in Erin during his reign. And to every one in Erin his fellow's voice seemed as sweet as the strings of lutes. From mid-spring to mid-autumn no wind disturbed a cow's tail. His reign was neither thunderous nor stormy.

Now his fosterbrothers murmured at the taking from them of their father's and their grandsire's gifts, namely Theft and Robbery and Slaughter of men and Rapine. They thieved the three thefts from the same man, to wit, a swine and an ox and a cow, every year, that they might see what punishment therefor the king would inflict upon them, and what damage the theft in his reign would cause to the king.

Now every year the farmer would come to the king to complain, and the king would say to him. "Go thou and address Donn Desa's three great grandsons, for 'tis they that have taken the beasts." Whenever he went to speak to Donn Desa's descendants they would almost kill him, and he would not return to the king lest Conaire should attend his hurt.

Since, then, pride and wilfulness possessed them, they took to marauding, surrounded by the sons of the lords of the men of Erin. Thrice fifty men had they as pupils when they (the pupils) were were-wolfing in the province of Connaught, until Maine Milscothach's swineherd saw them, and he had never seen that before. He went in flight. When they heard him they pursued him. The swineherd shouted, and the people of the two Maines came to him, and the thrice fifty men were arrested, along with their auxiliaries, and taken to Tara. They consulted the king concerning the matter, and he said: "Let each (father) slay his son, but let my fosterlings be spared."

"Leave, leave!" says every one: "it shall be done for thee."

"Nay indeed," quoth he; "no 'cast of life' by me is the doom I have delivered. The men shall not be hung; but let veterans go with them that they may wreak their rapine on the men of Alba."

This they do. Thence they put to sea and met the son of the king of Britain, even Ingcel the One-eyed, grandson of Conmac: thrice fifty men and their veterans they met upon the sea.

They make an alliance, and go with Ingcel and wrought rapine with him.

This is the destruction which his own impulse gave him. That was the night that his mother and his father and his seven brothers had been bidden to the house of the king of his district. All of them were destroyed by Ingcel in a single night. Then the Irish pirates put out to sea to the land of Erin to seek a destruction as payment for that to which Ingcel had been entitled from them.

In Conaire's reign there was perfect peace in Erin, save that in Thomond there was a joining of battle between the two Carbres. Two fosterbrothers of his were they. And until Conaire came it was impossible to make peace between them. 'Twas a tabu of his to go to separate them before they had repaired to him. He went, however, although to do so was one of his tabus, and he made peace between them. He remained five nights with each of the two. That also was a tabu of his.

After settling the two quarrels, he was travelling to Tara. This is the way they took to Tara, past Usnech of Meath; and they saw the raiding from east and west, and from south and north, and they saw the warbands and the hosts, and the men stark-naked; and the land of the southern O'Neills was a cloud of fire around him.

"What is this?" asked Conaire. "Easy to say," his people answer. "Easy to know that the king's law

has broken down therein, since the country has begun to burn."

"Whither shall we betake ourselves?" says Conaire.

"To the Northeast," says his people.

So then they went righthandwise round Tara, and lefthandwise round Bregia, and the evil beasts of Cerna were hunted by him. But he saw it not till the chase had ended.

They that made of the world that smoky mist of magic were elves, and they did so because Conaire's tabus had been violated.

Great fear then fell on Conaire because they had no way to wend save upon the Road of Midluachair and the Road of Cualu.

So they took their way by the coast of Ireland southward.

Then said Conaire on the Road of Cualu: "whither shall we go tonight?"

"May I succeed in telling thee! my fosterling Conaire," says Mac cecht, son of Snade Teiched, the champion of Conaire, son of Eterscel. "Oftener have the men of Erin been contending for thee every night than thou hast been wandering about for a guesthouse."

"Judgment goes with good times," says Conaire. "I had a friend in this country, if only we knew the way to his house!"

"What is his name?" asked Mac cecht.

"Da Derga of Leinster," answered Conaire. "He came unto me to seek a gift from me, and he did not come with a refusal. I gave him a hundred kine of the drove. I gave him a hundred fattened swine. I gave him a hundred mantles made of close cloth. I gave him a hundred blue-coloured weapons of battle. I gave him ten red, gilded brooches. I gave him ten vats good and brown. I gave him ten thralls. I gave him ten querns. I gave him thrice nine hounds all-white in their silver chains. I gave him a hundred race-horses in the herds of deer. There would be no abatement in his case though he should come again. He would make return. It is strange if he is surly to me tonight when reaching his abode."

"When I was acquainted with his house," says Mac cecht, "the road whereon thou art going towards him was the boundary of his abode. It continues till it enters his house, for through the house passes the road. There are seven doorways into the house, and seven bedrooms between every two doorways; but there is only one doorvalve on it, and that valve is turned to every doorway to which the wind blows."

"With all that thou hast here," says Conaire, "thou shalt go in thy great multitude until thou alight in the midst of the house."

"If so be," answers Mac cecht, "that thou goest thither, I go on that I may strike fire there ahead of thee."

When Conaire after this was journeying along the Road of Cualu, he marked before him three horsemen riding towards the house. Three red frocks had they, and three red mantles: three red bucklers they bore, and three red spears were in their hands: three red steeds they bestrode, and three red heads of hair were on them. Red were they all, both body and hair and raiment, both steeds and men.

"Who is it that fares before us?" asked Conaire. "It was a tabu of mine for those Three to go before me - the three Reds to the house of Red. Who will follow them and tell them to come towards me in my track?"

"I will follow them," says Le fri flaith, Conaire's son.

He goes after them, lashing his horse, and overtook them not. There was the length of a spearcast between them: but they did not gain upon him and he did not gain upon them.

He told them not to go before the king. He overtook them not; but one of the three men sang a lay to him over his shoulder:

"Lo, my son, great the news, news from a hostel . . . Lo, my son!"

They go away from him then: he could not detain them.

The boy waited for the host. He told his father what was said to him. Conaire liked it not. "After them, thou!" says Conaire, "and offer them three oxen and three bacon-pigs, and so long as they shall be in my household, no one shall be among them from fire to wall."

So the lad goes after them, and offers them that, and overtook them not. But one of the three men sang a lay to him over his shoulder:

"Lo, my son, great the news! A generous king's great ardour whets thee, burns thee. Through ancient men's enchantments a company of nine yields. Lo, my son!"

The boy turns back and repeated the lay to Conaire.

"Go after them," says Conaire, "and offer them six oxen and six bacon pigs, and my leavings, and gifts tomorrow, and so long as they shall be in my household no one to be among them from fire to wall."

The lad then went after them, and overtook them not; but one of the three men answered and said:

"Lo, my son, great the news. Weary are the steeds we ride. We ride the steeds of Donn Tetscorach from the elfmounds. Though we are alive we are dead. Great are the signs: destruction of life: sating of ravens: feeding of crows, strife of slaughter: wetting of sword-edge, shields with broken

bosses in hours after sundown. Lo, my son!"

Then they go from him.

"I see that thou hast not detained the men," says Conaire.

"Indeed it is not I that betrayed it," says Le fri flaith.

He recited the last answer that they gave him. Conaire and his retainers were not blithe thereat: and afterwards evil forebodings of terror were on them.

"All my tabus have seized me tonight," says Conaire, "since those Three Reds are the banished folks."<ref>They had been banished from the elfmounds, and for them to precede Conaire was to violate one of his taboos. - W.S.</ref>

They went forward to the house and took their seats therein, and fastened their red steeds to the door of the house.

That is the Forefaring of the Three Reds in the Bruden Da Derga.

This is the way that Conaire took with his troops, to Dublin.

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