

The Birth of Cu Chulainn

Dechtire, the sister of King Conchobar of Ulster, went, along with fifty other maidens, upon an elopement without the knowledge of the Ulstermen and Conchobar. No track nor trace of them was found, and the Ulstermen were seeking them to the end of three years.

Dechtire and her attendant maidens came then in the form of a bird-flock to the plain about Emain Macha, and destroyed the vegetation, so that they did not leave even the roots of the grass in the ground there. That thing was a great cause of vexation to the Ulstermen. They accordingly harnessed nine chariots for the hunting of the birds, for bird hunting was a custom of theirs. Among the hunting party were Conchobar and Fergus mac Roig and Amergin and Blai the Hospitaller and Bricriu.

The birds went before them southward across Sliab Fuait, over the Ford of Lethan and the Ford of Garach, and over the Plain of Gossa between the men of Ross and the men of Arda. Night then overtook them and the bird-flock escaped; so they unharnessed their chariots. Fergus went in search of a lodging, and he came upon a small new house, wherein he found a married couple. They welcomed him and offered him food, but he would not accept their hospitality because his companions were still abroad without shelter.

“Come thou with thy companions into the house, and welcome to you all,” said they. Fergus thereupon went out to his companions and brought them all in, both men and horses, so that they were all in the house (which had suddenly become large and magnificent).

Then Bricriu went out, and he heard Cnu Deroil. He heard the sound of the wistful fairy music, but he did not know what it meant. He went toward the sound until he came upon a great, fair, adorned house before him. He approached the door, and, on looking in, beheld the master of the house.

“Come in, O Bricriu,” said he; “why standest thou outside?”

“Welcome indeed,” said a woman who stood beside the master of the house.

Bricriu regarded the handsome, noble-looking warrior, and asked, “Why does the woman also welcome us?”

“It is on her account that I welcome thee,” said the man; “is anyone lacking to you in Emain?”

“There is indeed,” replied Bricriu; “fifty maidens have been lost to us for the space of three years.”

“Wouldst thou recognize them if thou sawest them?” asked the man.

“I might not recognize them,” said Bricriu; “the lapse of three years or sickness of three years may

perhaps cause ignorance or lack of recognition on my part.”

“Nevertheless, try to recognize them,” said the man. “The fifty maidens whom you seek are here in the house, and the chief of them is she who is here by my side. Dechtire is her name, and it is they who came in the form of the bird-flock to Emain Macha in order to induce the Ulstermen to come hither.”

The woman gave a purple, bordered mantle to Bricriu, and he went back thereafter to his companions. While returning to his company, Bricriu thought to himself as follows: “These fifty maidens who are lacking to Conchobar-to find them would be to flatter him. Therefore I will conceal from him that I have found his sister with her attendants; I will only say that I have found a house and a company of lovely women therein.”

When Bricriu arrived, Conchobar asked him the news.

“What is that to thee?” asked Bricriu. “I came upon a magnificent house; therein I saw a queen radiant and noble, dear and lovable; a company of women fair and pure; a household generous and shining.”

“Off with you to the house,” commanded Conchobar. “The master of that house is a subject of mine, for it is in my land he dwells. Let his wife come and sleep with me to-night.”

No one was found who would go upon this errand except Fergus. He went and spoke his message, and he was welcomed and the woman came with him. She complained to Fergus that the pains of childbirth were upon her. Then Fergus said to Conchobar that a respite should be granted to her. Thereupon the company lay down beside each other and slept. When they awoke in the morning, they saw a little boy in the fold of Conchobar’s cloak.

“Take the child to thee,” said Conchobar to his sister Finnchoem. When Finnchoem looked at the little boy beside Conchobar, she said, “My heart loves this boy so that he is the same with me as my own son Conall.”

“There is indeed little difference between them,” said Bricriu; “that child is the son of thine own sister Dechtire. She it is, who, with her fifty maidens, has been absent from Emain for three years and is now here.”

(The mysterious stranger who was with Dechtire was Lug Long-Arm, of the Tuatha De Danann. The little child was named Setanta until he slew the hound of Culann the smith, after which he was known as Cu Chulainn [Hound of Culann].)