

The Fight of Fer Diad and Cú Chulainn

Then they debated among themselves as to which man would be capable of repelling Cú Chulainn. The four provinces of Ireland named and confirmed and decided whom they should send to the ford to meet Cú Chulainn. They all declared that it was the hornskinned man from Irrus Domnann, the one whose attack cannot be endured, the battle-stone of doom, Cú Chulainn's own dear fosterbrother. Cú Chulainn possessed no feat that Fer Diad had not, except only the feat of the gáe bulga. And they thought that Fer Diad could avoid even that and protect himself from it, for he had a horn-skin which weapons and swords could not pierce. Medb sent messengers for Fer Diad, but he did not come with those messengers. Then Medb sent to fetch him poets and artists and satirists who might satirise him and disgrace him and put him to shame, so that he would find no resting-place in the world until he should come to the tent of Medb and Ailill on the Foray. So for fear that he should be put to shame by them Fer Diad came with those messengers.

Finnabair, the daughter of Medb and Ailill was placed at his side. It was she who handed Fer Diad every goblet and cup; it was she who gave him three kisses with every one of those cups; it was she who gave him fragrant apples over the bosom of her tunic. She kept saying that Fer Diad was her beloved, her chosen lover from among all the men of the world. When Fer Diad was sated and cheerful and merry, Medb said 'Well now, Fer Diad, do you know why you have been summoned to this tent?' 'I know not indeed,' said Fer Diad, 'except that the nobles of the men of Ireland are here, so why should it be less fitting for me to be here than any other nobleman?' 'That is not why, indeed,' said Medb, 'but (you have been summoned for us) to give you a chariot worth thrice seven cumala, the equipment of twelve men, the equivalent of Mag Muirthemne in the arable land of Mag nAí, permission to remain at all times in Crúachu with wine poured for you there, and your descendants and your race to be free for ever from tax or tribute, and my leaf-shaped brooch of gold in which there are ten score ounces and ten score half-ounces and ten score crosachs and ten score quarters bestowed on you, and Finnabair, my daughter and Ailill's, as your wedded wife, and my own intimate friendship. And in addition to that, if you require it, you will get the gods as guarantee.' 'Those gifts are great,' said they all. 'That is true,' said Fer Diad. 'They are indeed great. But great though they be, Medb, you will keep them yourself if I am to go and fight with my foster-brother.'

'O my men,' said Medb, intending to stir up strife and dissension and speaking as if she had not heard Fer Diad at all, 'what Cú Chulainn said is true.' 'What did he say, Medb?' asked Fer Diad. 'He said, my friend, that he thought you should fall by his choicest feat of arms in the province to which he would go.' 'It was not right for him to say that for he never found weakness or cowardice in me, day or night. I swear by my people's god that I shall be the first man to come tomorrow morning to the ford of combat.' 'A blessing on you!' said Medb. 'I prefer that rather than finding weakness or cowardice in you. Every man has kindly feeling for his own people. So is it any more fitting for him to work for Ulster's weal since his mother was of Ulster, than for you to seek the good of Connacht,

for you are the son of a Connacht king?’

Even as they bound their covenants and made this compact, they made a song there:

1. You shall have a reward of many bracelets, and a share of plain and forest, together with freedom for your posterity from today until doomsday. O Fer Diad mac Damáin, you shall receive beyond all expectation. It is right for you to accept what all others accept.
2. I shall not accept anything without surety for no warrior without skill in casting am I. It will be an oppressive task for me tomorrow. The exertion will be hard for me. A Hound called the Hound of Culann, it will not be easy to resist him. Hard the task, great the disaster.
3. What avails it for you to delay? Bind it as it may please you by the right hand of kings or princes who will go surety for you ... You shall have all that you ask, for it is certain that you will kill him who will come to encounter you.
4. I shall not consent unless I get six sureties—let it not be less— before performing my exploits in the presence of the army. Were I to have my wish ... I shall go to fight with brave Cú Chulainn.
5. O Medb great in boastfulness! The beauty of a bridegroom does not touch you. I am certain that you are master in Crúachu of the mounds. Loud your voice, great your fierce strength. Bring me satin richly variegated. Give me your gold and your silver in the amount that they were offered to me.
6. Take landowner or reaver, take the bardic folk as sureties. You will certainly have them. Take Morand as security if you wish for fulfilment (of my promises). Take Cairbre Nia Manand, and take our two sons.
7. I shall take those sureties as guarantees, and I shall sing a requiem for brave Cú Chulainn.
8. You are the heroic leader to whom I shall give my circular brooch. You shall have until Sunday, no longer shall the respite be. O strong and famous warrior, all the finest treasures on earth shall thus be given to you. You shall have them all.
9. Finnabair of the champions, the queen of the west of Inis Elga, when the Hound of the Smith has been killed, you shall have, O Fer Diad.

A wonderful warrior of the Ulstermen, Fergus mac Róig, was present when they made that compact.

Fergus came to his tent. ‘Woe is me for the deed that will be done tomorrow morning!’ ‘What deed is that?’ asked those in the tent. ‘The killing of my noble foster-son, Cú Chulainn.’ ‘Why, who makes such a boast?’ ‘His own dear foster-brother, Fer Diad mac Damáin. Why do ye not take my blessing and one of you go with a friendly warning to Cú Chulainn in the hope that he might not come to the ford tomorrow morning.’ ‘We swear,’ said they, ‘that even if you yourself were at the ford, we would not go there to you.’ ‘Well, driver,’ said Fergus, ‘harness our horses and yoke the chariot.’ The charioteer arose and harnessed the horses and yoked the chariot. They came forward to the ford of combat where Cú Chulainn was. ‘A single chariot is coming towards us, little Cú,’ said Láeg. For the charioteer had his back turned to his master.—He used to win every second game of draughts and chess from his master. Apart from that he acted as sentinel and watchman on the four airts of Ireland. ‘What manner of chariot?’ asked Cú Chulainn. ‘A chariot like a great palace,

with yoke of solid gold and a strong panel of copper, with its shafts of bronze, its frame with narrow compact opening, high and sword-straight, fit for a hero, drawn by two black horses, active, spirited, vigorous, easily yoked, ... A single royal, wide-eyed warrior is driven in the chariot. He has a thick, forked beard reaching down past the soft lower part of his navel. It would protect fifty warriors on a day of storm and rain if they were under the deep shelter of the hero's beard. He carries a curved variegated shield with white shoulder piece and three beautiful concentric circles. A litter-bed for four bands of ten men would fit upon the hide which stretches across the broad circumference of the warrior's shield. He has a long, hard-edged, broad, red sword in a sheath with interlaced design of bright silver ... Over the chariot he holds a strong, three ridged spear with rings and bands of pure white silver.' 'It is not hard to recognize him,' said Cú Chulainn. 'That is my master Fergus, coming to give me a friendly warning against all the four provinces of Ireland.'

Fergus arrived and descended from his chariot. Cú Chulainn bade him welcome. 'Your arrival is welcome, master Fergus,' said Cú Chulainn. 'I trust that welcome,' said Fergus. 'You may well trust it,' said Cú Chulainn. 'If a flock of birds fly across the plain, you shall have a wild goose and a half: or if fish come to the estuaries, you shall have a salmon and a half, or else a handful of watercress, a handful of laver and a handful of seaweed, and after that a drink of cold sandy water.' 'That is a meal fit for an outlaw,' said Fergus. 'That is so. I have an outlaw's portion,' said Cú Chulainn, 'for from the Monday after Samain until now I have not spent a night entertained as guest, but have been strongly holding back the men of Ireland on the Foray of Cúailnge.' 'If we had come for hospitality,' said Fergus, 'we should be all the better pleased to get it, but that is not why we have come.'

'Why then have you come?' asked Cú Chulainn. 'To tell you that a warrior will come to fight and do combat with you tomorrow morning,' said Fergus. 'Let us know who it is and hear it from you,' said Cú Chulainn. 'It is your own foster-brother, Fer Diad mac Damáin,' 'I vow that he is not the one we would prefer to meet,' said Cú Chulainn, 'not through fear of him indeed, but rather because of our great love for him.' 'It is right to fear him,' said Fergus, 'for he has a horn-skin when he fights with an opponent, and neither weapons nor sharp points can pierce it.'

'Do not say that,' said Cú Chulainn, 'for I swear the oath of my people that his every joint and limb will bend beneath my swordpoint as pliantly as a rush in mid-stream, if he once appear before me on the ford.' As they spoke thus, they made a lay:

1. O Cú Chulainn—clear covenant—I see that it is time for you to rise. Fer Diad mac Damáin of the ruddy countenance comes here to meet you in his wrath.
2. I am here strongly holding back the men of Ireland—no easy task. I do not retreat one step to avoid encounter with a single opponent.
3. It is not that I attribute cowardice to you, O famed Cú Chulainn, but Fer Diad of the many followers has a hornskin against which no fight or combat can prevail.
4. When I and Fer Diad the valorous meet at the ford, it will not be a fight without fierceness. Our sword-fight will be wrathful.
5. Strong is his hand which wreaks his anger with his hard red sword. There is the strength of a hundred in his body; brave is the hero. The point of weapons wounds him not, the edge of weapons cuts him not.

6. Hold your peace! Do not argue the matter, O Fergus of the mighty weapons. Over every land and territory there will be no fight against overwhelming odds for me.
7. O Cú Chulainn of the red sword, I should prefer above any reward that you were the one to take the spoils of proud Fer Diad eastwards.
8. I vow clearly, though I am not given to vaunting, that I shall be the one to triumph over the son of Damán mac Dáire.
9. It was I who, in requital for the wrong done me by the Ulsterman, collected and brought these forces to the east. With me the heroes and the warriors came from their own lands.
10. Were it not that Conchobar lies in his debility, our meeting would indeed be hard. Medb of Mag in Scáil has never come on a more uproarious march.
11. A greater deed now awaits your hand-to fight with Fer Diad mac Damáin. Have with you, O Cú Chulainn, weapons harsh and hard and famed in song.

After that, Cú Chulainn asked: 'Why have you come, master Fergus?' 'That is my message,' said Fergus. 'It is a happy augury,' said Cú Chulainn, 'that it was not someone else from among the men of Ireland who brought that message. But unless all the four provinces of Ireland join together (to attack me), I think nothing of a warning against the coming of a single warrior.' Thereafter Fergus came back to his tent. Concerning Cú Chulainn: 'What will you do tonight?' asked Láeg. 'What indeed?' said Cú Chulainn. 'Fer Diad will come against you freshly beautified, washed and bathed, with hair plaited and beard shorn, and the four provinces of Ireland will come with him to watch the fight. I should like you to go to where you will get the same adorning, to the spot where Emer Fholtcháin is, to Cairthenn Clúana Da Dam in Slíab Fuait.'

So on that night Cú Chulainn came to that place and spent the night with his own wife. His doings apart from that are not recorded here now, but those of Fer Diad. Fer Diad came to his tent. Sullen and dispirited were those in Fer Diad's tent that night. They felt certain that when the two world champions met, they would both fall, or else that the result would be the fall of their own lord. For it was no easy matter to encounter Cú Chulainn on the Foray.

That night great anxieties preyed upon Fer Diad's mind and kept him awake. One great anxiety was the fear that he would lose all the treasures and the maid offered to him for engaging in single combat. For if he did not fight that one man, he must fight with six warriors on the next day. But there weighed upon him a greater anxiety than all that: he was sure that if he once appeared before Cú Chulainn on the ford, he would no longer have power over his own body or soul.

And Fer Diad arose early on the morrow. 'My lad,' said he, 'harness our horses and yoke the chariot.' 'On my word,' said the charioteer, 'it is no more advisable for us to go on this expedition than not to go at all.'

As Fer Diad spoke to the charioteer, he made this little song to urge him on:

1. Let us go to this encounter, to contend with this man, until we reach that ford above which the war-goddess will shriek. Let us go to meet Cú Chulainn, to wound his slender body, so that a spear-point may pierce him and he may die thereof.

2. It were better for us to stay here. The threats ye will exchange will not be mild. There will be one to whom sorrow will come. Your fight will be short. An encounter with a fosterling of the Ulstermen is one from which harm will come. It will long be remembered. Woe to him who goes on that course!
3. What you say is wrong, for diffidence does not become a warrior. You must not show timidity. We shall not stay here for you. Be silent, lad! We shall presently be brave, for stoutness of heart is better than cowardice. Let us go to the encounter.

The charioteer harnessed the horses and prepared the chariot, and they drove forward out of the camp. 'My lad,' said Fer Diad, 'it is not right for us to go without bidding farewell to the men of Ireland. Turn back the horses and chariot to face the men of Ireland.' Three times the charioteer turned horses and chariot to face the men of Ireland. Medb was urinating on the floor of the tent. 'Is Ailill asleep now?' asked Medb. 'No indeed,' said Ailill. 'Do you hear your new son-in-law bidding you farewell?' 'Is that what he is doing?' asked Ailill. 'It is indeed,' said Medb. 'But I swear my people's oath that he who is so bidding you farewell will not return to you on his own feet.' 'Because of what we have gained by this marriage,' said Ailill, 'we care not if both of them fall, provided that Cú Chulainn is killed by him. But indeed we should be the better pleased if Fer Diad escaped.' Fer Diad came forward to the ford of combat. 'Look and see, lad, if Cú Chulainn is at the ford.' said Fer Diad. 'He is not,' said the charioteer. 'Look closely for us,' said Fer Diad. 'Cú Chulainn is no small hidden trifle, wherever he might be.' said the charioteer.

'That is so, driver. Until today Cú Chulainn never heard of a brave warrior or a noble opposing him on the Foray, and when he did hear of one, he went from the ford.' 'It is shameful to revile him in his absence, for do you remember how ye both fought against Germán Garbglas above the shores of the Tyrrhene Sea and you left your sword with the enemy hosts, and how Cú Chulainn slew a hundred warriors to get it back for you, and how he gave it to you? And do you remember where we were that night?' 'I do not know,' said Fer Diad. 'We were in the house of Scáthach's steward,' said the charioteer, 'and you were the first of us to go eagerly and proudly into the house. The churlish fellow struck you in the small of your back with the three-pronged fork and pitched you out the door. Cú Chulainn came in and struck the fellow with his sword and clove him in twain. As long as ye remained in that stead, I acted as your steward. If it were that day now, you would not say that you were a better warrior than Cú Chulainn.' 'You have done wrong (not to speak before this), driver,' said Fer Diad, 'for if you had told me that at first, I should not have come to the fight. Why do you not pull the shafts of the chariot under my side and the skin-coverings beneath my head that I may sleep a while?' 'Alas!' said the charioteer, 'such a sleep is the sleep of a doomed one faced by stag and hounds.' 'Why then, driver, are you not capable of keeping watch for me?' 'I am,' said the driver, 'and unless they come out of the clouds and the air to attack you, none shall come from east or from west to fight with you without due warning.' The shafts of his chariot were pulled beneath his side, and his skin-coverings placed under his head, and yet he slept not at all.

Now as regards Cú Chulainn 'Good, my friend Láeg, harness the horses and prepare the chariot. If Fer Diad is awaiting us, he will deem it long.' The charioteer arose. He harnessed the horses and he yoked the chariot. Cú Chulainn mounted the chariot and they drove forward towards the ford. As for Fer Diad's charioteer, he was not long on the watch when he heard the rumble of a chariot approaching them. As he awoke his master, he made this lay:

1. I hear the sound of a chariot with fair yoke of silver. (I perceive) the form of a man of great size, rising above the front of the strong chariot. Past Broinfeirste Broine they advance along the road, past the side of Baile in Bile. Victorious is their triumph.
2. A plundering Hound drives, a bright chariot-fighter harnesses, a noble hawk lashes his steeds towards the south. I am certain that he will come ... He will give us battle.
3. Woe to him who is on the hill awaiting the worthy Hound. Last year I foretold that he would come at some time, the Hound of Emain Macha, the Hound with beauty of every colour, the Hound of spoils, the Hound of battle. I hear him and he hears(us).

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