

The Incantation of Lug

‘Arise, O son of mighty Ulster now that your wounds are healed ... Help from the fairy mound will set you free ... A single lad is on his guard ... Strike ... and I shall strike with you. They have no strong length of life, so wreak your furious anger mightily on your vile(?) enemies. Mount your safe chariot, so then arise.’

For three days and three nights Cú Chulainn slept. It was right that the length of his sleep should correspond to the greatness of his weariness. From the Monday after Samain until the Wednesday after the festival of Spring Cú Chulainn had not slept except when he dozed for a little while after midday, leaning against his spear with his head resting on his clenched fist and his fist holding his spear and his spear on his knee, but he kept striking and cutting down, slaying and killing the four great provinces of Ireland during all that time. Then the warrior from the fairy mound put plants and healing herbs and a curing charm in the wounds and cuts, in the gashes and many injuries of Cú Chulainn so that he recovered during his sleep without his perceiving it at all.

It was at this time that the youths came southwards from Emain Macha, thrice fifty of the kings' sons of Ulster led by Fallamain, the son of Conchobair. Thrice they gave battle to the host and three times their own number fell by them, but the youths fell too, all except Fallamain mac Conchobair. Fallamain vowed that he would never go back to Emain until he carried off Ailill's head with its golden diadem. No easy task was it that faced him. For the two sons of Beithe mac Báin, the sons of Ailill's fostermother and fosterfather, came up with him and wounded him so that he fell dead at their hands. That is the Death of the Youths from Ulster and of Fallamain mac Conchobair./P[gt]

Cú Chulainn, however, lay in a deep sleep at the mound in Lerga until the end of three days and three nights. Then he rose up from his sleep and passed his hand over his face and blushed crimson from head to foot. His spirits were as high as if he were going to an assembly or a march or a tryst or a feast or to one of the great assemblies of Ireland. ‘How long have I been asleep now, O warrior?’ asked Cú Chulainn. ‘Three days and three nights,’ answered the warrior. ‘Woe is me then!’ said Cú Chulainn. ‘Why is that?’ asked the warrior. ‘Because the hosts have been left unattacked for that length of time,’ said Cú Chulainn.

‘They have not indeed,’ said the warrior. ‘Why, how was that?’ asked Cú Chulainn. ‘The youths came south from Emain Macha, thrice fifty of the kings' sons of Ulster, led by Fallamain mac Conchobair and during the three days and three nights that you were asleep, they fought three times with the hosts, and three times their own number fell by them and the youths themselves fell, all except Fallamain mac Conchobair. Fallamain swore that he would carry off Ailill's head, but that proved no easy task for he was killed himself.’ ‘Alas that I was not in my full strength, for had I been, the youths would not have fallen as they did, nor would Fallamain have fallen.’ ‘Fight on, little Cú, it is no reproach to your honour, no disgrace to your valour.’ ‘Stay here with us tonight, O warrior,’ said Cú Chulainn, ‘that together we may take vengeance on the host for the death of the boys.’

‘Indeed I shall not stay,’ said the warrior, ‘for though a man do many valorous and heroic deeds in

your company, the fame and glory of them will redound not on him but on you. Therefore I shall not stay. But exert your valour, yourself alone, on the hosts, for not with them lies any power over your life at this time.'

'What of the scythed chariot, my friend Láeg?' said Cú Chulainn. 'Can you yoke it and have you its equipment? If you can yoke it and have its equipment, then do so. But if you have not its equipment, do not yoke it.'

Then the charioteer arose and put on his warlike outfit for chariot-driving. Of this outfit which he donned was his smooth tunic of skins, which was light and airy, supple and filmy, stitched and of deerskin, which did not hinder the movement of his arms outside. Over that he put on his overmantle black as raven's feathers. Simon Magus had made it for Darius King of the Romans, and Darius had given it to Conchobar and Conchobar had given it to Cú Chulainn who gave it to his charioteer. This charioteer now put on his helmet, crested, flat-surfaced, rectangular with variety of every colour and form, and reaching past the middle of his shoulders. This was an adornment to him and was not an encumbrance. His hand brought to his brow the circlet, red-yellow like a red-gold plate of refined gold smelted over the edge of an anvil, which was a sign of his charioteer status to distinguish him from his master. In his right hand he took the long spandel of his horses and his ornamented goad. In his left he grasped the thongs to check his horses, that is, the reins of his horses which controlled his driving.

Then he put on his horses their iron inlaid armour, covering them from forehead to forehead and set with little spears and sharp points and lances and hard points, and every wheel of the chariot was closely studded with points, and every corner and edge, every end and front of the chariot lacerated as it passed.

Then he cast a protective spell over his horses and over his companion, so that they were not visible to anyone in the camp, yet everyone in the camp was visible to them. It was right that he should cast this spell, for on that day the charioteer had three great gifts of charioteering, to wit, léim dar boilg, foscúl ndírich and imorchor ndelind.

Then the champion and warrior, the marshalled fence of battle of all the men of earth who was Cú Chulainn, put on his battle-array of fighting and contest and strife. Of that battle-array which he put on were the twenty-seven shirts, waxed, board-like, compact, which used to be bound with strings and ropes and thongs next to his fair body that his mind and understanding might not be deranged whenever his rage should come upon him. Outside these he put on his hero's battle-girdle of hard leather, tough and tanned, made from the choicest part of seven yearling ox-hides which covered him from the thin part of his side to the thick part of his armpit. He wore it to repel spears and points and darts and lances and arrows, for they used to glance from it as if they had struck on stone or rock or horn. Then he put on his apron of filmy silk with its border of variegated white gold against the soft lower part of his body. Outside his apron of filmy silk he put on his dark apron of pliable brown leather made from the choicest part of four yearling ox-hides with his battle-girdle of cows' hides about it. Then the royal hero took up his weapons of battle and contest and strife. Of these weapons were his eight small swords together with his ivory-hilted bright-faced sword. He took his eight little spears with his five-pronged spear. He took his eight little javelins with his ivory-handled javelin. He took his eight little darts together with his deil chliss. He took his eight shields together with his curved dark-red shield into the boss of which a show boar would fit, with its sharp, keen razor-like rim all around it, so sharp and keen and razor-like that it would cut a hair against

the current. Whenever the warrior did the 'edge-feat' with it, he would slash alike with shield or spear or sword. Then he put on his head his crested war-helmet of battle and strife and conflict. From it was uttered the shout of a hundred warriors with a long-drawn-out cry from every corner and angle of it. For there used to cry from it alike goblins and sprites, spirits of the glen and demons of the air before him and above him and around him wherever he went, prophesying the shedding of the blood of warriors and champions. He cast around him his protective cloak made of raiment from Tír Tairngire, brought to him from his teacher of wizardry.

Then a great distortion came upon Cú Chulainn so that he became horrible, many-shaped, strange and unrecognizable. All the flesh of his body quivered like a tree in a current or like a bulrush in a stream, every limb and every joint, every end and every member of him from head to foot. He performed a wild feat of contortion with his body inside his skin. His feet and his shins and his knees came to the back; his heels and his calves and his hams came to the front. The sinews of his calves came on to the front of his shins, and each huge round knot of them was as big as a warrior's fist. The sinews of his head were stretched to the nape of his neck and every huge immeasurable, vast, incalculable round ball of them was as big as the head of a month-old child. Then his face became a red hollow (?). He sucked one of his eyes into his head so deep that a wild crane could hardly have reached it to pluck it out from the back of his skull on to his cheek. The other eye sprang out on to his cheek. His mouth was twisted back fearsomely. He drew back his cheek from his jawbone until his inward parts were visible. His lungs and his liver fluttered in his mouth and his throat. His upper palate clashed against the lower in a mighty pincer-like movement(?) and every stream of fiery flakes which came into his mouth from his throat was as wide as a ram's skin. The loud beating of his heart against his ribs was heard like the baying of a bloodhound ... or like a lion attacking bears. The torches of the war-goddess, virulent rain-clouds and sparks of blazing fire, were seen in the air over his head with the seething of fierce rage that rose in him. His hair curled about his head like branches of red hawthorn used to re-fence a gap in a hedge. If a noble apple-tree weighed down with fruit had been shaken about his hair, scarcely one apple would have reached the ground through it, but an apple would have stayed impaled on each separate hair because of the fierce bristling of his hair above his head. The hero's light rose from his forehead, as long and as thick as a hero's fist and it was as long as his nose, and he was filled with rage as he wielded the shields and urged on the charioteer and cast sling-stones at the host. As high, as thick, as strong, as powerful and as long as the mast of a great ship was the straight stream of dark blood which rose up from the very top of his head and dissolved into a dark magical mist like the smoke of a palace when a king comes to be waited on in the evening of a winter's day.

After being thus distorted, the hero Cú Chulainn sprang into his scythed chariot, with its iron points, its thin sharp edges, its hooks and its steel points, with its nails which were on the shafts and thongs and loops and fastenings in that chariot. Thus was the chariot: it had a framework of narrow and compact opening, high enough for great feats, sword-straight, worthy of a hero. In it would fit eight sets of royal weapons, and it moved as swiftly as a swallow or as the wind or as a deer across the level plain. It was drawn by two swift horses, fierce and furious, with small round pointed heads, with pricked ears, with broad hoofs, with roan breast, steady, splendid, easily harnessed to the beautiful shafts(?) of Cú Chulainn's chariots. One of these horses was lithe(?) and swift-leaping, eager for battle, arched of neck, with great hoofs which scattered the sods of the earth. The other horse had a curling mane, and narrow, slender feet and heels.

Then Cú Chulainn performed the thunderfeat of a hundred and the thunderfeat of two hundred, the thunderfeat of three hundred and the thunderfeat of four hundred. And at the thunderfeat of five hundred he ceased for he thought that that was a sufficient number to fall by him in his first attack and in his first contest of battle against the four provinces of Ireland. And in that manner he came forth to attack his enemies and drove his chariot in a wide circuit outside the four great provinces of Ireland. And he drove his chariot furiously so that the iron wheels sank deep into the ground casting up earth sufficient to provide fort and fortress, for there arose on the outside as high as the iron wheels dykes and boulders and rocks and flagstones and gravel from the ground. He made this warlike encirclement of the four great provinces of Ireland so that they might not flee from him nor disperse around him until he pressed them close to take vengeance on them for the deaths of the youths of Ulster. And he came across into the middle of their ranks and three times he threw up great ramparts of his enemies' corpses outside around the host. And he made upon them the attack of a foe upon his foes so that they fell, sole of foot to sole of foot, and headless neck to headless neck, such was the density of the carnage. Three times again he encircled them in this way leaving a layer of six corpses around them, that is, the soles of three men to the necks of three men, all around the encampment. So that the name of this tale in the Táin is Sesrech Breslige, the Sixfold Slaughter. It is one of the three slaughters in which the victims cannot be numbered, the three being Sesrech Breslige and Imshlige Glennamnach and the battle at Gáirech and Irgáirech. But on this occasion hound and horse and man suffered alike.

—Other versions say that Lug mac Eithlend fought beside Cú Chulainn in the battle of Sesrech Breslige.

Their number is not known nor is it possible to count how many of the common soldiery fell there, but their leaders alone have been reckoned. Here follow their names: two men called Crúaid, two called Calad, two called Cír, two called Cíar, two called Ecell, three called Crom, three called Caurath, three called Combirge, four called Feochar, four called Furachar, four called Cass, four called Fota, five called Caurath, five called Cerman, five called Cobthach, six called Saxan, six called Dách, six called Daíre, seven called Rochaid, seven called Rónán, seven called Rúrthech, eight called Rochlad, eight called Rochtad, eight called Rindach, eight called Cairpre, eight called Mulach, nine called Daigith, nine called Daíre, nine called Dámach, ten called Fiac, ten called Fíacha, ten called Fedelmid.

Seven score and ten kings did Cú Chulainn slay in the battle of Breslech Mór in Mag Muirthemne, and a countless number besides of hounds and horses, of women and boys and children, and of the common folk. For not one man in three of the men of Ireland escaped without his thigh-bone or the side of his head or one eye being broken or without being marked for life. Then Cú Chulainn, after he had fought that battle against them, came from them with no wound or gash inflicted upon himself or his charioteer or on either of his horses.

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