The Raid for Dartaid's Cattle

- (Táin bó Dartada, Egerton 1782, Yellow Book of Lecan. Trans. A. H. Leahy)

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This tale is given by Windisch (Irische Texte, II. pp. 185-205), from two versions; one, whose translation he gives in full, except for one doubtful passage, is from the manuscript in the British Museum, known as Egerton, 1782 (dated 1414); the other is from the Yellow Book of Lecan (fourteenth century), in the library of Trinity College, Dublin.

The version in the Yellow Book is sometimes hard to read, which seems to be the reason why Windisch prefers to translate the younger authority, but though in some places the Egerton version is the fuller, the Yellow Book version (Y.B.L.) often adds passages, some of which Windisch has given in notes; some he has left untranslated. In the following prose version as much of Y.B.L. as adds anything to the Egerton text has been translated, with marks of interrogation where the attempted rendering is not certain: variants from the text adopted are placed below the prose version as footnotes. The insertions from Y.B.L. are indicated by brackets; but no note is taken of cases where the Egerton version is fuller than Y.B.L.

The opening of the story (the first five lines in the verse rendering) is in the eleventh century Book of the Dun Cow: the fragment agrees closely with the two later texts, differing in fact from Y.B.L. in one word only. All three texts are given in the original by Windisch.

The story is simple and straightforward, but is a good example of fairy vengeance, the description of the appearance of the troop recalls similar descriptions in the Tain bo Fraich, and in the Courtship of Ferb. The tale is further noticeable from its connection with the province of Munster: most of the heroic tales are connected with the other three provinces only. Orlam, the hero of the end of the tale, was one of Cuchulain's earliest victims in the Tain bo Cualgne.

The Passages that occur only in the Yellow Book (Y.B.L.) are indicated by being placed in square brackets.

Eocho Bec, the son of Corpre, king of Cliu[1], dwelt in the Dun of Cuillne[2], and with him were forty fosterlings, all sons of the kings of Munster; he had also forty milch-cows for their sustenance. By Ailill and Medb messengers were sent, asking him to come to a conference. "[In a week,"][3] said Eocho, "I will go to that conference;" and the messengers departed from him.

One night Eocho lay there in his sleep, when he saw something approach him; a woman, and a young man in her attendance. "Ye are welcome!" said Eocho. ["Knowest thou us?"] said she, "Where hast thou learned to know us?" "It seems to me as if I had been near to you." "I think that we have been very near to one another, though we have not seen each other face to face!" "In what place do ye dwell?" said Eocho. "Yonder in Sid Cuillne (the fairy mound of Cuillne)," said she. "And, wherefore have ye come?" "In order to give thee counsel," said she. For what purpose is the counsel," said he, "that thou givest me?"

"Something," she said, "that will bring thee honour and renown on thy journey at home and abroad. A stately troop shall be round thee, and goodly foreign horses shall be under thee[4]." "With how many shall I go?" said Eocho. "Fifty horsemen is the number that is suitable for thee," she answered.

"To-morrow in the morning fifty black horses, furnished with bridles of gold and silver, shall come to thee from me; and with them fifty sets of equipment of the equipment of the Sidé; and all of thy foster-children shall go with thee; well it becomes us to help thee, because thou art valiant in the defence of our country and our soil." Then the woman left him.

Early in the morning they arise, there they see something: the fifty black horses, furnished with bridles of gold and silver tied fast to the gate of the castle, also fifty breeches of silver with embellishment of gold; and fifty youths' garments with their edges of spun gold, and fifty white horses with red ears and long tails, purple-red were all their tails and their manes, with silver bits[5] (?) and foot-chains of brass upon each horse; there were also fifty whips of white bronze (findruine), with end pieces of gold that thereby they might be taken into hands[6].

Then King Eocho arises, and prepares himself (for the journey): they depart with this equipment to Cruachan Ai[7]: and the people were well-nigh overcome with their consequence and appearance: their troop was great, goodly, splendid, compact: [fifty heroes, all with that appearance that has just been related.

"How is that man named?" said Ailill. "Not hard, Eocho Bec, the king of Cliu." They entered the Liss (outer court), and the royal house; welcome was given to them, he remained there three days and three nights at the feasting.]

"Wherefore have I have been invited to come?" said Eocho to Ailill: "To learn if I can obtain a gift from thee," said Ailill; "for a heavy need weighs upon me, even the sustenance of the men of Ireland for the bringing of the cattle from Cualgne."

"What manner of gift is it that thou desirest?" said Eocho. "Nothing less than a gift of milking-kine," said Ailill. "There is no superfluity of these in my land," said Eocho; "I have forty fosterlings, sons of the kings of Munster, to bring them up (to manhood); they are here in My company, there are forty cows to supply the needs of these, to supply my own needs are seven times twenty milch-cows [there are fifty men for this cause watching over them].

"Let me have from thee," said Ailill, "one cow from each farmer who is under thy lordship as my share; moreover I will yield thee assistance if at any time thou art oppressed by superior might." "Thus let it be as thou sayest," said Eocho; "moreover, they shall come to thee this very day."

For three days and three nights they were hospitably entertained by Ailill and Medb, and then they departed homewards, till they met the sons of Glaschu, who came from Irross Donnan (the peninsula of Donnan, now Mayo); the number of those who met them was seven times twenty men, And they set themselves to attack each other, and to strive with each other in combat, and [at the island of O'Conchada (Inse Ua Conchada)] they fought together. In that place fell the forty sons of kings round Eocho Bec, and that news was spread abroad over all the land of Ireland, so that four times twenty kings' sons, of the youths of Munster, died, sorrowing for the deaths of these princes.

On another night, as Ailill lay in his sleep, upon his bed, he saw some thing, a young man and a woman, the fairest that could be found in Ireland. "Who are ye?" said Ailill. "Victory and Defeat are our names," she said. "Victory indeed is welcome to me, but not so Defeat," said Ailill. "Victory shall be thine in each form!" said she. ["What is the next thing after this that awaits us?" said Ailill. "Not hard to tell thee," said she] "let men march out from thy palace in the morning, that thou mayest win for thyself the cattle of Dartaid, the daughter of Eocho. Forty is the number of her milch-cows, it is thine own son, Orlam mac Ailill, whom she loves. Let Orlam prepare for his journey with a stately troop of valiant men, also forty sons of those kings who dwell in the land of Connaught; and by me shall be given to them the same equipment that the other youths had who fell in yon fight, bridles and garments and brooches; [early in the morning shall count of the treasure be made, and now we go to our own land," said she].

Then they depart from him, and forthwith they go to [Corp[8] Liath (the Gray),] who was the son of Tassach. His castle was on the bank of the river Nemain, upon the northern side, he was a champion of renown for the guarding of the men of Munster; longer than his hand is the evil he hath wrought. To this man also they appeared, and "What are your names?" said he: "Tecmall and Coscrad (Gathering of Hosts, and Destruction)," said they. "Gathering of Hosts is indeed good," said Corp Liath, "an evil thing is destruction": "There will be no destruction for thee, and thou shalt destroy the sons of kings and nobles": "And what," said Corp Liath, "is the next thing to be done?"

"That is easy to say," they said[9]; "each son of a king and a queen, and each heir of a king that is in Connaught, is now coming upon you to bear off cows from your country, for that the sons of your kings and queens have fallen by the hand of the men of Connaught. To-morrow morning, at the ninth hour they will come, and small is their troop; so if valiant warriors go thither to meet them, the honour of Munster shall be preserved; if indeed thine adventure shall meet with success."

"With what number should I go?" he said. "Seven times twenty heroes thou shouldest take with thee," she replied, ["and seven times twenty warriors besides"]: "And now" said the woman, "we depart to meet thee to-morrow at the ninth hour."

At the time (appointed), when morning had come, the men of Connaught saw the horses and the raiment of which we have spoken, at the gate of the fort of Croghan, [even as she (the fairy) had foretold, and as we have told, so that at that gate was all she had promised, and all that had been seen on the sons of kings aforetime], and there was a doubt among the people whether they should go on that quest or not. "It is shame," said Ailill, "to refuse a thing that is good"; and upon that Orlam departed [till[10] he came to the house of Dartaid, the daughter of Eocho, in Cliu Classach (Cliu the Moated), on the Shannon upon the south (bank).

There they halted], and the maiden rejoiced at their coming: "Three of the kine are missing." "We cannot wait for these; let the men take provision on their horses, [for rightly should we be afraid in the midst of Munster. Wilt thou depart with me, O maiden?" said he. "I will indeed go with thee," said she]. "Come then thou," said he, "and with thee all of thy cows."

[Then the young men go away with the cows in the midst, and the maiden was with them; but Corp Liath, the son of Tassach, met them with seven times twenty warriors to oppose their march. A battle was fought], and in that place fell the sons of the kings of Connaught, together with the warriors who had gone with them, all except Orlam and eight others[11], who carried away with them the kine, even the forty milch-cows, and fifty heifers, [so that they came into the land of Connaught]; but the maiden fell at the beginning of the fight.

Hence is that place called Imlech Dartaid. (the Lake Shore of Darta), in the land of Cliu, [where Dartaid, the daughter of Eocho, the son of Corpre, fell: and for this reason this story is called the Tain bo Dartae, it is one of the preludes to the Tain bo Cualnge].

- Cliu, a district in Munster.
- The eleventh century MS., the Leabhar na h-Uidhri, which gives the first four lines of this tale as a fragment, adds here as a note: "this is in the land of the O'Cuanach": apparently the O'Briens of Cuanach.
- At Samhuin day (Egerton)
- Y.B.L. adds a passage that Windisch does not translate: it seems to run thus: "Unknown to thee is the half of what thou hast met: it seems to us that foreign may be thy splendour"(?)
- co m-belgib (?) Windisch translates "bridles," the same as cona srianaib above.
- Y.B.L. adds, "Through wizardry was all that thing: it was recited (?) how great a thing had appeared, and he told his dream to his people."
- Egerton here gives "Ailill and Medb made them welcome;" it omits the long passage in square brackets.
- The Egerton MS. gives the name, Corb Cliach.
- Y.B.L. gives the passage thus: "Assemble with you the sons of kings, and heirs of kings, that you may destroy the sons of kings and heirs of kings." "Who are they?" said Corp Liath. "A noble youth it is from Connaught: he comes to yon to drive your cows before him, after that your young men were yesterday destroyed by him, at the ninth hour of the morning they will come to take away the cows of Darta, the daughter of Eocho."
- Egerton Version has only "towards Chu till he came to the home of Dartaid, the daughter of Eocho: the maiden rejoiced," &c. From this point to the end the version in the Yellow Book is much fuller.

1. Y.B.L. inserts Dartaid's death at this point: "and Dartaid fell at the beginning of the fight, together with the stately sons of Connaught."