

Chapter XVI

The Champion's Covenant.

§ 91. Once upon a time as the Ultonians were in Emain, fatigued after the gathering and the games, Conchobar and Fergus mac Rôig, with Ultonia's nobles as well, proceeded from the sporting field outside and gat seated in the Royal Court (lit. Red Branch) of Conchobar. Neither Cuchulainn nor Conall the Victorious nor Loigaire the Triumphant were there that night. But the hosts of Ultonia's valiant heroes were there. As they were seated, it being eventide, and the day drawing towards the close, they saw a big uncouth fellow of exceeding ugliness drawing nigh them into the hall. To them it seemed as if none of the Ultonians would reach half his height. Horrible and ugly was the carle's guise. Next his skin he wore an old hide with a dark dun mantle around him, and over him a great spreading club-tree (branch) the size of a winter-shed, under which thirty bullocks could find shelter. Ravenous yellow eyes he had, protruding from his head, each of the twain the size of an ox-vat. Each finger as thick as another person's wrist. In his left hand a stock, a burden for twenty yoke of oxen. In his right hand an axe weighing thrice fifty glowing molten masses [of metal]. Its handle would require a plough-team (a yoke of six) to move it. Its sharpness such that it would lop off hairs, the wind blowing them against its edge.

§ 92. In that guise he went and stood by the fork-beam beside the fire. "Is the hall lacking in room for you," quoth Duach of the Chafer Tongue to the uncouth clodhopper, "that ye find no other place than by the fork-beam, unless ye wish to be domestic luminary?—only sooner will a blaze be to the house than brightness to the household." "What property soever may be mine, sooth ye will agree, no matter how big I am, that the household as a whole will be enlightened, while the hall will not be burnt.

§ 93. "That, however, is not my sole function; I have others as well. But neither in Erin nor in Alba nor in Europe nor in Africa nor in Asia, including Greece, Scythia, the Isles of Gades, the Pillars of Hercules, and Bregon's Tower (Brigantium), have I found the quest on which I have come, nor a man to do me fairplay regarding it. Since ye Ultonians have excelled all the folks of those lands in strength, prowess, valour; in rank, magnanimity, dignity; in truth, generosity and worth, get ye one among you to give me the boon I crave."

§ 94. "In sooth it is not just that the honour of a province be carried

off," quoth Fergus mac Rôich, "because of one man who fails in keeping his word of honour. Death, certainly, is not a whit nearer to him than to you." "Not that I shun it," quoth he. "Make thy quest known to us then," quoth Fergus mac Rôich. "If but fairplay be vouchsafed me, I will tell it." "It is right also to give fairplay," quoth Sencha, son of Ailill, "for it beseemeth not a great clannish folk to break a mutual covenant over any unknown individual. To us too it seemeth likely, if at long last you find such a person, you will find here one worthy of you." "Conchobar I put aside," he quoth, "for sake of his sovranty, and Fergus mac Rôich also on account of his like privilege. These two excepted, come whosoever of you that may venture, that I may [23] cut off his head to-night, he mine to-morrow night."

§ 95. "Sure then there is no warrior here," quoth Duach, "after these two." "By my troth there will be this moment," quoth Fat-Neck, son of Short Head, as he sprang on to the floor of the hall. The strength then of yon Fat Neck was as the strength of a hundred warriors, each arm having the might of a hundred "centaurs." "Bend down, bachlach," quoth Fat-Neck, "that I may cut your head off to night, you to cut off mine to-morrow night." "Were that my quest, I could have got it anywhere," quoth the bachlach. "Let us act according to our covenant," he quoth, "I to cut off your head to-night, you to avenge it to morrow night." "By my people's god," quoth Duach of the Chafer Tongue, "death is thus for thee no pleasant prospect should the man killed to-night attack thee on the morrow. [24] It is given to you alone if you have the power, being killed night after night (lit. to be killed every night), to avenge it next day." "Truly I will carry out what you all as a body agree upon by way of counsel,[25] strange as it may seem to you," quoth the bachlach. He then pledged the other to keep his troth in this contention as to fulfilling his tryst on the morrow.

§ 96. With that Fat-Neck took the axe from out of the bachlach's hand. Seven feet apart were its two angles. Then did the bachlach put his neck across the block. Fat-Neck dealt a blow across it with the axe till it stuck in the block underneath, cutting off the head till it lay by the base of the fork-beam, the house being filled with the blood. Straightway the bachlach rose, recovered himself, clasped his head, block and axe to his breast, thus made his exit from the hall with blood streaming from his neck. It filled the Red Branch on every side. Great was the folk's horror, wondering at the marvel that had appeared to them. "By my people's god," quoth Duach of the Chafer Tongue, "if the bachlach, having been killed to-night, come back tomorrow, he will not leave a man alive in Ultonia." The following night, however, he returned, and Fat-Neck shirked him. Then began the bachlach to urge his pact with Fat-Neck. "Sooth it is not right for Fat-Neck not to fulfil his covenant with me."

§ 97. That night, however, Loigaire the Triumphant was present.

“Who of the warriors that contest Ultonia’s Champion’s Portion will carry out a covenant to-night with me? Where is Loigaire the Triumphant?” quoth he. “Here,” said Loigaire. He pledged him too, yet Loigaire kept not his tryst. The bachlach returned on the morrow and similarly pledged Conall Cernach, who came not as he had sworn.

§ 98. The fourth night the bachlach returned, and fierce and furious was he. All the ladies of Ultonia came that night to see the strange marvel that had come into the Red Branch. That night Cuchulainn was there also. Then the fellow began to upbraid them. “Ye men of Ultonia, your valour and your prowess are gone. Your warriors greatly covet the Champion’s Portion, yet are unable to contest it. Where is yon poor mad wight that is hight Cuchulainn? Fain would I know if his word be better than the others’.” “No covenant do I desire with you,” quoth Cuchulainn. “Likely is that, you wretched fly;^[26] greatly thou dost fear to die.”

Whereupon Cuchulainn sprang towards him and dealt him a blow with the axe, hurling his head to the top rafter of the Red Branch till the whole hall shook. Cuchulainn again caught up the head and gave it a blow with the axe and smashed it. Thereafter the bachlach rose up.

§ 99. On the morrow the Ultonians were watching Cuchulainn to see whether he would shirk the bachlach as the other heroes had done. As Cuchulainn was awaiting the bachlach, they saw that great dejection seized him. It had been fitting had they sung his dirge. They felt sure his life would last only till the bachlach came. Then quoth Cuchulainn with shame to Conchobar:^[27]

“Thou shall not go until my pledge to the bachlach is fulfilled; for death awaits me, and I would rather have death with honour.”

§ 100. They were there as the day was closing when they saw the bachlach approaching. “Where is Cuchulainn?” he quoth. “Here am I,” he answered. “You’re dull of speech to-night, unhappy one; greatly you fear to die. Yet, though great your fear, death you have not shirked.” Thereafter Cuchulainn went up to him and stretched his neck across the block, which was of such size that his neck reached but half-way. “Stretch out your neck, you wretch,” the bachlach quoth. “You keep me in torment,” quoth Cuchulainn. “Despatch me quickly; last night, by my troth, I tormented you not. Verily I swear if you torment me, I shall make myself as long as a crane above you.” “I cannot slay you,” quoth the bachlach, “what with the size of the block and the shortness of your neck and of your side” (sic!).

§ 101. Then Cuchulainn stretched out his neck so that a warrior’s full-grown foot would have fitted between any two of his ribs; his neck he distended till it reached the other side of the block. The bachlach raised his axe till it reached the roof-tree of the hall. The creaking of the old hide that was about the fellow and the crashing of the axe—both his arms being raised aloft with all his might—were as the loud noise of a wood tempest-tossed in a night of storm. Down it came then ... on his

neck, its blunt side below,—all the nobles of Ultonia gazing upon them.
§ 102. “O Cuchulainn, arise! ... Of the warriors of Ultonia and Erin, no matter their mettle, none is found to be compared with thee in valour, bravery and truthfulness. The sovranty of the heroes of Erin to thee from this hour forth and the Champion’s Portion undisputed, and to thy lady the precedence alway of the ladies of Ultonia in the Mead Hall. And whosoever shall lay wager against thee from now, as my folks swear I swear, while on life he will be in [sore scathe].” Then the bachlach vanished. It was Curoi mac Dairi who in that guise had come to fulfil the promise he had given to Cuchulainn.

And thus henceforth the Champion’s Portion of Emain

And the Ulster Women’s War of Words

And the Champion’s Wager in Emain

And the Hosting of the Ultonians

To Cruachan.

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