

III. The Wooing of Etain

Another time on a lovely summer day Eochaid Airem king of Tara arose and climbed the terrace of Tara to gaze over Mag Berg. It was radiant with bloom of every hue. As Eochaid looked round him he saw a strange warrior on the terrace before him. A purple tunic about him, and golden yellow hair on him to the edge of his shoulders. A shining blue eye in his head. A five-pointed spear in one hand, a white-bossed shield in the other, with golden gems thereon. Eochaid was silent, for he was unaware of his being in Tara the night before, and the courts had not been opened at that hour.

2. Thereupon he came up to Eochaid. Then Eochaid said, "Welcome to the warrior whom we do not know." "Tis for that we have come," said the Warrior. "We know thee not," said Eochaid. "I know thee, however," replied the warrior. "What is thy name?" said Eochaid. "Not famous," said he, "Midir of Bri Leith." "What has brought thee?" said Eochaid. "To play chess¹ with thee," said he. "Of a truth I am good at chess," said Eochaid. "Let us make trial of it," said Midir. "The queen is asleep," said Eochaid, "and it is in her house that the chess-board is." "I have here," said Midir, "a chess-board that is not inferior." That was true: a silver board and golden men, and each corner there lit up by precious stone, and a bag for the men of plaited links of bronze.

3. Thereupon Midir arranges the board. "Do thou play," said Midir. "I will not play save for a stake," said Eochaid. "What shall the wager be?" said Midir. "It is all one to me," said Eochaid. "Thou shalt have from me," said Midir, "if thou win my stake, fifty dark grey steeds with dappled blood-red heads, pointed-ears, broad-chested, with distended nostrils, slender limbs, mighty, keen ..., huge, swift, steady easily yoked, with their fifty enamelled reins. They shall be here at the hour of tierce to-morrow." Eochaid said the same to him. Thereupon they play. Midir's stake is taken. He goes off taking his chess-board with him. When Eochaid arose on the morrow he came on the terrace of Tara at sunrise, and he saw his opponent also by coming towards him along the terrace. He knew not whither he had gone or whence he had come, and he saw the fifty dark grey steeds with their enamelled reins. "This is honourable," said Eochaid. "What is promised is due," said Midir.

4. "Shall we play at chess?" said Midir. "Willingly," said Eochaid, "so it be for a stake." "Thou shalt have from me," said Midir, "fifty young boars, curly-motted, grey-bellied, blue-backed, with horses' hooves to them, together with a vat of blackthorn into which they all will fit. Further, fifty gold-hilted swords, and again fifty red-eared cows with white red-eared calves with a bronze spangle on each calf. Further, fifty grey wethers with red heads, three-headed, three-horned. Further, fifty ivory-hilted swords. Further, fifty speckled cloaks, but each fifty of them on its own day."

5. Eochaid's fosterfather questioned him, and asked him whence he had brought his great wealth. He said to him, "That is indeed fit to relate." "Verily Indeed. Thou must take heed of him; it is a man of magic power that has come to thee, my son, lay heavy burdens on him." After that his opponent came to him, and Eochaid laid upon him the famous great tasks, namely to clear Meath of stone, to put rushes over Tethba, a causeway over Moin Lamraige, and a wood over Breifne. Concerning which the poet uttered the followings staves:

These are the four things
that Eochaid Airem imposed
on many a manly-visaged throng
with many a shield and spear:

A causeway over Moin Lamraige,
a wood over Breifne, without difficulty,
a clearing of stone from the hillocks of great Meath,
and rushes over Tethba.

6. These then are the pledges and the hardships that were imposed. "Thou layest too much upon me," said Midir. "I do not indeed," said Eochaid. "Then do thou grant me a request and a boon. As far as thou holdest sway let no man or woman be out of doors until sunrise to-morrow." "It shall be done," said Eochaid. No one had ever trodden that bog before.

7. Then Eochaid commanded his steward to watch the effort they put forth in making the causeway. The steward went into the bog. It seemed to him as though all the men in the world from sunrise to sunset had come to the bog. They all made one mound of their clothes, and Midir went up to that mound. Into the bottom of the causeway they kept putting a forest with its trunks and roots, Midir standing and urging on the host on every side. One would think that below him all the men of the world were raising a tumult.

8. After that, clay and gravel and stones were place upon the bog. Now until that night the men of Ireland used to put the strain on the foreheads of oxen, (but) it was seen that the folk of the elfmounds were putting it on their shoulders. Eochaid did the same, hence he is called Eochaid Airem [i.e. ploughman], for he was the first of the men of Ireland to put a yoke upon the necks of oxen. And these were the words that were on the lips of the host as they were making the causeway: "Put in hand, throw in hand, excellent oxen, in the hours after sundown; overhard is the exaction; none knoweth whose is the gain, whose the loss, from the causeway over Moin Lamraige."

There had been no better causeway in the world, had not a watch been set on them. Defects were left in them. There after the steward came to Eochaid and brings tidings of the vast work he had witnessed, and he said there was not on the ridge of the world a magic power that surpassed it.

9. While they were speaking they saw Midir coming towards them, his loins girt and an evil look on him. Eochaid was afraid, but bade him welcome. "Tis for that we have come," said Midir. "It is fierce and unreasonable of thee to lay such hardship and infliction upon me. I would have wrought something else to please thee, but my mind is inflamed against thee." "Thou shalt not get wrath in return for thy rage: thy mind shall be set at ease," said Eochaid. "It shall be accepted then," said Midir; "Shall we play at chess?" said Midir. "What shall the stake be?" said Eochaid. The stake that either of us shall wish," said Midir. That day Eochaid's stake was taken. "Thou has taken my stake," said Eochaid. "Had I wished I could have taken it before now," said Midir. "What wouldst thou from me?" said Eochaid. "My arms around Etain and a kiss from her," said Midir. Eochaid was silent. "Come a month from to-day and that shall be given thee."

10. The year before Midir came to play chess with Eochaid he was wooing Etain, but he could not

win her, the name by which Midir called her was Be Find [Fair Lady], and he spake to her:

O Be Find, wilt thou come with me
to the wondrous land wherein harmony is,
hair is like the crown of the primrose there.
and the body smooth and white as snow.

There, is neither mine or thine,
white are teeth there, dark the brows.
A delight of the eye the number of our hosts,
every cheek there is of the hue of the foxglove.

A gillyflower is each one's neck,
a delight of the eye are blackbirds' eggs.
Though fair the prospect of Mag Fail,
'tis desolate after frequenting Mag Mar.

Though choice you deem the ale of Inis Fail,
more intoxicating is the ale of Tir Mar.
A wondrous land is the land I tell of;
youth departs not there before old.

Warm sweet streams flow through the land,
the choice of mead and wine.
Stately folk without blemish,
conception without sin, without lust.

We see everyone on every side,
and no one sees us.
It is the darkness of Adam's transgression
that hath prevented us from being counted.

O woman, if thou come to my proud folk,
a crown of gold shall be upon thy head
honey, wine, ale, fresh milk, and drink,
thou shalt have with me there, O Be Find.

"I will go with thee" said Etain, "if thou obtain me from my husband, if thou obtain me not, I will not go."

11. After that Midir came to Eochaid, and he yielded his stake at once in order that he might have a ground of quarrel with Eochaid. Therefore it was that he fulfilled the onerous conditions, and it was for that reason he stipulated the unnamed pledge, so that it afterwards it was named.¹⁰ When Midir and his people were carrying out the terms of the night, i.e. the causeway over Moin Lamraige, and the clearing away the stones from Meath and putting rushes over Tethba, and the wood over Breifne, these are the words people were saying, according to the Book of Druim Snechta:

12. [Cuirthe i iland toche i iland airderg damrudh trom an coidben cluinotar fir ferdi buidne balethruim crandchuir forderg saire fedhar sechuib slimprib snithib sciathu lama indrochad cloena fo bith oenmna duib in digail duib an tromdam tairthrim flatho fer ban fomnis in fer mbraine cerpai fomnis diadh dergage fer arfeidh solaid fri ais estild fer bron fort ier techta in delmnad o luachair for di Teithbi dictlochad Midi indracht coich les coich aimles.]

13. Midir made a tryst of a month from that day. But Eochaid mustered the flower of the warriors of Ireland to Tara, and the best of the war-bands of Ireland, each encircling the other around Tara, in the midst, without and within, and the king and queen in the middle of the house, and the courts locked, for they knew that a man of great magic power would come. Etain was serving the lords on that night, for the serving of drink was a special gift of hers.

14. Thereafter as they were speaking they saw Midir coming towards them in the midst of the royal house. He was fair at all times, but on that night he was fairer. The hosts were astonished. Then silence fell upon them, and the king bade him welcome. "'Tis that we have come for," said Midir; "what has been pledged to me," said he, "let it be given to me. What is promised is due. What was promised, I have given thee." "I have not thought further of that until now," said Eochaid. "Etain herself promised me that she would come away from thee," said Midir. Thereupon Etain blushes. "Do not blush, O Etain," said Midir. "It is not unwomanly for thee. I have been a year," said he, "seeking thee with gifts and treasures the most beautiful in Ireland, nor did I take thee until I had Eochaid's leave. It is not through any... though I should win thee?" "I have told thee," said she, "that I will not go to thee until Eochaid sell me. As for me, thou mayst take me if Eochaid sell me."

15. "I will not sell thee indeed," said Eochaid, "but let him put his arms round thee in the middle of the house as thou art." "It shall be done," said Midir. He takes his weapons in his left hand, and the woman he took under his right arm, and bore her away through the skylight of the house. The hosts rose up in shame around the king. They beheld two swans in flight round Tara.

And the way they went was to Sid ar Femuin, and Eochaid went with flower of men of Ireland around him to Sid ar Femuin, that is Sid Ban Find. And this was the counsel of the men of Ireland, to dig up dig up every elfmound in Ireland until his wife came thereout to him.

16. They dug up Sid Ban Find, and a certain person comes forth and told them that the woman was not there. "The king of the elfmounds of Ireland, he is the man who came to you. He is in his royal stronghold with the young woman. Set out thither until ye come to it." They go northwards. They began to dig up the elfmound. They were a year and three months at it. What they would dig up one day would be restored on the morrow. Two white ravens went forth from the mound to them, and there came two hounds, Schleth and Samair. They went south again to Sid Ban Find. They began to dig the elfmound. One comes forth to them and said to them, "What hast thou against us, O Eochaid?" said he. "We have not taken thy wife. No injury had been done thee. Beware of saying aught that may be harmful to a king." "I will not go hence," said Eochaid, "till ye tell me how I may attain my wife." "Take blind welps with thee, and blind cats, and leave them. That is the work thou must do every day." They turn away, and that is done by them. And in this manner they set about it.

17. As they were razing Sid Bri Leith they beheld Midir coming towards them. "What has thou against me," said Midir. "Thou dost me wrong. Thou hast put great tribulations upon me. Thou didst

sell thy wife to me. Injure me no more," said he. "She shall not be with thee," said Eochaid. "She shall not," said Midir. "Get thee home, Thy wife shall reach thee at the third hour to-morrow..." said Midir. "Injure me not again if thou are contented with me this time." "I accept," said Eochaid. Midir bound his covenants and departs from them. As they were there at the third hour on the morrow, they saw fifty women all of like form and raiment as Etain. Silence fell on the hosts. There was a grey slut before them. They say to Eochaid, "Choose thy wife now, or bid one of the women to abide with thee. It is meet that we set out for home."

18. "What will ye do," said Eochaid to the men of Ireland, "because of the doubt that has come upon you?" "We have no resolve as to what we shall do," said the men of Ireland. "I have," said Eochaid. "My wife is the best at serving drink in Ireland. I shall recognize her by her serving." Twenty-five were placed at the side of the house and twenty five at this, and still he did not find Etain. It came at last to two women. One of them poured out first. Said Eochaid, "This is Etain, and it is not herself." Then they all took counsel. "Truly it is Etain, but it is not her serving." The rest of the women departed. That deed which he did was a great satisfaction to the men of Ireland, and the high feat the oxen had done, and the rescue of the woman from the men of the elfmounds.

19. One fine day Eochaid arose, and he and his queen were conversing in the middle of the court, they saw Midir coming towards them. "Well, Eochaid," said Midir. "Well," said Eochaid. "Thou has not played me fair with the hardships thou has inflicted on me, considering the backing thou hadst and all that... to demand from me. There was naught that thou didst not suspect me of." "I did not sell thee my wife," said Eochaid. "Answer, dost thou consider thy conscience in regard to me?" said Midir. "Until thou proffer another pledge, I will not consider it," said Eochaid. "Answer, is thy mind at ease?" said Midir. "It is," said Eochaid. "So also is mine," said Midir. "Thy wife was pregnant when she was taken from thee, and she bore a daughter, and it is she who is with thee. Thy wife, moreover, is with me and it had befallen thee to let her go a second time." Thereupon he departs.

20. After that Eochaid did not dare to dig again an elfmound of Midir's, for there was a bond against him. It grieved Eochaid that his wife had eloped, and that his own daughter had lain with him. And she was with child by him and bore him a daughter. "O ye gods," said Eochaid, "I and my daughter's daughter shall never look on one another," Two of his household go to throw her into a pit among beasts. They visit the house of Findlam the herdsman of Tara in Slaib Fuait, in the midst of a wilderness. There was no one in the house. They ate the food with in. Then they threw the girl to the bitch and her welps that was in the kennel in the house. They go away again. The herdsman and his wife return home and saw within the fair infant in the kennel. They were amazed at that. They take her out of the kennel. They brought her up without knowing whence she had come, and she waxed strong, moreover, being the daughter of a king and queen. She surpassed all women at embroidery. Her eyes saw nothing that her hands could not embroider. In that wise then she was reared by Findlam and his wife, until one day Etarscel's people saw her and told the king, and she was taken away forcibly by Etarscel, and was with him after that as his wife. So she is the mother of Conaire son of Etarscel.

21. And after that Eochaid Airem was in Fremain of Tethba, after he had lost Etain, and his mind was troubled. Sigmall Cael, grandson of Midir, that is, the son of Midir's daughter, Oicnis was her name, came and burned Eochaid's Dun Fremainn, and Eochaid fell by him and his head was brought by Sigmall to Sid Nennta in revenge for the honour of his grandfather, even Midir.

This is not so, however, for Sigmall and Fuamnach the wife of Midir had fallen at the hands of Manannan in Bri Leith long before that in the reign of the Tuatha De Danann: whereof the poet said:

R. Fumnach the foolish one, was Midir's wife,
Sigmall, a hill with ancient trees
in Bri Leith, twas a faultless arrangement,
they were burned by Manannan.

22. It is this wise however that the death of Eochaid Airem came about, as the learned in ancient lore say:

Eochaid was in Fremainn of Tethba, as we have said, and it is there was his mansion and his ancestral domain towards the end. Hense there arose hard tribute of service beyond telling on the people of the district and the land, because the sustenance of the king usually fell on them, wherefore Tethba is called the seventh part of Ireland, for the seventh part of the tribute and the maintenance of the king fell on them. The Fir Chul of the Luigne of Tara were in Tara at this time, and on them that the tribute was laid. Normael was king of the Fir Chul then and he was the steward in Fremainn. His mother's son was Sigmall of Brestine son of Midir king of Bentraige. A plot was then hatched by them, and what they resolved on was the slaying of Eochaid.

23. Then they both set out, the Bentraige under Sigmall and the Fir Chul under Mormael, and they took Dun Fremainn, Eochaid's stronghold, and burned it, and slew him there. After that they went to Connacht with their spoils, and bore Eochaid's head along with them to Sid Nennta iar nUsicu (west of the water), so that commemorate that deed the historian uttered the following:

Eochaid Airem, noble, fair and graceful,
eminent high-king of Ireland,
extended his bold hard tribute,
it spread through Banda of of the brown cloaks.

The folk of Tethba of the stubborn fights
got the tribute of the king of Ireland.
The lawgiving king who...them, put
the seventh (part) on them alone.

Heavy sorrow of the host came
because of the monstrous unjust law,
anger was kindled among because of it,
until Eochaid Airem was slain.

The folk of Tethba, mighty of yore,
slew Eochaid of Fremaind
'Twas not strength with cause on their part,
because of the monstrous unjust law.

Mormael was the name of the king at first

by whom the great deed was done,
Fir Chul the name of the men of Tethba in the east
when Dun Fremainn was overpowered.

Though 'tis said that Sigmal of the spears
slew Eochaid Airem,
he died himself prior to Eochaid of Fremaind
in the succession of leaders.

Sigmall of the battling spears died
by the smooth bright face of Manannan;
a vast long time in the east, without weakness,
before Eochaid met his death.

The two Sigmalls of Sid Nennta,
intrepid their feet, mighty their prowess,
Sigmall son of Coirpre of the battles,
Sigmall who was at Eochaid's death.

Sigmall son of Brestine of lasting [memory],
king of Bentraige with great triumph,
and great Mormael from the plain,
by them Eochaid perished.

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