

Part III

The Room Of Mac Cecht, Conaire's Battle-Soldier

There I beheld another room with a trio in it, three half-furious nobles: the biggest of them in the middle, very noisy . . . rock-bodied, angry, smiting, dealing strong blows, who beats nine hundred in battleconflict. A wooden shield, dark, covered with iron, he bears, with a hard . . . rim, a shield whereon would fit the proper litter of four troops of ten weaklings on its . . . of . . . leather. A . . . boss thereon, the depth of a caldron, fit to cook four oxen, a hollow maw, a great boiling, with four swine in its mid-maw great . . . At his two smooth sides are two five-thwarted boats fit for three parties of ten in each of his two strong fleets.

A spear he hath, blue-red, hand-fitting, on its puissant shaft. It stretches along the wall on the roof and rests on the ground. An iron point upon it, dark-red, dripping. Four amply-measured feet between the two points of its edge.

Thirty amply-measured feet in his deadly-striking sword from dark point to iron hilt. It shews forth fiery sparks which illumine the Mid-court House from roof to ground.

'Tis a strong countenance that I see. A swoon from horror almost befell me while staring at those three. There is nothing stranger.

Two bare hills were there by the man with hair. Two loughs by a mountain of the . . . of a blue-fronted wave: two hides by a tree. Two boats near them full of thorns of a white thorn tree on a circular board. And there seems to me somewhat like a slender stream of water on which the sun is shining, and its trickle down from it, and a hide arranged behind it, and a palace housepost shaped like a great lance above it. A good weight of a plough-yoke is the shaft that is therein. Liken thou that, O Fer rogain!

"Easy, meseems, to liken him! That is Mac cecht son of Snaide Teichid; the battle-soldier of Conaire son of Eterscel. Good is the hero Mac cecht! Supine he was in his room, in his sleep, when thou beheldest him. The two bare hills which thou sawest by the man with hair, these are his two knees by his head. The two loughs by the mountain which thou sawest, these are his two eyes by his nose. The two hides by a tree which thou sawest, these are his two ears by his head. The two five-thwarted boats on a circular board, which thou sawest, these are his two sandals on his shield. The slender stream of water which thou sawest, whereon the sun shines, and its trickle down from it, this is the flickering of his sword. The hide which thou sawest arranged behind him, that is his sword's scabbard. The palace house-post which thou sawest, that is his lance: and he brandishes this spear till its two ends meet, and he hurls a wilful cast of it when he pleases. Good is the hero, Mac cecht!"

"Six hundred will fall by him in his first encounter, and a man for each of his weapons, besides a man for himself. And he will share prowess with every one in the Hostel, and he will boast of

triumph over a king or chief of the reavers in front of the Hostel. He will chance to escape though wounded. And when he shall chance to come upon you out of the house, as numerous as hailstones, and grass on a green, and stars of heaven will be your cloven heads and skulls, and the clots of your brains, your bones and the heaps of your bowels, crushed by him and scattered throughout the ridges."

Then with trembling and terror of Mac cecht they flee over three ridges.

They took the pledges among them again, even Ger and Gabur and Fer rogain.

"Woe to him that shall wreak the Destruction," says Lomna Druth; "your heads will depart from you."

"Ye cannot," says Ingcel: "clouds of weakness are coming to you" etc.

"True indeed, O Ingcel," says Lomna Druth son of Donn Desa. "Not unto thee is the loss caused by the Destruction. Woe is me for the Destruction, for the first head that will reach the Hostel will be mine!"

"'Tis harder for me," says Ingcel: "'tis my destruction that has been . . . there.

"Truly then," says Ingcel, "maybe I shall be the corpse that is frailest there," etc.

"And afterwards whom sawest thou there?"

The Room Of Conaire's Three Sons, Oball And Oblin And Corpre

"There I beheld a room with a trio in it, to wit, three tender striplings, wearing three silken mantles. In their mantles were three golden brooches. Three golden-yellow manes were on them. When they undergo headcleansing their golden-yellow mane reaches the edge of their haunches. When they raise their eye it raises the hair so that it is not lower than the tips of their ears, and it is as curly as a ram's head. A . . . of gold and a palace-flambeau above each of them. Every one who is in the house spares them, voice and deed and word. Liken thou that, O Fer rogain," says Ingcel.

Fer rogain wept, so that his mantle in front of him became moist. And no voice was gotten out of his head till a third of the night had passed.

"O little ones," says Fer rogain, "I have good reason for what I do! Those are three sons of the king of Erin: Oball and Oblin and Corpre Findmor."

"It grieves us if the tale be true," say the sons of Donn Desa. "Good is the trio in that room. Manners of ripe maidens have they, and hearts of brothers, and valours of bears, and furies of lions. Whosoever is in their company and in their couch, and parts from them, he sleeps not and eats not at ease till the end of nine days, from lack of their companionship. Good are the youths for their age! Thrice ten will fall by each of them in their first encounter, and a man for each weapon, and three men for themselves. And one of the three will fall there. Because of that trio, woe to him that shall wreak the Destruction!"

"Ye cannot," says Ingcel: "clouds of weakness are coming to you, etc. And whom sawest thou afterwards?"

The Room Of The Fomorians

I beheld there a room with a trio in it, to wit, a trio horrible, unheard - of, a triad of champions, etc.

Liken thou that, O Fer rogain?

"'Tis hard for me to liken that trio. Neither of the men of Erin nor of the men of the world do I know it, unless it be the trio that Mac cecht brought out of the land of the Fomorians by dint of duels. Not one of the Fomorians was found to fight him, so he brought away those three, and they are in Conaire's house as sureties that, while Conaire is reigning, the Fomorians destroy neither corn nor milk in Erin beyond their fair tribute. Well may their aspect be loathy! Three rows of teeth in their heads from one ear to another. An ox with a bacon-pig, this is the ration of each of them, and that ration which they put into their mouths is visible till it comes down past their navels. Bodies of bone (i.e. without a joint in them) all those three have. I swear what my tribe swears, more will be killed by them at the Destruction than those they leave alive. Six hundred warriors will fall by them in their first conflict, and a man for each of their weapons, and one for each of the three themselves. And they will boast a triumph over a king or chief of the reavers. It will not be more than with a bite or a blow or a kick that each of those men will kill, for no arms are allowed them in the house, since they are in 'hostageship at the wall' lest they do a misdeed therein. I swear what my tribe swears, if they had armour on them, they would slay us all but a third. Woe to him that shall wreak the Destruction, because it is not a combat against sluggards."

"Ye cannot," says Ingcel, etc. "And whom sawest thou there after that?"

The Room Of Munremar Son Of Gerrchenn, Birderg Son Of Ruan, Mal son of Telband

"I beheld a room there, with a trio in it. Three brown, big men, with three brown heads of short hair. Thick calf-bottoms (ankles?) they had. As thick as a man's waist was each of their limbs. Three brown and curled masses of hair upon them, with a thick head: three cloaks, red and speckled, they wore: three black shields with clasps of gold, and three five-barbed javelins; and each had in hand an ivory-hilted sword. This is the feat they perform with their swords: they throw them high up, and they throw the scabbards after them, and the swords, before reaching the ground, place themselves in the scabbards. Then they throw the scabbards first, and the swords after them, and the scabbards meet the swords and place themselves round them before they reach the ground. Liken thou that, O Fer rogain!"

"Easy for me to liken them! Mal son of Telband, and Munremar son of Gerrchenn, and Birderg son of Ruan. Three crown-princes, three champions of valour, three heroes the best behind weapons in Erin! A hundred heroes will fall by them in their first conflict, and they will share prowess with every man in the Hostel, and they will boast of the victory over a king or chief of the reavers, and afterwards they will chance to escape. The Destruction should not be wrought even because of those three."

"Woe to him that shall wreak the Destruction!" says Lomna. "Better were the victory of saving

them than the victory of slaying them! Happy he who should save them! Woe to him that shall slay them!"

"It is not feasible," says Ingcel, etc. "And afterwards whom sawest thou?"

The Room Of Conall Cernach

"There I beheld in a decorated room the fairest man of Erin's heroes. He wore a tufted purple cloak. White as snow was one of his cheeks, the other was red and speckled like foxglove. Blue as hyacinth was one of his eyes, dark as a stag-beetle's back was the other. The bushy head of fair golden hair upon him was as large as a reaping-basket, and it touches the edge of his haunches. It is as curly as a ram's head. If a sackful of red-shelled nuts were spilt on the crown of his head, not one of them would fall on the floor, but remain on the hooks and plaits and swordlets of their hair. A gold hilted sword in his hand; a blood-red shield which has been speckled with rivets of white bronze between plates of gold. A long, heavy, three-ridged spear: as thick as an outer yoke is the shaft that is in it. Liken thou that, O Fer rogain!"

"Easy for me to liken him, for the men of Erin know that scion. That is Conall Cernach, son of Amorgen. He has chanced to be along with Conaire at this time. 'Tis he whom Conaire loves beyond every one, because of his resemblance to him in goodness of form and shape. Goodly is the hero that is there, Conall Cernach! To that blood-red shield on his fist, which has been speckled with rivets of white bronze, the Ulaid have given a famous name, to wit, the Bricriu of Conall Cernach.

"I swear what my tribe swears, plenteous will be the rain of red blood over it to-night before the Hostel! That ridged spear above him, many will there be unto whom to-night, before the Hostel, it will deal drinks of death. Seven doorways there are out of the house, and Conall Cernach will contrive to be each of them, and from no doorway will he be absent. Three hundred will fall by Conall in his first conflict, besides a man for each (of his) weapons and one for himself. He will share prowess with every one in the Hostel, and when he shall happen to sally upon you from the house, as numerous as hailstones and grass on green and stars of heaven will be your half-heads and cloven skulls, and your bones under the point of his sword. He will succeed in escaping though wounded. Woe to him that shall wreak the Destruction, were it but for this man only!"

"Ye cannot," says Ingcel. "Clouds," etc.

"And after that whom sawest thou?"

The Room Of Conaire Himself

"There I beheld a room, more beautifully decorated than the other rooms of the house. A silvery curtain around it, and there were ornaments in the room. I beheld a trio in it. The outer two of them were, both of them, fair, with their hair and eyelashes; and they are as bright as snow. A very lovely blush on the cheek of each of the twain. A tender lad in the midst between them. The ardour and energy of a king has he and the counsel of a sage. The mantle I saw around him is even as the mist of Mayday. Diverse are the hue and semblance each moment shewn upon it. Lovelier is each hue than the other. In front of him in the mantle I beheld a wheel of gold which reached from his

chin to his navel. The colour of his hair was like the sheen of smelted gold. Of all the world's forms that I beheld, this is the most beautiful. I saw his golden-hilted glaive down beside him. A forearm's length of the sword was outside the scabbard. That forearm, a man down in the front of the house could see a fleshworm by the shadow of the sword! Sweeter is the melodious sounding of the sword than the melodious sound of the golden pipes that accompany music in the palace."

"Then," quoth Ingcel, "I said, gazing at him:

I see a high, stately prince, etc.

I see a famous king, etc.

I see his white prince's diadem, etc.

I see his two blue-bright cheeks, etc.

I see his high wheel . . . round his head . . . which is over his yellow - curly hair.

I see his mantle red, many-coloured, etc.

I see therein a huge brooch of gold, etc.

I see his beautiful linen frock . . . from ankle to kneecaps.

I see his sword golden-hilted, inlaid, in its scabbard of white silver, etc.

I see his shield bright, chalky, etc.

A tower of inlaid gold," etc.

Now the tender warrior was asleep, with his feet in the lap of one of the two men and his head in the lap of the other. Then he awoke out of his sleep, and arose, and chanted this lay:

"The howl of Ossar (Conaire's dog) . . . cry of warriors on the summit of Tol Geisse; a cold wind over edges perilous: a night to destroy a king is this night."

He slept again, and awoke thereout, and sang this rhetoric:

"The howl of Ossar . . . a battle he announced: enslavement of a people: sack of the Hostel: mournful are the champions: men wounded: wind of terror: hurling of javelins: trouble of unfair fight: wreck of houses: Tara waste: a foreign heritage: like is lamenting Conaire: destruction of corn: feast of arms: cry of screams: destruction of Erin's king: chariots a-tottering: oppression of the king of Tara: lamentations will overcome laughter: Ossar's howl."

He said the third time:

"Trouble hath been shewn to me: a multitude of elves: a host supine; foes' prostration: a conflict of

men on the Dodder⁶: oppression of Tara's king: in youth he was destroyed: lamentations will overcome laughter: Ossar's howl."^[6]

"Liken thou, O Fer rogain, him who has sung that lay."

"Easy for me to liken him," says Fer rogain. No "conflict without a king" this. He is the most splendid and noble and beautiful and mighty king that has come into the whole world. He is the mildest and gentlest and most perfect king that has come to it, even Conaire son of Eterscel. 'Tis he that is overking of all Erin. There is no defect in that man, whether in form or shape or vesture: whether in size or fitness or proportion, whether in eye or hair of brightness, whether in wisdom or skill or eloquence, whether in weapon or dress or appearance, whether in splendour or abundance or dignity, whether in knowledge or valour or kindred.

"Great is the tenderness of the sleepy simple man till he has chanced on a deed of valour. But if his fury and his courage be awakened when the champions of Erin and Alba are at him in the house, the Destruction will not be wrought so long as he is therein. Six hundred will fall by Conaire before he shall attain his arms, and seven hundred will fall by him in his first conflict after attaining his arms. I swear to God what my tribe swears, unless drink be taken from him, though there be no one else in the house, but he alone, he would hold the Hostel until help would reach it which the man would prepare for him from the Wave of Clidna⁷ and the Wave of Assaroe⁸ while ye are at the Hostel."^{[7][8]}

"Nine doors there are to the house, and at each door a hundred warriors will fall by his hand. And when every one in the house has ceased to ply his weapon, 'tis then he will resort to a deed of arms. And if he chance to come upon you out of the house, as numerous as hailstones and grass on a green will be your halves of heads and your cloven skulls and your bones under the edge of his sword.

"'Tis my opinion that he will not chance to get out of the house. Dear to him are the two that are with him in the room, his two fosterers, Dris and Snithe. Thrice fifty warriors will fall before each of them in front of the Hostel, and not farther than a foot from him, on this side and that, will they too fall."

"Woe to him who shall wreak the Destruction, were it only because of that pair and the prince that is between them, the over-king of Erin, Conaire son of Eterscel! Sad were the quenching of that reign!" says Lomna Druth, son of Donn Desa.

"Ye cannot," says Ingcel. "Clouds of weakness are coming to you," etc.

"Good cause hast thou, O Ingcel," says Lomna son of Donn Desa. "Not unto thee is the loss caused by the Destruction: for thou wilt carry off the head of the king of another country, and thyself will escape. Howbeit 'tis hard for me, for I shall be the first to be slain at the Hostel."

"Alas for me!" says Ingcel, "peradventure I shall be the frailest corpse," etc.

"And whom sawest thou afterwards?"

The Room Of The Rearguards

"There I saw twelve men on silvery hurdles all around that room of the king. Light yellow hair was on them. Blue kilts they wore. Equally beautiful were they, equally hardy, equally shapely. An ivory-hilted sword in each man's hand, and they cast them not down; but it is the horse-rods in their hands that are all round the room. Liken thou that, O Fer rogain."

"Easy for me to say. The king of Tara's guardsmen are there. These are their names: three Londs of Liffey -plain: three Arts of Ath cliath (Dublin): three Buders of Buagnech: and three Trenfers of Cuilne. I swear what my tribe swears, that many will be the dead by them around the Hostel.

And they will escape from it although they are wounded. Woe to him who shall wreak the Destruction were it only because of that band! And afterwards whom sawest thou there?"

Le Fri Flaith Son Of Conaire, Whose Likeness This Is

"There I beheld a red-freckled boy in a purple cloak. He is always a wailing in the house. A stead wherein is the king of a cantred, whom each man takes from bosom to bosom.

"So he is with a blue silvery chair under his seat in the midst of the house, and he always a-wailing. Truly then, sad are his household listening to him! Three heads of hair on that boy, and these are the three; green hair and purple hair and all-golden hair. I know not whether they are many appearances which the hair receives, or whether they are three kinds of hair which are naturally upon him. But I know that evil is the thing he dreads to night. I beheld thrice fifty boys on silvern chairs around him, and there were fifteen bulrushes in the hand of that red-freckled boy, with a thorn at the end of each of the rushes. And we were fifteen men, and our fifteen right eyes were blinded by him, and he blinded one of the seven pupils which was in my head," saith Ingcel. "Hast thou his like, O Fer rogain?"

"Easy for me to liken him!" Fer rogain wept till he shed his tears of blood over his cheeks. "Alas for him!" quoth he. "This child is a 'scion of contention' for the men of Erin with the men of Alba for hospitality, and shape, and form and horsemanship. Sad is his slaughter! 'Tis a 'swine that goes before mast,' 'tis a babe in age! the best crown-prince that has ever come into Erin! The child of Conaire son of Eterscel, Le fri flaith is his name. Seven years there are in his age. It seems to me very likely that he is miserable because of the many appearances on his hair and the various hues that the hair assumes upon him. This is his special household, the thrice fifty lads that are around him."

"Woe," says Lomna, "to him that shall wreak the Destruction, were it only because of that boy!"

"Ye cannot," says Ingcel. "Clouds of weakness are coming on you, etc." "And after that whom sawest thou there?"

The Room Of The Cupbearers

"There I saw six men in front of the same room. Fair yellow manes upon them: green mantles about them: tin brooches at the opening of their mantles. Half-horses (centaurs) are they, like

Conall Cernach. Each of them throws his mantle round another and is as swift as a millwheel. Thine eye can hardly follow them. Liken thou those, O Fer rogain!"

"This is easy for me. Those are the King of Tara's six cupbearers, namely Uan and Broen and Banna, Delt and Drucht and Dathen. That feat does not hinder them from their skinking, and it blunts not their intelligence thereat. Good are the warriors that are there! Thrice their number will fall by them. They will share prowess with any six in the Hostel, and they will escape from their foes, for they are out of the elfmounds. They are the best cupbearers in Erin. Woe to him that shall wreak the Destruction were it only because of them!"

"Ye cannot," says Ingcel. "Clouds, etc." "And after that, whom sawest thou there?"

The Room Of Tulchinne The Juggler

"There I beheld a great champion, in front of the same room, on the floor of the house. The shame of baldness is on him. White as mountain cotton grass is each hair that grows through his head. Earrings of gold around his ears. A mantle speckled, coloured, he wore. Nine swords in his hand, and nine silvern shields, and nine apples of gold. He throws each of them upwards, and none of them falls on the ground, and there is only one of them on his palm; each of them rising and falling past another is just like the movement to and fro of bees on a day of beauty. When he was swiftest, I beheld him at the feat, and as I looked, they uttered a cry about him and they were all on the house-floor. Then the Prince who is in the house said to the juggler: 'We have come together since thou wast a little boy, and till to-night thy juggling never failed thee.'

"'Alas, alas, fair master Conaire, good cause have I. A keen, angry eye looked at me: a man with the third of a pupil which sees the going of the nine bands. Not much to him is that keen, wrathful sight! Battles are fought with it,' saith he. 'It should be known till doomsday that there is evil in front of the Hostel.'

"Then he took the swords in his hand, and the silvern shields and the apples of gold; and again they uttered a cry and were all on the floor of the house. That amazed him, and he gave over his play and said:

'O Fer caille, arise! Do not . . . its slaughter. Sacrifice thy pig! Find out who is in front of the house to injure the men of the Hostel.'

'There,' said he, 'are Fer Cualngi, Fer le, Fer gar, Fer rogel, Fer rogain. They have announced a deed which is not feeble, the annihilation of Conaire by Donn Desa's five sons, by Conaire's five loving foster-brothers.'

"Liken thou that, O Fer rogain! Who has chanted that lay?"

"Easy for me to liken him," says Fer rogain. "Taulchinne the chief juggler of the King of Tara; he is Conaire's conjurer. A man of great might is that man. Thrice nine will fall by him in his first encounter, and he will share prowess with every one in the Hostel, and he will chance to escape therefrom though wounded. What then? Even on account of this man only the Destruction should not be wrought."

"Long live he who should spare him!" says Lomna Druth.

"Ye cannot," says Ingcel, etc.

The Room Of The Swineherds

"I beheld a trio in the front of the house: three dark crowntufts on them: three green frocks around them: three dark mantles over them: three forked . . . (?) above them on the side of the wall. Six black greaves they had on the mast. Who are yon, O Fer rogain?"

"Easy to say," answers Fer rogain: "the three swineherds of the king, Dub and Donn and Dorch: three brothers are they, three sons of Mapher of Tara. Long live he who should protect them! woe to him who shall slay them! for greater would be the triumph of protecting them than the triumph of slaying them!"

"Ye cannot," says Ingcel, etc.

The Room Of The Principal Charioteers

"I beheld another trio in front of them: three plates of gold on their foreheads: three short aprons they wore, of grey linen embroidered with gold: three crimson capes about them: three goads of bronze in their hands. Liken thou that, O Fer rogain!"

"I know them," he answered. "Cul and Frecul and Forcul, the three charioteers of the King: three of the same age: three sons of Pole and Yoke. A man will perish by each of their weapons, and they will share the triumph of slaughter."

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