

The Boyhood Deeds

‘He was reared,’ said Fergus, ‘by his father and mother at the Airgthech in Mag Muirthemne. He was told the famous tales of the youths in Emain. For,’ said Fergus, ‘thrice fifty youths are usually there engaged in play. This is how Conchobor spends his time of sovereignty: one third of the day spent watching the youths, another third playing fidchell, another third drinking ale till he falls asleep therefrom. Though we have been exiled by him, (I still maintain that) there is not in Ireland a warrior more wonderful,’ said Fergus.

‘Cú Chulainn asked his mother to let him go to join the boys. ‘You shall not go,’ said his mother, ‘till you be escorted by some of the Ulster warriors.’ ‘I think it too long to wait for that,’ said Cú Chulainn. ‘Point out to me in what direction is Emain.’ ‘To the north there,’ said his mother, ‘and the journey is hard. Slíab Fúait lies between you and Emain.’ ‘I shall make an attempt at it at all events,’ said Cú Chulainn. He went off then with his wooden shield and his toy javelin, his hurley and his ball. He kept throwing the javelin in front of him and catching it by the point before its end touched the ground.’

‘Then he went to the boys without binding them over to protect him. For no one used to come to them in their playing-field till his protection was guaranteed, but Cú Chulainn was not aware of the fact that this was tabu for them. ‘The boy insults us,’ said Follomon mac Conchobair. ‘Yet we know he is of the Ulstermen. Attack him.’ They threw their thrice fifty javelins at him, and they all stuck in his toy shield. Then they threw all their balls at him and he caught them, every single ball, against his breast. Then they threw their thrice fifty hurling-clubs at him. He warded them off so that they did not touch him, and he took a load of them on his back.’

‘Thereupon he became distorted. His hair stood on end so that it seemed as if each separate hair on his head had been hammered into it. You would have thought that there was a spark of fire on each single hair. He closed one eye so that it was no wider than the eye of a needle; he opened the other until it was as large as the mouth of a mead-goblet. He laid bare from his jaw to his ear and opened his mouth rib-wide(?) so that his internal organs were visible. The champion's light rose above his head.’

‘Then he attacked the boys. He knocked down fifty of them before they reached the gate of Emain. Nine of them came past me and Conchobar where we were playing chess. Cú Chulainn leapt over the chess-board in pursuit of the nine. Conchobar seized him by the forearm. ‘The boys are not well treated.’ said Conchobar. ‘It was right for me (to treat them so), master Conchobar,’ said he. ‘I came to play with them from my home, from my father and mother, and they were not kind to me.’ ‘What is your name?’ said Conchobar. ‘I am Sétanta the son of Súaltaim and of Deichtire, your sister. It was not to be expected that I should be tormented there.’ ‘Why were the boys not bound over to protect you?’ asked Conchobar. ‘I did not know of (the need of) that,’ said Cú Chulainn. ‘Undertake to protect me against them.’ ‘I agree,’ said Conchobar. But then he turned again and attacked the boys throughout the house. ‘What have you got against them now?’ asked Conchobar. ‘Let me be bound over to protect them,’ said Cú Chulainn. ‘Undertake it then,’ said Conchobar. ‘I

agree,' said Cú Chulainn. So they all went into the playing field. And those boys who had been knocked down there rose to their feet, helped by their fostermothers and their foster- fathers.'

'At one time,' said Fergus, 'when Cú Chulainn was a boy, he never slept in Emain. 'Tell me,' said Conchobar to him, 'Why do you not sleep?'

'I do not sleep unless my head and my feet are equally high.' So a pillar-stone was placed by Conchobar at his head and another at his feet, and a special couch was made for him between them. On another occasion a certain man went to wake him and with his fist Cú Chulainn struck him on the forehead, driving the front of his forehead on to his brain, while with his arm he knocked down the pillar-stone. 'Surely,' said Ailill, 'that was the fist of a warrior and the arm of a strong man!'' 'From that time on,' said Fergus, 'they never dared to wake him (but left him) till he woke of his own accord.'

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