

The Death of Nechta Scéne's Three Sons

‘He did still another exploit,’ said Fiachu mac Fir Fhebe. ‘Cathbad the druid was with his son Conchobar mac Nessa. There were with him a hundred active men learning the druid's art—that was the number that Cathbad used to instruct. One of his pupils asked him for what that day would be of good omen. Cathbad said that if a warrior took up arms on that day, his name for deeds of valour would be known throughout Ireland and his fame would last for ever. Cú Chulainn heard this. He went to Conchobar to ask for arms. Conchobar asked: ‘Who prophesied good fortune for you?’ ‘Master Cathbad,’ said Cú Chulainn. ‘We know him indeed,’ said Conchobar. He gave him a spear and a shield. Cú Chulainn brandished them in the middle of the hall so that not one was left unbroken of the fifteen spare sets of weapons which were kept in Conchobar's household to replace broken weapons or to provide for the taking up of arms by someone. Finally Conchobar's own arms were given to him. They withstood him, and he brandished them and blessed the king whose arms they were, saying: ‘Happy the people and race over whom reigns the owner of these arms’

‘Then Cathbad came to them and asked: ‘Is the boy taking up arms?’ ‘Yes,’ said Conchobar. ‘That is not lucky for the son of his mother,’ said he. ‘Why, was it not you who instructed him?’ ‘It was not I indeed,’ said Cathbad. ‘What use is it for you to deceive me so, you sprite?’ said Conchobar to Cú Chulainn. ‘O king of the Fíán, it is no deceit,’ said Cú Chulainn. ‘He prophesied good fortune for his pupils this morning and I heard him from where I was on the south side of Emain, and then I came to you.’ ‘It is indeed a day of good omen,’ said Cathbad. ‘It is certain that he who takes up arms today will be famous and renowned, but he will, however, be short-lived.’ ‘A mighty thing!’ said Cú Chulainn. ‘Provided I be famous, I am content to be only one day on earth.’

‘On another day a certain man asked the druids for what that day was a good omen. ‘The name of one who goes (for the first time) into a chariot on this day,’ said Cathbad, ‘will be famed throughout Ireland for ever.’ Then Cú Chulainn heard this, and he came to Conchobar and said to him: ‘Master Conchobar, give me a chariot.’ Conchobar gave him a chariot. Cú Chulainn put his hand between the two shafts and the chariot broke. In the same way he smashed twelve chariots. So finally Conchobar's chariot was given to him and it withstood the test. Thereafter he went into the chariot with Conchobar's charioteer. The charioteer, whose name was Ibor, turned the chariot under him. ‘Come out of the chariot now,’ said the charioteer. ‘These are fine horses.’ ‘I am fine too, lad,’ said Cú Chulainn. ‘Just go on around Emain and you shall be rewarded for it.’

‘The charioteer drove off and Cú Chulainn made him go along the road that he might greet the boys, ‘and so that the boys may wish me well.’ Then he besought him to go back over the road again. When they had come there Cú Chulainn said to the charioteer: ‘Ply the goad on the horses.’ ‘In what direction?’ asked the charioteer. ‘As far as the road will lead,’ said Cú Chulainn.’

‘Thence they came to Slíab Fúait where they found Conall Cernach. It had fallen to Conall to guard the province that day. For each warrior of the Ulstermen spent a day in turn in Slíab Fúait, to protect anyone who came that way with poetry or with challenge to battle, so that there he might be encountered and so that no one should go unnoticed into Emain. ‘I wish you prosperity, victory and triumph!’ said Conall. ‘Go to the fort, Conall, and leave me here to watch now,’ said Cú Chulainn. ‘That will do,’ said Conall, ‘if it is (merely) to undertake the protection of one coming with poetry. However, if it be to fight some one, it is still too soon for you to do that.’ ‘Perhaps it will not be necessary at all,’ said Cú Chulainn. ‘Meanwhile let us go to take a look at the sand-bank of Loch Echtra. There are usually warriors staying there.’ ‘I am willing,’ said Conall. So they set out.’

‘Cú Chulainn threw a stone from his sling and the shaft of Conall Cernach's chariot broke. ‘Why have you thrown the stone, lad?’ asked Conall. ‘To test my shooting and the accuracy of my shot,’ said Cú Chulainn, ‘And it is the custom with you Ulstermen that you do not drive on in a chariot which is unsafe. Go back to Emain master Conall, and leave me here to keep watch.’ ‘I am willing,’ said Conall. Conall Cernach did not go past that spot afterwards.’

‘Cú Chulainn went on to Loch Echtra but they found no one there. The charioteer told Cú Chulainn that they should go to Emain to be in time for the feasting there. ‘No,’ said Cú Chulainn. ‘What mountain is that over there?’ ‘Slíab Monduirnd,’ said the charioteer. ‘Let us go to it,’ said Cú Chulainn.’

‘Then they went to it, and when they had reached the mountain, Cú Chulainn asked ‘What white cairn is that over there on the mountain-top?’ ‘Finncharn,’ said the charioteer. ‘What plain is that yonder?’ asked Cú Chulainn. ‘Mag mBreg,’ said the charioteer.’

‘So he told him the name of every chief fort between Temair and Cennannas. He named, moreover, their meadowlands and their fords, their renowned places and their dwellings, their forts and their fortified heights. He showed him too the fort of the three sons of Nechta Scéne, from Inber Scene. Fer Ulli mac Lugdach was their father and Nechtan Scéne their mother. The Ulstermen had killed their father which is the reason they were at war with the Ulstermen to wit, Fóill, Fannall and Túachell. ‘Is it they who say,’ asked Cú Chulainn, ‘that there are not more Ulstermen alive than they have killed of them?’ ‘It is they indeed,’ said the charioteer. ‘Let us go to meet them,’ said Cú Chulainn. ‘It is dangerous for us,’ said the charioteer.’

‘Indeed it is not to avoid danger that we go,’ said Cú Chulainn. Then they set off, and they unyoked their horses at the confluence of a bog and a river, on the south above the fort of the sons of Nechta Scéne. And Cú Chulainn cast the withe that was on the pillar-stone as far as his arm could throw it out into the river and let it float downstream. This violated a tabu which bound the sons of Nechta Scéne who noticed what had been done and came towards them. But Cú Chulainn, after letting the withe drift with the current, fell asleep at the pillar-stone, having said to the charioteer: ‘Do not wake me for a few, but wake me for several.’

‘However the charioteer was now sore afraid, and he harnessed the chariot and he tugged at the rugs and skin-coverings that were under Cú Chulainn, though he did not dare to waken him because Cú Chulainn had previously told him not to waken him for a few.’

‘Then came the sons of Nechta Scéne. ‘Who is here?’ said one of them. ‘A little lad who has come on an expedition in a chariot today,’ answered the charioteer. ‘May his first taking up of arms not bring him prosperity or success. He must not stay in our land and the horses must not graze here any longer,’ said the warrior. ‘Their reins are ready in my hand,’ said the charioteer. ‘You had no reason to show yourself unfriendly to him, and anyway,’ said Ibor to the warrior, ‘the lad is asleep.’ ‘I am no lad indeed,’ said Cú Chulainn, ‘but the lad who is here has come to seek battle with a man.’ ‘That pleases me well,’ said the warrior. ‘It will please you well now in yonder ford,’ said Cú Chulainn. ‘This is fitting for you,’ said the charioteer. ‘Beware of the man who comes against you. Fóill (Sly) is his name. If you reach him not with the first thrust, you will never reach him.’ ‘I swear by the god by whom my people swear, he shall not play that trick again on Ulstermen if once the broad spear of my master Conchobar reach him from my hand. It will mean an outlaw's hand, that is, death, for him.’ Then Cú Chulainn cast the spear at Fóill so that his back broke therefrom and he carried off his spoils and his severed head then.’

‘‘Beware of the next man,’ said the charioteer. ‘Fannall (Swallow) is his name. He skims over water as lightly as a swan or a swallow.’ ‘I swear that he will not play that stick on Ulstermen again,’ said Cú Chulainn. ‘You have seen how I travel across the pool in Emain.’ Then they met in the ford. Cú Chulainn killed that man and carried off his spoils and his head.’

‘‘Beware of the next man who comes to you,’ said the charioteer. ‘Túachell (Cunning) is his name, and it is no misnomer for no weapons wound him.’ ‘Here is the deil chlis for him to confound him so that it may riddle him like a sieve,’ said Cú Chulainn. Then he cast the spear at him and knocked him down. He went towards him and cut off his head. He carried off his head and his spoils to his own charioteer. Then he heard the cry of their mother, Nechta Scéne, bewailing them. He carried off the spoils and brought the three heads with him in his chariot and said ‘I will not part from these tokens of my triumph until I reach Emain.’ Thereupon they set forth with their trophies. Cú Chulainn said to the charioteer: ‘You promised us a good drive, and we need it now because of the fight and because of the pursuit behind us.’

‘They drove on then to Slíab Fúait. So swift was the run they made across Brega after his urging of the charioteer that the chariot-horses used to outstrip the wind and birds in flight, and Cú Chulainn used to catch the stone he had thrown from his sling before it reached the ground.’

‘On reaching Slíab Fúait they found a herd of deer before them. ‘What are those nimble cattle over there?’ asked Cú Chulainn. ‘Wild deer,’ said the charioteer. ‘Which would the Ulstermen deem best, that I should take them to them alive or dead?’ ‘It is more wonderful (to take them) alive’ said the charioteer. ‘Not every one can do so, but there is not one of them who cannot take them dead. But you cannot carry off any one of them alive,’ added the charioteer. ‘Indeed I can,’ said Cú Chulainn. ‘Ply the goad on the horses and drive them to the bog.’ The charioteer did so, and the horses stuck fast in the bog. Cú Chulainn sprang out of the chariot and caught the deer that was nearest to him and the finest of the herd. He lashed the horses through the bog and subdued the deer immediately and tied it up between the two poles of the chariot.’

‘Again they saw before them a flock of swans. ‘Which would the Ulstermen deem best,’ asked Cú Chulainn, ‘that I should carry them alive to them or carry them dead?’ ‘The bravest and most active carry them off alive,’ said the charioteer. Cú Chulainn then threw a small stone at the birds and

brought down eight of them. Again he threw a big stone and struck twelve of them. All this was done by his 'return-stroke'. 'Collect the birds for me,' said Cú Chulainn to his charioteer. 'If I go to get them, the wild deer will spring on you.'

'It is not easy for me to go there,' said the charioteer. 'The horses have become wild so that I cannot go past them. Nor can I go past the iron wheels of the chariot because of their sharpness, and I cannot go past the deer for his antlers have filled all the space between the two poles of the chariot.' 'Step from his antlers then,' said Cú Chulainn. 'I swear by the god by whom the Ulstermen swear, that I shall so nod at him and so glare at him that he will not move his head towards you and will not dare to stir.' That was done then. Cú Chulainn fastened the reins and the charioteer collected the birds. Then Cú Chulainn tied the birds to the strings and cords of the chariot. In this wise he went to Emain Macha with a wild deer behind his chariot, a flock of swans fluttering over it and three severed heads in his chariot.'

'They reached Emain then. 'A chariot-warrior is driving towards you!' cried the watchman in Emain Macha. 'He will shed the blood of every man in the fort unless heed be taken and naked women go out to meet him.'

'Then he turned the left side of his chariot towards Emain which was tabu for it. And Cú Chulainn said. 'I swear by the god by whom Ulstermen swear that, unless some man is found to fight with me, I shall shed the blood of everyone in the fort.' 'Send forth naked women to meet him !' ordered Conchobor. Then the women-folk of Emain came forth to meet him led by Mugain,

or by Férach, according to other versions [gloss] the wife of Conchobor mac Nessa, and they bared their breasts to him. 'These are the warriors who will encounter you today,' said Mugain.

or Férach [gloss]" .'

'He hid his face. Then the warriors of Emain seized him and cast him into a tub of cold water. That tub burst about him. The second tub into which he was plunged boiled hands high therefrom. The third tub into which he went after that he warmed so that its heat and its cold were properly adjusted for him. Then he came out and the queen, Mugain, put on him a blue mantle with a silver brooch therein, and a hooded tunic, and he sat at Conchobor's knee which was his resting-place always after that.'

'One who did that in his seventh year,' said Fiachu mac Fir Pebe, 'it were no wonder that he should triumph over odds and overcome in fair fight now that his seventeen years are complete today.'

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