

The Harrying of Cúailnge

When they had all arrived with their booty and assembled at Findabair Cúailnge, Medb said 'Let the army be divided here. All the cattle cannot be taken by one route. Let Ailill go with half of them by Slige Midlúachra. Fergus and I will go by Bernas Bó nUlad.' 'The half of the drove that has fallen to our share is not lucky for us,' said Fergus. 'The cattle cannot be taken across the mountain unless they are divided.' So it was done. Whence comes the name Bernas Bó nUlad.

Then Ailill said to Cuillius, his charioteer: 'Spy for me today on Medb and Fergus. I do not know what has brought them thus together. I shall be glad if you can bring me a proof.' Cuillius arrived when they were in Cluichri. The lovers remained behind while the warriors went on ahead. Cuillius came to where they were, but they did not hear the spy. Fergus's sword happened to be beside him and Cuillius drew it out of its scabbard, leaving the scabbard empty.

Then he came back to Ailill. 'Well?' said Ailill. 'Well indeed,' said Cuillius. 'Here is a proof for you.' 'That is well,' said Ailill. They exchanged smiles. 'As you thought,' said Cuillius, 'I found them both lying together.'

'She is right (to behave thus),' said Ailill. 'She did it to help in the cattle-driving. Make sure that the sword remain in good condition. Put it under your seat in the chariot, wrapped in a linen cloth.'

Then Fergus rose up to look for his sword. 'Alas!' he cried. 'What ails you?' asked Medb. 'I have wronged Ailill,' said he. 'Wait here until I come out of the wood, and do not wonder if it is a long time until I return.' Now in fact Medb did not know of the loss of the sword. Fergus went off, taking his charioteer's sword in his hand. In the wood he cut a wooden sword. Hence the Ulstermen have the place-name Fid Mórdrúalle.

'Let us go on after the others,' said Fergus. All their hosts met in the plain. They pitched their tents. Fergus was summoned to Ailill to play chess. When he came into the tent Ailill began to laugh at him.

Fergus said: 'Well for the man who is being laughed at if he be not deluded by the foolish violence of his fateful deed. By the point of my sword, halidom of Macha, swiftly shall we wreak vengeance on swords following on a cry (for help) from the Gaileóin had not a woman's triumph misdirected (me); following on a tryst bloody and gravestrewn and with blunt-edged spears between a great host with [their] commanders, there shall be fought a battle [extending] to the mountain of Nessa's grandson (Cú Chulainn) by a stout host, and the battle shall scatter the headless trunks of men.'

Then Ailill spoke: 'Do not wage battle after the loss of your sword ... It defends Medb against many tribes ... Sit down then,' said Ailill, 'so that we may play a game of chess. Your arrival is welcome.' Then Ailill said 'Play chess and draughts before a king and a queen. They have prepared a game for great eager armies. It matters not(?) what stake you lay ... I am well- skilled. Perhaps in truth the first guilt will lie on the women ... Findabair loves the bold Fergus, Fergus mac Rossa Róich with

lowing cattle and great armies surrounded(?) by tribes with great possessions, Fergus with the beauty of a king, the fierceness of a dragon, the venomous breath of a viper, the powerful blow of a lion.' Then they began to play chess. They moved the gold and silver chessmen across the bronze chessboard.

Ailill was heard speaking: 'It is not the due of a king ... ' Medb was heard to say: 'Cease those uncouth speeches. A noble lady is not the secret love of a stranger ... I am not given to destruction and unjust judgments ... ' Then Fergus was heard saying: 'Alas! With many words they wage war facing many tribes, and with secret counsels they will be nourished(?) and with treasure they will be bewitched(?), and with spears they will be cleared away ... that is, you will be obeyed.' They remained there that night and on the following morning they heard Ailill say 'A great champion comes to face the mighty army by Cronn, the river of Nessa's grandson. The men of Connacht will fight against an opponent. There will flow streams of blood from headless necks in a bloody and grave-strewn meeting of heroes. Many waters rise up against the beardless champion who will come from Ulster to the fray.'

Then Medb spoke: 'Do not contend, O arrogant son of Máta ... men are herded together, women are carried off ... great armies propose to come from the battle-field of Cúailnge and the hosts sleep on.' Fergus was heard: 'Let a great prince(?) be seized ... Let them swear by their people, let them make promises to their queens, let them fight against their enemies.' Medb was heard saying: 'Let what he says be done, let it be done.' Medb spoke: 'He judges in submission to you for many armies. Let them advance while Ailill is in your power...' They set forth on their way to the river Cronn, and Mane mac Ailella was heard to say: 'If I am quickly sent forth against a fair opponent of many feats, he will ward off father and mother on horned cattle ... '

Then Fergus was heard saying: 'Do not go, O valorous boy. They will give no other counsel until a beardless lad shall strike your head from your neck ... ' 'Let me go in front with the banished Ulstermen,' said Fergus, 'to make sure that the lad gets fair play, with the cattle before us and the army in our rear, and the women folk behind the army.'

Then Medb was heard saying: 'Hark, O Fergus! for the sake of your honour ... ward off (the enemy) with your fine army. Do not drive away the Ulstermen ... In Mag nAí you prevail over a meeting of companies.'

Fergus spoke: 'Alas! O foolish Medb whose voice I do not hear ... I am not the son of a weakling ... I shall not strike a great blow upon the tribes. Cease to cast stones at me ... '

Cú Chulainn came to Áth Cruinn to meet them. 'My friend Láeg,' said he to his charioteer, 'the armies are coming towards us.'

Láeg spoke: 'I swear by the gods that I shall perform a great deed in front of chariot-warriors in the small remnant of the battle. They are carried on slender steeds with silver yokes and golden wheels (on their chariots) ... You will march against kings. They will conquer with their power of leaping.'

Cú Chulainn spoke: 'Take heed, O Láeg, that you grasp the reins with the great victory of Macha ... I beseech the rivers to come to my help. I call upon heaven and earth and especially the river Cronn to aid me.'

1. The plaintive river Cronn offers them resistance and will not let them cross into Muirthemne until the work of warriors is finished in the mountain north of Ochaíne.

Thereupon the river rose in flood as high as the tree-tops.

Maine, the son of Ailill and Medb came forward before the others. Cú Chulainn slaughtered him on the ford and thirty horsemen of his household were submerged in the water. Cú Chulainn overthrew thirty-two of their brave warriors again at the river. They pitched their tents at that ford. Lugaid mac Nóis uí Lomairc Allchomaig accompanied by thirty horsemen came on a fleeting visit to parley with Cú Chulainn.

‘Welcome, Lugaid,’ said Cú Chulainn. ‘If birds fly over Mag Murthemne you shall have a barnacle goose and a half. Or else if fish swim into the estuaries you shall have a salmon and a half. Or else you shall have three sprigs, a sprig of cress, a sprig of laver, a sprig of seaweed. A man shall take your place (to fight) at the ford.’ ‘That is welcome,’ said Lugaid. ‘I wish all goodness of the tribe for the lad.’ ‘Your army is fine,’ said Cú Chulainn.

‘You will not suffer even though the company you bring against them is few,’ said Lugaid. ‘Grant me fair play and goodly combat,’ said Cú Chulainn. ‘O friend Lugaid, do the army hold me in fear?’ ‘I swear by the god of my people,’ said Lugaid, ‘that not one man or two dare go outside the camp to make water unless they go in companies of twenty or of thirty.’ ‘It will be a fine thing for them,’ said Cú Chulainn, ‘if I begin to pelt them with stones from my sling. If every man's strength is put forth against me, it will be right for you, Lugaid, (to remember) your alliance with the men of Ulster. Tell me now what it is that you want.’ ‘I want a truce from you for my company.’

‘You shall have that provided that they bear a special sign (that I may recognize them.) And tell my friend Fergus that his company too should bear a special sign. Tell the physicians to make their company also bear a sign and let them swear to preserve my life and send me food every night.’ Lugaid left him then. Now it chanced that Fergus was in his tent with Ailill. Lugaid called him out and gave him the message.

Ailill was heard speaking: ‘Cair iss i sanassaib ... Let us go with a small army, to a choice tent and an encampment ...’ ‘I swear by the god of my people that it is not so,’ said Fergus, ‘unless I ask the lad. Come, Lugaid, go and ask him if Ailill and his division of three thousand may join together with my company. Take him an ox and a flitch of bacon and a barrel of wine.’ Then Lugaid goes to him and gives him that message. ‘I do not mind if he go,’ said Cú Chulainn. So the two companies joined them. They remained there until night. Cú Chulainn wounded thirty of their warriors with stones from his sling. —Or, as some books tell it, they remained there for twenty nights. ‘Your journeyings will be unpleasant,’ said Fergus. ‘The Ulstermen will recover from their debility and they will crush us into the dust and gravel. We are ill-placed for battle. Come on to Cúil Airthir.’ It happened that Cú Chulainn went that night to speak with the men of Ulster.

‘What tidings have you?’ asked Conchobar. ‘Women are taken captive,’ said he, ‘cattle are driven away, men are slain.’ ‘Who takes them captive? Who drives them away? Who kills them?’ ‘... The man foremost in slaughter and killing, Ailill mac Máta, carries them off and Fergus mac Róich, the brave one, who wields a sword ...’ ‘That is not of much benefit to you,’ said Conchobar. ‘Today we

have been smitten (by the cess) as before.'

Thereafter Cú Chulainn left them. He saw the army going forth.

Ailill spoke: 'Alas! I see a chariot with bright points ... he will slay men in fords and capture cows, and the thirty will act when the army has come from Laigin. Blood will flow from headless necks. They will fall fighting for the cattle of the Ulstermen in the ford.' Cú Chulainn killed thirty of their warriors at Áth Durn. They made no stop then until at nightfall they reached Cúil Airthir. He killed thirty of them at that spot and they pitched their tents there.

Ailill's charioteer, Cuillius, was at the ford early in the morning washing the wheels of the chariot. Cú Chulainn hit him with a stone and killed him. Hence the place-name Áth Cuillne in Cúil Airthir.

They travelled on then and spent the night in Druim Féine in Conaille, as we have related above. Cú Chulainn attacked them there. On each of the three nights that they were there he killed a hundred of them. He let fly at them with his sling from Ochaíne near them.

'Our army will not long survive with Cú Chulainn attacking us in this fashion,' said Ailill. 'Let an offer of terms from us be made to him, namely, that he shall have an extent of Mag nAí equal to Mag Muirthemne, the best chariot in Mag nAí and the equipment of twelve men. Or, if he prefer, this plain in which he was reared and thrice seven cumala. And all that has been destroyed in his household or among his cattle shall be made good, and he shall be compensated for it. And let him take service with me, it is better for him than to be in the service of a princeling.' 'Who will go on that mission?' they asked. 'Mac Roth yonder.'

Mac Roth, the messenger of Ailill and Medb—he it is who could go all round Ireland in one day—went to Delga on that mission, for Fergus believed that Cú Chulainn was in Delga.

'I see a man coming towards us,' said Láeg to Cú Chulainn. 'He has yellow hair. He wears the linen garments of his office. In his hand a great club and at his waist an ivory-hilted sword. He wears a hooded tunic with red insertion.'

'That is one of the king's warriors,' said Cú Chulainn.

Mac Roth asked Láeg whose vassal he was. 'Vassal to yonder man below,' said Láeg. Cú Chulainn was sitting stark-naked in the snow which reached up to his thighs, examining his shirt for lice. So Mac Roth asked Cú Chulainn whose vassal he was. 'Vassal of Conchobor mac Nessa,' said Cú Chulainn. 'Have you no more definite description?' 'That is sufficient,' said Cú Chulainn. 'Where is Cú Chulainn then?' asked Mac Roth. 'What would you say to him?' said Cú Chulainn. So Mac Roth told him the whole message as we have (already) related. 'Even if Cú Chulainn were here near at hand, he would not agree to that. He will not exchange his mother's brother for another king.'

Once again Cú Chulainn was visited (by Mac Roth) and he was told that he would be given the noblest of the (captured) women and the dry kine on condition that he should not ply his sling on them by night even if he killed them by day. 'I will not agree,' said Cú Chulainn. 'If our base-born women are carried off, then our noble women will work at querns, and if our milch cows are taken away we shall be left without milk.' A third time Cú Chulainn was visited by Mac Roth and he was told that he would get the base-born women and the milch cows. 'I will not agree,' said Cú

Chulainn. 'The Ulstermen will take their base born women to bed and base offspring will be born to them, and they will use their milch cows for meat in the winter.' 'Is there anything else then?' asked the messenger. 'There is,' said Cú Chulainn, 'but I shall not tell you. It will be agreed to if some one (else) tell you.' 'I know what it is,' said Fergus. 'The man has arranged that I should make it known. But indeed it is of no advantage to you. These then are the terms: that for a day and a night the cattle shall not be taken away from the ford on which he shall fight in single combat, in the hope that help may come from the Ulstermen to him. And I find it strange,' said Fergus, 'that they are so long in recovering from their debility.' 'It is better for us indeed,' said Ailill, 'to lose one man every day than a hundred men every night.'

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