

The March of the Companies

Now while these prophetic visions were happening the men of Connacht, on the advice of Ailill and Medb and Fergus, decided to send messengers to see if the men of Ulster had reached the plain. Then said Ailill: 'Go, Mac Roth, and find out for us if those men are in this plain of Meath where we now are, I have carried off their cattle and their prey. They will give me battle if they so wish. But if they have not reached the plain, I shall not await them here any longer.' So Mac Roth went to reconnoitre the plain. He returned again to Ailill and Medb and Fergus. The first time Mac Roth gazed into the distance around Slíab Fúait, he saw that all the wild beasts had come out of the wood into the whole plain. 'The second time I looked out over the plain,' said Mac Roth, 'I saw that a dense mist had filled the glens and valleys, so that the hills between them rose up like islands in lakes. Then I saw sparks of fire flashing in that dense mist, and I seemed to see the variegation of every colour in the world. Then I saw the lightning and I heard the din and the thunder, and I felt a great wind which almost blew the hair from my head and threw me on my back, and yet the wind that day was not strong.'

'What was that, Fergus?' said Ailill. 'Identify it.' 'It is not hard for me to recognize what it is,' said Fergus. 'Those are the men of Ulster now recovered from their debility. It was they who rushed into the wood. It was the multitude, the greatness and the violence of the warriors that shook the wood. It is from them the wild beasts fled into the plain. The dense mist you saw which filled the valleys was the breath of those champions which filled the glens and made the hills to rise among them like islands in lakes. The lightning and the flashes of fire and the varied colours that you saw, Mac Roth', said Fergus, 'were the eyes of the warriors flashing in their heads like sparks of fire. The thunder and the din and the great uproar that you heard, that was the whistling of swords and ivory-hilted rapiers, the clatter of weapons, the creaking of chariots, the hoof-beats of the horses, the might of the chariot-fighters, the loud roaring of the warriors, the shouts of the soldiers, the ardour and anger and fierceness of the heroes as they rushed in fury to battle. So great is their anger and excitement that they think they will never arrive.' 'We shall await them,' said Ailill. 'We have warriors to encounter them.' 'You will need them,' said Fergus. 'For not in all Ireland nor in the western world from Greece and Scythia westwards to the Orkneys and the Pillars of Hercules and to Tor Breogain and the Islands of Gades, will anyone be found who can withstand the men of Ulster when they are in their rage and anger.'

After that Mac Roth went once more to survey the march of the men of Ulster and came to their encampment in Slemain Mide. He came back to Ailill and Medb and Fergus, and gave them a detailed description, and describing them he spoke as follows: 'There came on to the hill at Slemain Mide,' said Mac Roth, 'a great company, fierce, powerful, proud. I think that it numbered three thousand. At once they cast off their garments and dug up a turfy mound as a seat for their leader. A warrior, fair, slender, tall, pleasant, led that company. Fairest in form among kings was he. He had yellow hair, curled, well-arranged, trimmed and wavy, which reached to the hollow between his shoulders. He wore a purple mantle wrapped about him with a beautiful brooch of red gold in the mantle over his breast. He had shining, beautiful eyes. His countenance was crimson and comely, narrow below, broad above. He had a forked beard, very curly, golden-yellow. He wore

a white hooded tunic with red insertion. Across his shoulders he had a gold-hilted sword, and he carried a white shield with animal designs in gold. In his hand he held a broad shining spear on a slender shaft. His array was the finest of all the princes of the world, alike as regards followers and fierceness and beauty, equipment and garments, as regards terror and battle and triumph, prowess and fearsomeness and dignity.'

'There came too another company,' said Mac Roth. 'They were almost the same as the other in numbers and arrangement and equipment, in dreadfulness and fearsomeness. A fair heroic warrior in the van of that company. A green cloak wrapped about him and a golden brooch on his shoulder. He had yellow curling hair. He carried an ivory-hilted sword at his left side. He wore a bordered(?) tunic reaching to his knee. He carried a smiting shield with scalloped rim. In his hand a spear like a palace torch with a silver band around it which runs now back from shaft to spearhead, now down again to the grip. That company took up position on the left hand of the leader of the first band. And the position they took was with knee to ground and shield-rim held to chin. It seemed to me that the tall haughty warrior who led that band stammered in his speech.'

'There came yet another band,' said Mac Roth. 'It looked to be more than three thousand. A valiant man, handsome and broad headed, was in the van. He had brown curling hair and a long, forked, fine-haired beard. A dark-grey fringed cloak was wrapped about him, with a leaf-shaped brooch of white gold over his breast. He wore a white hooded tunic reaching to his knee. He carried a variegated shield with animal designs. A sword of bright silver with rounded hilt at his waist, and a five-pronged spear in his hand. He sat down in front of the leader of the first company.'

'Who were those, Fergus?' asked Ailill. 'We know those companies indeed,' said Fergus. 'It was Conchobar, the king of a province in Ireland, who sat down on the mound of turf. It was Sencha mac Ailella, the eloquent speaker of Ulster, who sat down in front of Conchobar. It was Cúscraid Menn Macha, Conchobar's son, who sat at his father's hand. That spear which Cúscraid has is wont to behave thus before victory; at no other time does the ring run (up and down). Those who came there were goodly men to inflict wounds in the attack of every conflict,' added Fergus. 'They will find men to answer them here,' said Medb. 'I swear by my people's god,' said Fergus, 'that until now there has not been born in Ireland an army which could ever check the Ulstermen.'

'There came still another company,' said Mac Roth, 'in number more than three thousand. In the van was a tall, valiant warrior, hideous, fearsome, swarthy and with fiery countenance. He had dark brown hair which lay smooth and fine over his forehead. He carried a curved shield with scalloped rim. In his hand he had a five-pronged spear and with it a pronged javelin. He bore across his back a bloodstained sword. Around him was wrapped a purple mantle with a golden brooch on his shoulder. He wore a white hooded tunic reaching to his knee.' 'Who was that, Fergus?' asked Ailill. 'He who came there is the starting of strife, a warrior for conflict, the doom of enemies, to wit, Eógan mac Durrthacht, King of Farney,' said Fergus.

'Another great, haughty band came on to the hill in Slemain Mide,' said Mac Roth. 'They cast off their garments. In truth they marched valiantly to the hill. Great the horror and vast the fear they brought with them. Terrible the clatter of arms they made as they marched. In the van of the company a man, bigheaded, valiant, heroic, fierce and hideous. He had fine grizzled hair and great yellow eyes. A yellow mantle with a white border wrapped around him. Outside this he carried a smiting shield with scalloped rim. In his hand he held a spear, broad-bladed and longheaded with a

drop of blood on its shaft, and a similar spear with the blood of enemies along its edge. A great smiting sword across his shoulders.' 'Who was that, Fergus?' asked Ailill. 'The warrior who came there shuns not battle nor conflict nor contest. It was Lóegaire Búadach mac Connaid meic Iliach from Immail in the north,' said Fergus.

'Another great company came to the hill in Slemain Mide,' said Mac Roth. 'A handsome warrior, thick-necked, corpulent, led that company. He had black curling hair and he was swarthy-faced with ruddy cheeks. Shining grey eyes in his head. He wore a duncoloured mantle of curly wool in which was a brooch of white silver. He carried a black shield with boss of bronze, and in his hand he held a shimmering perforated(?) spear. He wore a plaited tunic with red insertion. Outside his garments he carried an ivoryhilted sword.' 'Who was that, Fergus?' asked Ailill. 'He who came is the stirring up of strife. He is the stormy wave which overwhelms streamlets. He is the man of three shouts. He is the threatening doom of enemies,' said Fergus. 'That was Munremur mac Gercind from Modorn in the north.'

'There came still another great company to the hill in Slemain Mide,' said Mac Roth. 'A company beautiful and splendid in numbers and arrangement and equipment. Proudly they made for the hill. The clatter of arms they made as they advanced shook the whole army. A handsome and noble warrior led that company. Most beautiful of men was his appearance, alike for hair and eyes and skin, alike for equipment and appearance, and voice and fairness, for dignity, size and honour, for arms and excellence and for garments and weapons and proportion, for worth and wisdom and lineage.' 'That is his (exact) description,' said Fergus. 'That handsome man Feidlimid who came there is the brilliance of fire, the proud hero, the stormy wave which engulfs, the force, which cannot be endured, with victories in other lands after he has slaughtered his enemies (at home). That was Feidlimid Cilair Cétaig.'

'There came still another band to the hill in Slemain Mide,' said Mac Roth, 'no fewer than three thousand in number. In the front of the band a tall, valiant warrior, of dusky complexion, well-proportioned ... He had black curling hair, round eyes, dull and haughty in his head. He was a strong, bull-like, rough man. He wore a grey mantle with a silver pin on his shoulder, and a white hooded tunic was wrapped around him. He carried a sword on his thigh and bore a red shield with a boss of hard silver. In his hand was a broad-bladed spear with three rivets.' 'Who was that, Fergus?' asked Ailill. 'He who came there is the fierce ardour of anger, the one who dares(?) every conflict, who wins every battle. That was Connad mac Mornai from Callann,' said Fergus.

'There came still another company to the hill in Slemain Mide,' said Mac Roth. 'In size it appears an army. Not often is found a hero finer in form and equipment and garments than the leader in the van of that company. He had trimmed auburn hair. His face was comely, ruddy, well-proportioned, a face narrow below and broad above. His lips were red and thin, his teeth shining and pearl-like, his voice loud and clear. He was the most beautiful of the forms of men. He wore a purple mantle wrapped around him with a brooch inlaid with gold over his white breast. On his left side a curved shield with animal emblems in many colours and a boss of silver. In his hand a long spear with shining edge and a sharp, aggressive dagger. On his back a sword with golden hilt. A tunic, hooded and with red insertion, wrapped about him.' 'Who was that, Fergus?' asked Ailill. 'We know him indeed,' said Fergus. 'He who came there is indeed a worthy adversary, he is the dividing of a combat, he is the fierce ardour of a blood-hound. That was Rochaid mac Faithemain from Brig Dumae, your son-in-law, he who wedded your daughter Finnabair.'

‘There came still another company to the hill in Slemain Mide,’ said Mac Roth. ‘A warrior brawny-legged, thick-thighed and tall in the forefront of that company. Each of his limbs was almost as thick as a man. In truth he was every inch a man,’ said he. ‘He had black hair and a ruddy, scarred countenance. A noble eye of many colours in his head. A splendid, eager man was he thus with fearsomeness and horror. He had wonderful equipment in clothes and weapons and raiment and splendour and attire ... with the triumphant exploits of a warrior, with splendid deeds, with eager pride, avoiding equal combat to vanquish overwhelming numbers, with fierce anger towards enemies, attacking many enemy lands without protection (?). In truth the company came boldly to Slemain Mide.’ ‘He had(?) valour and prowess indeed,’ said Fergus, ‘he had(?) hot-bloodedness and violence, strength and dignity in the armies and troops. It was my own foster-brother, Fergus mac Leiti, King of Líne, the point of perfection in battle in the north of Ireland.’

‘There came another great, haughty company to the hill in Slemain Mide,’ said Mac Roth. ‘They wore wonderful garments. A handsome, noble warrior in the van. He had every endowment of beauty in hair and eyes and fairness, in size and demeanour and proportion. He carried a shield made of five concentric circles of gold. He wore a green mantle wrapped about him with a golden brooch in the mantle above his shoulder, and a white hooded tunic. A spear like the turret of a royal palace in his hand, a gold-hilted sword across his shoulders.’ ‘Fierce is the anger of the victorious hero who came there,’ said Fergus. ‘That was Amorgene mac Eccetsalaig from Búas in the north.’

‘There came another company on to the hill in Slemain Mide,’ said Mac Roth, ‘in size like the overwhelming sea, in brightness like fire, in fierceness like a lion, in numbers a battalion, in greatness like a cliff, in strength like a rock, in combativeness like doom, in violence like thunder. A coarse-visaged, fearsome warrior in the forefront of that company, big-bellied, thick-lipped, big-nosed, redlimbed, with coarse grizzled hair. He wore a striped cloak pinned with an iron stake, and carried a curved shield with scalloped rim. He wore a rough plaited tunic and in his hand he held a great grey spear with thirty rivets. Across his shoulders he carried a sword tempered seven times by fire. All the army rose up to meet him and the host was thrown into confusion as he went towards the hill.’

‘He who came there is the leader of battle,’ said Fergus. ‘He is a worthy adversary. He is a hero in prowess. He is (like) a stormy wave which overwhelms. He is (like) the sea pouring across boundaries. That was Celtchair mac Cuithechair from Dún Lethglaise in the north.’

‘There came still another company to the hill in Slemain Mide,’ said Mac Roth. ‘A warrior, altogether fair led them. Fair in all points was he, hair and eyebrows and beard and clothing. He carried a shield with golden boss and a sword with ivory hilt. In his hand he had a great perforated spear. Bravely did the troop advance.’ ‘Splendid indeed is the strong-smiting hero who came there,’ said Fergus, ‘the valiant warrior who performs great deeds against enemies and destroys men! That was Feradach Find Fechnach from Nemed Sléibe Fúait in the north.’ ‘There came still another company to the hill in Slemain Mide,’ said Mac Roth. ‘A fearsome warrior in front of that company, bigbellied, thick-lipped. His lips were as thick as those of a horse. He had brown curling hair, bright cheeks too, and a broad head and long arms. A black swinging mantle around him with a round brooch of bronze over his shoulder. A grey shield across his left side. A great spear with neck-rings in his right hand, a long sword across his shoulders.’ ‘He who came is (like) a lion fiercely combative with bloodstained paws,’ said Fergus. ‘He is the warlike, valorous hero of heroic deeds. He is (like) a fiery, unendurable blast of heat across the land. That was Eirрге Echbél from Brí Eirрге

in the north,' said Fergus.

'There came still another company to the hill in Slemain Mide,' said Mac Roth, 'led by two fair, youthful warriors, both alike. They had yellow hair. They carried two white shields with animal designs in silver. A slight difference of age between them. Together they raised and set down their feet; it is not their wont for one to lift his foot before the other.' 'Who are those, Fergus?' asked Ailill. 'Those are two warriors, two bright flames, two points of perfection in battle, two heroes, two combative chiefs, two dragons, two fiery ones, two champions, two fighters, two scions, two bold ones, the two beloved by the Ulstermen around their king. They are Fiachna and Fíacha, two sons of Conchobar mac Nesa, the two loved ones of the north of Ireland.'

'There came still another company to the hill in Slemain Mide,' said Mac Roth. 'At their head three noble, fiery swarthy-faced warriors. They had three heads of long yellow hair. Three mantles of the same colour wrapped about them with three golden brooches above their shoulders. They wore three ... tunics with red insertion. They carried three similar shields, with golden-hilted swords across their shoulders and broad shining spears in their right hands. There was a slight difference of age between them.' 'Those are the three great champions of Cuib, the three valorous ones of Midlúachair, the three chiefs of Roth, the three veterans of Airther Fúata;' said Fergus. 'Those are the three sons of Fiachna who have come in pursuit of the Bull, to wit, Rus and Dáire and Imchad,' said Fergus.

'There came still another company to the hill in Slemain Mide,' said Mac Roth. 'A fine and fierce man in the forefront. Red eyes full of courage in his head. A vari-coloured mantle around him in which was a circular brooch of silver. He carried a grey shield on his left side, a sword with silver hilt on his thigh, and in his avenging right hand a splendid spear with sharp points (?). He wore a white hooded tunic reaching to his knee. Around him was a company bloodstained and wounded, and he too was covered with blood and wounds.' 'That,' said Fergus, 'is the bold and ruthless one. He is the daring one (?) who rends. He is the boar(?) of battle. He is the mad bull. He is the victorious one from Baile, the valorous one from Bernas, the champion of Colptha, the protector of the north of Ireland, namely, Menn mac Sálchada from Coranna. It is to take vengeance on you for their wounds that that man has come.'

'There came still another company to the hill in Slemain Mide,' said Mac Roth, 'and they were heroic and eager. At their head a tall, sallow-faced, long-cheeked warrior. He had brown, bushy hair. He wore a red mantle of fine wool and a golden brooch in the mantle over his shoulder. He wore a fine tunic. On his left side he had a splendid sword with bright silver hilt. He carried a red shield and in his hand he held a broad shining spear on a beautiful shaft (?) of ash.' 'It was the man of three stout blows who came there,' said Fergus, 'the man of three roads, the man of three paths, the man of three highways, the man of three triumphs, the man of three battle-cries who is victorious over foes in other lands. That was Fergna mae Findchoíme from Coronn.'

'There came still another company to the hill in Slemain Mide,' said Mac Roth. 'It appeared greater than three thousand in number. A handsome, fair-breasted warrior in the van of that company. He was like Ailill yonder in size and dignity, in dress and equipment. He wore a golden diadem on his head. A beautiful cloak was wrapped around him with a golden brooch in the cloak over his breast. He wore a tunic with red insertion. He carried a smiting shield with golden rims and in his hand a spear like the turret of a palace. Across his shoulders he had a goldhilted sword.' 'The man who

came there is (like) the sea inundating rivers,' said Fergus. 'It is the fierce ardour of a warrior. His rage against his foes cannot be borne. That was Furbaide Fer Benn.'

'There came still another company to the hill in Slemain Mide, heroic, countless in number,' said Mac Roth. 'They wore strange garments unlike those of the other companies. Glorious were their weapons and their equipment and their raiment as they came. In this company was a great, proud army led by a little freckled lad. His form was the most beautiful of all men's forms. In his hand a white-bosomed, gold-studded shield with rim of gold. He held a light sharp spear which shimmered. He was wrapped in a purple, fringed mantle, with a silver brooch in the mantle over his breast. He wore a white hooded tunic with red insertion and carried outside his garments a golden-hilted sword.' Thereupon Fergus fell silent.

'Indeed I know not,' said Fergus, 'anyone like that little lad among the Ulstermen, but in fact I should think it likely that those might be the men of Tara with the fine, noble lad who is Erc, the son of Cairpre Nia Fer and of Conchobar's daughter ... Without asking permission of his father, that boy has come to the assistance of his grandfather. It is because of that lad that you will be defeated in battle. He will experience neither dread nor fear as he makes for you in the middle of your own army. Bravely will the warriors of Ulster roar as they hew down the army before them, rushing to rescue their beloved lad. They will all feel the ties of kinship when they see the boy in that great conflict. Like the baying of a blood-hound will be heard the sound of Conchobar's sword as he comes to the boy's rescue. Cú Chulainn will cast up three ramparts of (dead) men around the battle as he rushes towards that little lad. Mindful of their kinship with the boy, the warriors of Ulster will attack the vast (enemy) host.' 'I find it tedious,' said Mac Roth, 'to recount all that I saw, but I have come at any rate to bring you tidings.' 'You have (indeed) brought (tidings),' said Fergus. 'Conall Cernach, however, did not come with his great company,' said Mac Roth, 'nor did the three sons of Conchobar with their three divisions. Nor did Cú Chulainn come for he has been wounded fighting against odds. Except only that a single chariot-warrior who came there is probably he.'

'The chariot was drawn by two strong-haunched steeds, with flowing tail and broad hoofs, broad in back and thin in flank, with head held high and arched neck, with thin mouth and flaring nostrils. Two black, firm(?) wheels, smooth easily-running rims, framework high and creaking and a green ornamented awning. There was a warrior, broad, ruddy-faced, in that chariot. He had a curly jet-black head of hair reaching to the hollow between his shoulders. He wore a red girded mantle. In each hand he carried four daggers and at his left side a gold-hilted sword. He had both shield and spear. He wore twenty-four shirts tied with cords and ropes. In front of him was a charioteer whose back was turned to the horses and who held the reins between his fingers in front of him. A chess-board spread between the two, half the chessmen of yellow gold, the other half of white gold. His thighs rested on another boardgame, a búanbach. He cast nine feats aloft (?).' 'Who were those, Fergus?' asked Ailill. 'Easy to tell,' said Fergus. 'Those were Cú Chulainn the son of Súaltaim from the fairy mounds and Lóeg mac Riagabra, Cú Chulainn's charioteer.' 'Many hundreds indeed and many thousands,' said Mac Roth, 'came to this encampment of the Ulstermen. Many heroes and champions and warriors raced their horses to the assembly. Many more companies who had not arrived at the encampment when I (first) came were coming there now. But indeed wherever my eye fell on hill or height in all the space visible to me between Áth Fhir Diad and Slemain Mide, I saw nothing save men and horses.'

'It was indeed a brave(?) company that you saw,' said Fergus. Then Conchobar and his army went

and made camp beside the others. He asked Ailill for a truce until sunrise on the morrow, and Ailill guaranteed it on behalf of the men of Ireland and the exiled Ulstermen while Conchobar guaranteed it for the men, of Ulster. The men of Ireland's tents were pitched, and before sunset there was scarcely a bare patch of earth between them and the encampment of the Ulstermen. Then the Mórrígan spoke in the dusk between the two encampments, saying 'Ravens gnaw the necks of men. Blood flows. Battle is fought ... Hail to the men of Ulster! Woe to the Érainn! Woe to the men of Ulster! Hail to the Érainn!' These were the words she whispered to the Érainn : 'Woe to the men of Ulster for they have not won(?) the battle.'

Cú Chulainn was beside them in Fedain Collna. Food was brought to him from the hospitallers that night. They used to go and converse with him by day. He killed no one north of Áth Fhir Diad. 'See a little flock coming from the western encampment to the encampment in the east,' said the charioteer to Cú Chulainn, 'and see a band of youths come to meet them.' 'Those youths will meet and the flock will go across the plain. He who will not accept quarter will go to help the youths.' It happened afterwards as Cú Chulainn had said. 'How do the youth of Ulster fight the battle?' 'Bravely,' said the charioteer. 'It were right that they should fall in rescuing their flock,' said Cú Chulainn. 'And now?' 'The beardless young warriors are fighting now,' said the charioteer. 'Has a bright cloud come across the sun yet?' asked Cú Chulainn. 'No indeed,' said the charioteer. 'Alas that I have not the strength to go to them!' said Cú Chulainn. 'There is fighting here already today,' said the charioteer at sunrise. 'It is proud folk who are now fighting the battle, but there are no leaders for they are still asleep.' It was at sunrise that Fachtna spoke. —Or (according to another account) Conchobar chanted these words in his trance: 'Arise, O valiant kings of Macha, generous people! Sharpen your swords. Fight the battle. Dig a trench. Strike your shields. Men's hands are weary. Their flocks are loud voiced ... They all fight with one another ... Sorrow will fill the heart of their queen so that the grassy sod on which they might strike, and on which they might go should be covered with blood. Arise, kings of Macha.'

'Who has chanted these words?' asked they all. 'Conchobar mac Nesa,' they answered. 'Or Fachtna chanted them. —Sleep on, sleep on but set your sentinels.' Láegaire Búadach was heard speaking: 'Arise, kings of Macha. Strike your kine with the sword. Protect your booty ... He will smite all the world on the plain of Gáirech.'

'Who has chanted that?' they all asked. 'Láegaire Búadach mac Connaid Buidi meic Iliach. Sleep on, sleep on but set your sentinels.' 'Wait on a while,' said Conchobar, 'until the sun has risen well above the glens and mounds of Ireland.' When Cú Chulainn saw the chiefs from the east putting on their diadems and coming to the rescue of the troops, he told his charioteer to arouse the men of Ulster.

The charioteer spoke. —Or else it was the poet Amargin mac Eicit who spoke: 'Arise, valiant kings of Macha! A generous people. The wargoddess desires the kine of Immail. The blood from men's hearts spreads around ... None like Cú Chulainn was found. Arise!' 'I have aroused them,' said the charioteer. 'They have come into battle stark-naked except for their weapons. He whose tent-opening faces east, has (in his eagerness) come out westwards through the tent.' 'That is speedy help in time of need,' said Cú Chulainn.

The doings of the men of Ulster are not described for a while. But as for the men of Ireland, Badb and Bé Néit and Némain shrieked above them that night in Gáirech and Irgáirech so that a hundred of their warriors died of terror. That was not the most peaceful night for them.

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