

The Story in Due Order

When they had come on the first stage of their journey from Crúachain to Cúil Silinne, the site of Loch Cairrcín today, Medb told her charioteer to harness her nine chariots

She was always accompanied by nine chariots, so that the dust raised by the great army should not soil her

for her that she might drive around the encampment and see who among them was reluctant and who was glad to go on the hosting. Now his tent was pitched for Ailill and his equipment was placed therein, both beds and blankets. Fergus mac Róich was next to Ailill in his tent. Cormac Conn Longas, son of Conchobor, was next to him. Then came Conall Cernach, with Fíacha mac Fir Fhebe, the son of Conchobor's daughter, beside him. Medb, the daughter of Eochu Feidlech was on the other side of Ailill, with Finnabair, the daughter of Ailill and Medb, beside her and Flidais next to Finnabair. This was not counting the servants and attendants.

After she had surveyed the host, Medb came back and said that it would be vain for the rest to go on that expedition if the division of the Gailiόin went also. 'Why do you belittle the men?' asked Ailill. 'I am not belittling them,' said Medb. 'They are splendid warriors. When the others were making their shelters, the Gailiόin had already finished thatching their shelters and cooking their food. When the rest were eating, they had already finished their meal and their harpers were playing to them. So it is useless for them to go on this expedition,' said Medb, 'for it is they who will take credit for the victory of the army.' 'Yet it is for us they fight,' said Ailill. 'They shall not go with us,' said Medb. 'Let them stay here then,' said Ailill. 'Indeed they shall not,' said Medb. 'They will overpower us when we have come back and seize our land.' 'Well then, what shall be done with them,' asked Ailill, 'since neither their staying nor their going pleases you?' 'Kill them!' said Medb.

'I shall not deny that is a woman's counsel,' said Ailill. 'You speak foolishly,' said Fergus in a low voice. 'It shall not happen unless we are all killed, for they are allies of us Ulstermen.'

'Nevertheless,' said Medb, 'we could do it. For I have here with me my own household retinue numbering two divisions, and the seven Maines are here, my seven sons, with seven divisions. Their luck can protect them,' said she. 'Their names are Maine Máthramail, Maine Aithremail, Maine Mórgor, Maine Mingor, Maine Mo Epir, who is also called Maine Milscothach, Maine Andóe and Maine Cotageib Uile—he it is who has inherited the appearance of his mother and his father and the dignity of them both '

'That will not be,' said Fergus, 'There are here seven kings from Munster, allies of us Ulstermen, and a division with each king. I shall give you battle in the middle of the encampment where we now are, supported by those seven divisions, by my own division and by the division of the Gailiόin. But I shall not argue the point,' said Fergus. 'We shall arrange the warriors of the Gailiόin so that they shall not prevail over the rest of the army. Seventeen divisions,' said Fergus, 'is the number here in our encampment, not counting the camp-followers and our boys and our women- folk—for each chief here in Medb's company has brought his wife. The eighteenth division is that of the

Gailíoin. Let them be distributed throughout all the host.' 'I care not,' said Medb, 'provided that they do not remain in the close battle array in which they now are.' This then was done; the Gailíoin were distributed among the host. Next morning they set out for Móin Choltna. There they met with eight score deer in a single herd. They encircled them and killed them. Wherever there was a man of the Gailíoin, it was he who got a deer, for the rest of the host got only five of the deer. They came on then to Mag Trego and there they encamped and prepared food for themselves.

According to one version it was then that Dubthach chanted this lay:

1. Admit that hitherto ye have not heard nor listened to the trance-speech of Dubthach. A fierce hosting lies before you, contending for Findbenn, the bull of Ailill's wife.
2. There will come a leader of armies who will try to recover the cattle of Murthemne. Because of the companionship of the two swineherds, ravens on the battle-field will drink men's blood.
3. The watchful river Crann will offer them resistance and will not let them cross into Murthemne until the work of warriors is finished in the mountain north of Ochaíne.
4. 'Quickly,' said Ailill to Cormac, 'come and hold back your son.' None comes from the plains where the cattle graze but is affrighted(?) by the din of the army.
5. In due course a battle will be fought here with Medb and a third of the army. Men's corpses will then lie here if the distorted one come to you.

Thereupon the Némain, that is, the war-goddess, attacked them. That was not the quietest of nights for them with the trance-speech of the boorish Dubthach as he slept. The hosts rose up at once and the army was thrown into confusion until Medb came and quelled them.

Then, after the army had been led astray across bogs and streams, they went and spent the night in Granard in northern Tethba. For the sake of kinship Fergus sent a warning to the Ulstermen who were still suffering from their debility, all except Cú Chulainn and his father Súaltaim. When the warning message had come from Fergus, Cú Chulainn and his father went as far as Irard Cuillenn, that is, Crossa Cail, there to watch for the enemy host. 'I have a premonition that the host will arrive tonight,' said Cú Chulainn to his father. 'Take a warning from us to the men of Ulster. I must go to Feidelm Noíchride'—he meant to tryst with her handmaiden who was secretly Cú Chulainn's concubine—'to fulfil my own pledge which I gave her.' Then before he went, he twisted a withe into a ring and wrote an ogam inscription on its peg, and cast it over the top of a pillar-stone. Then Fergus was given the task of leading the army along the path. He went far astray to the south to give the Ulstermen time to complete the mustering of their army. This he did out of affection for his own kin.

Ailill and Medb noticed this, and Medb said:

1. O Fergus, this is strange. What manner of path do we travel? We go astray to south and to north, past every strange district.

2. Ailill of Mag Aí with his army fears that you will betray him. Until now he heeded not where the path led.
3. If you feel the pull of kinship, do not lead horses any longer. Perhaps someone else may be found to guide us on our way.

Fergus answered:

1. O Medb, what perturbs you? This is not anything resembling treachery. O woman, the land across which I shall lead you belongs to the men of Ulster.
2. Not with intent to harm the hosting do I go in turn along each devious road, but that I may avoid the great one who guards Mag Murthemne.
3. It is not to save my mind from weariness that I go thus aside from the path, but I am trying to avoid meeting Cú Chulainn mac Súaltainn even at a later time.

They went on then to Irard Cuilenn, today called Crossa Caíl. The four sons of Irard mac Anchinnel

or the four sons of Nera mac Núada meic Taccain, as is found in other versions

, Eirr and Indell with Foich and Fochlam their two charioteers, were those who always preceded the hosts to protect their brooches and their rugs and their mantles that the dust raised by the army might not soil them. These men found the withe Cú Chulainn had cast and they noticed the grazing made by the horses. For Súaltainn's two horses had cropped the grass to its roots in the earth while Cú Chulainn's horses had licked the soil down to the bedrock beneath the grass. Then these four men sat still till the host came up, and their musicians played to them. They handed the withe to Fergus mac Róich; he read out the ogam inscription that was on it.

When Medb arrived she asked: 'Why are you waiting here?' 'We are waiting,' said Fergus, 'because of yonder withe. There is on its peg an ogam inscription which reads: 'Let none go past till there be found a man to throw a withe made of one branch as it is in the same way with one hand. But I except my friend Fergus.' In truth,' said Fergus, 'it is Cú Chulainn who has cast it and it is his horses which grazed this plain.' And he put the withe in the druid's hand and chanted this song:

1. Here is a withe. What is its message for us? What is its secret meaning? And how many put it there? Was it few or many?
2. Will it bring ruin on the army if they go past it? Find out, O ye druids, why the withe was left there.

A druid answered:

1. A hero cast it there, the swift cutting(?) of a hero, a source of perplexity to warriors, containment of chiefs with their followers. One man cast it there with one hand.
2. Does not the king's army obey him unless they have broken faith? I know no reason why the withe was cast there save that one of you should cast a withe even as one man did.

Then said Fergus to them 'If ye flout this withe or if ye go past it, though it be in a man's possession or in a locked house, it will go after the man who wrote the ogam inscription, and he will kill one of you before morning unless one of you cast a withe in like manner.' 'We do not wish, however, that any one of us should be killed straight away,' said Ailill. 'Let us go to the end of yon great wood to the south of us, Fid Dúin. We shall go no farther than that.' The army then hewed down the wood to make a path for the chariots. That place is called Slechta. It is there that the Partraige (now) live.

—According to others, however, it was here that the dialogue between Medb and Feidelm Banfháith as we have related above took place, and it was after the answer Feidelm made to Medb that the wood was cut down. Thus: 'Look for me,' said Medb, '(to see) how will my expedition fare.' 'It is hard for me,' said the maiden. 'The wood prevents me from seeing them properly.' 'That can be arranged,' said Medb. 'We shall cut down the wood.' it was done, and Slechta is the name of that place.—

They spent the night then in Cúil Sibrille, that is, Cennannas. Heavy snow fell on them, reaching to the girdles of the men and the wheels of the chariots. They rose early on the morrow. That had not been a restful night for them because of the snow, nor had they prepared food for themselves that night. But Cú Chulainn did not come early from his tryst; he remained until he had washed and bathed. Then he came on to the track of the army. 'Would that we had not gone thither nor betrayed the men of Ulster!' cried Cú Chulainn. 'We have let the enemy host come upon them unawares. Make an estimate of the host for us,' said Cú Chulainn to Lóg, 'that we may know their number.' Lóg did so and said to Cú Chulainn 'I am confused. I cannot estimate exactly.' 'If only I come, I shall not see them confusedly,' said Cú Chulainn. 'Get out of the chariot,' said Lóg. Cú Chulainn got out of the chariot and for a long time he estimated the number of the host. 'Even you,' said Lóg, 'do not find it easy.' 'It is easier for me, however, than for you. For I have three gifts, namely, the gift of sight, the gift of understanding, the gift of reckoning. I have reckoned up the numbers here.

This is one of the three cleverest yet most difficult reckonings ever made in Ireland, the three being this reckoning of the men of Ireland made by Cú Chulainn in the Táin, the reckoning made by Lug of the Fomorians in the battle of Mag Tuired and the reckoning of the army in Bruiden Da Derga made by Ingcél, [marginal note]

There are here in number eighteen divisions, but the eighteenth division, that is, the division of the Gailiúin, has been distributed among the whole host so that it is confusing to count them.'

Then Cú Chulainn went round the host until he was at Áth nGrencha. There he cut down a forked branch with one blow of his sword and fixed it in the middle of the stream so that a chariot could not pass it on this side or on that. While he was thus engaged Eirr and Indell with their two charioteers, Fóich and Fochlam, came up with him. He cut off their four heads and impaled them on

the four prongs of the forked branch. Hence the name Áth nGabla.

that is, at the place called Beloch Caille Móire to the north of Cnogba, [marginal note]

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Then the horses of the four men went towards the host, with their bloodstained trappings. The host thought that there had been a battle in the ford before them. A band went from them to survey the ford; they saw only the track of one chariot and the forked branch with the four heads and an ogam inscription on its side. At that point the whole army arrived.

‘Are yonder heads those of some of our people?’ asked Medb. ‘They are of our people and of our choice men,’ said Ailill. One of them read aloud the ogam inscription that was on the side of the forked branch: ‘One man has cast this forked branch with one hand, and ye shall not go past it unless one of you, but not Fergus, has cast it with one hand.’ ‘It is marvellous,’ said Ailill, ‘how quickly the four were slain.’ ‘Do not think that marvellous,’ said Fergus, ‘but rather the cutting of the forked branch from its root with one blow, and if its end shows one cutting, it is all the greater achievement, and (it is marvellous) that it should have been driven in in this manner, for no hole was dug for it but it was cast from the back of a chariot with one hand.’ ‘Deliver us in this difficulty, Fergus,’ said Medb. ‘Give me a chariot then,’ said Fergus, ‘that I may pull the branch out so that it may be seen if its end shows one cutting.’ Then Fergus smashed fourteen of their chariots but from his own chariot he drew the forked branch out of the ground and he saw that its end was one cutting.

‘We must take heed of the nature of the people to whom we are going,’ said Ailill. ‘Let all of you prepare food. Last night was not restful for you with the snow. And let some of the adventures and stories of the people to whom we go be related to us.’ So then they were told the adventures of Cú Chulainn.

Ailill asked ‘Is it Conchobar who has done this?’ ‘It is not indeed,’ said Fergus. ‘He would not have come to the marches unless he was accompanied by a number sufficient to give battle.’ ‘Was it Celtchar mac Uthidir?’ ‘It was not indeed,’ said Fergus. ‘He would not have come to the marches without a number sufficient to give battle around him.’ ‘Was it Eógan mac Durthacht?’ ‘It was not indeed,’ said Fergus. ‘He would not have come past the marches without thirty scythed chariots. The man who would have done the deed is Cú Chulainn,’ said Fergus. ‘It is he who would have cut down the tree with one blow from its root, and he who would have killed the four men as quickly as they were killed, and he who would have come to the border accompanied (only) by his charioteer.’

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