

Cuchulain of Muirthemne :  
The story of the men of The Red Branch of Ulster arranged and put into English by  
Lady Gregory with a preface by W. B. Yeats

1911

“ Bheirim an mhóid do bheir mo mhuinntir,” ar Cúchulain, “ go mbéidh trácht agus iomrádh fós ar mo ghníomharthaibh-se ameach na n-árd-ghníomh do rinne na gaisgidhigh is tréine.”

“ I swear by the oath of my people,” said Cuchulain, “ I will make my doings be spoken of among the great doings of heroes in their strength.”

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*Dedication of The Irish Edition to The People of Kiltartan*

My Dear Friends,

When I began to gather these stories together, it is of you I was thinking, that you would like to have them and to be reading them. For although you have not to go far to get stories of Finn and Goll and Oisín from any old person in the place, there is very little of the history of Cuchulain and his friends left in the memory of the people, but only that they were brave men and good fighters, and that Deirdre was beautiful.

When I went looking for the stories in the old writings, I found that the Irish in them is too hard for any person to read that has not made a long study of it. Some scholars have worked well at them, Irishmen and Germans and Frenchmen, but they have printed them in the old cramped Irish, with translations into German or French or English, and these are not easy for you to get, or to understand, and the stories themselves are confused, every one giving a different account from the others in some small thing, the way there is not much pleasure in reading them. It is what I have tried to do, to take the best of the stories, or what ever parts of each will fit best to one another, and in that way to give a fair account of Cuchulain's life and death. I left out a good deal I thought you would not care about for one reason or another, but I put in nothing of my own that could be helped, only a sentence or so now and again to link the different parts together. I have told the whole story in plain and simple words, in the same way my old nurse Mary Sheridan used to be telling stories from the Irish long ago, and I a child at Roxborough.

And indeed if there was more respect for Irish things among the learned men that live in the college at Dublin, where so many of these old writings are stored, this work would not have been left to a woman of the house, that has to be minding the place, and listening to complaints, and dividing her share of food

My friend and your friend the *Craoibhin Aoibhin* has put Irish of to-day on some of these stories that I have set in order, for I am sure you will like to have the history of the heroes of Ireland told in the language of Ireland. And I am very glad to have something that is worth offering you, for you have been very kind to me ever since I came over to you from Kilchriest, two-and -twenty years ago.

AUGUSTA GREGORY.

March 1902.

## PREFACE

### I

I THINK this book is the best that has come out of Ireland in my time. Perhaps I should say that it is the best book that has ever come out of Ireland ; for the stories which it tells are a chief part of Ireland's gift to the imagination of the world—and it tells them perfectly for the first time. Translators from the Irish have hitherto retold one story or the other from some one version, and not often with any fine understanding of English, of those changes of rhythm for instance that are changes of the sense. They have translated the best and fullest manuscripts they knew, as accurately as they could, and that is all we have the right to expect from the first translators of a difficult and old literature. But few of the stories really begin to exist as great works of imagination until somebody has taken the best bits out of many manuscripts. Sometimes, as in Lady Gregory's version of Deirdre, a dozen manuscripts have to give their best before the beads are ready for the necklace. It has been as necessary also to leave out as to add, for generations of copyists, who had often but little sympathy with the stories they copied, have mixed versions together in a clumsy fashion, often repeating one incident several times, and every century has ornamented what was once a simple story with its own often extravagant ornament. One does not perhaps exaggerate when one says that no story has come down to us in the form it had when the story-teller told it in the winter evenings. Lady Gregory has done her work of compression and selection at once so firmly and so reverently that I cannot believe that anybody, except now and then for a scientific purpose, will need another text than this, or than the version of it the Gaelic League is about to publish in Modern Irish. When she has added her translations from other cycles, she will have given Ireland its Mabinogion, its Morte D'Arthur, its Nibelungenlied. She has already put a great mass of stories, in which the ancient heart of Ireland still lives, into a shape at once harmonious and characteristic ; and without writing more than a very few sentences of her own to link together incidents or thoughts taken from different manuscripts, without adding more indeed than the story-teller must often have added to amend the hesitation of a moment Perhaps more than all she had discovered a fitting dialect to tell them in. Some years ago I wrote some stories of mediæval Irish life, and as I wrote I was sometimes made wretched by the thought that I knew of no kind of English that fitted them as the language of Morris' prose stories—the most beautiful language I had ever read—fitted his journeys to woods and wells beyond the world. I knew of no language to write about Ireland in but raw modern English ; but now Lady Gregory has discovered a speech as beautiful as that of Morris, and a living speech into the bargain. As she moved about among her people she learned to love the beautiful speech of those who think in Irish, and to understand that it is as true a dialect of English as the dialect that Burns wrote in. It is some hundreds of years old, and age gives a language authority. One finds in it the vocabulary of the translators of the Bible, joined to an idiom which makes it tender, compassionate, and complaisant, like the Irish language itself. It is certainly well suited to clothe a literature which never ceased to be folk-lore even when it was recited in the Courts of Kings.

### II

Lady Gregory could with less trouble have made a book that would have better pleased the hasty reader. She could have plucked away details, smoothed out characteristics till she had left nothing but the bare stories ; but a book of that kind would never have called up the past, or stirred the imagination of a painter or a poet, and would be as little thought of in a few years as if it had been a popular novel.

The abundance of what may seem at first irrelevant invention in a story like the death of Conaire, is essential if we are to recall a time when people were in love with a story, and gave themselves up to imagination as if to a lover. One may think there are too many lyrical outbursts, or too many enigmatical symbols here and there in some other story, but delight will always overtake one in the end. One comes to accept without reserve an art that is half epical, half lyrical, like that of the historical parts of the Bible, the art of a time when perhaps men passed more readily than they do now from one mood to another, and found it harder than we do to keep to the mood in which one tots up figures or banters a friend.

### III

The Church when it was most powerful created an imaginative unity, for it taught learned and unlearned to climb, as it were, to the great moral realities through hierarchies of Cherubim and Seraphim, through clouds of Saints and Angels who had all their precise duties and privileges. The story-tellers of Ireland, perhaps of every primitive country, created a like unity, only it was to the great aesthetic realities that they taught people to climb. They created for learned and unlearned alike, a communion of heroes, a cloud of stalwart witnesses ; but because they were as much excited as a monk over his prayers, they did not think sufficiently about the shape of the poem and the story. One has to get a little weary or a little distrustful of one's subject, perhaps, before one can lie awake thinking how one will make the most of it. They were more anxious to describe energetic characters, and to invent beautiful stories, than to express themselves with perfect dramatic logic or in perfectly-ordered words. They shared their characters and their stories, their very images, with one another, and handed them down from generation to generation ; for nobody, even when he had added some new trait, or some new incident, thought of claiming for himself what so obviously lived its own merry or mournful life. The wood-carver who first put a sword into St Michael's hand would have as soon claimed as his own a thought which was perhaps put into his mind by St Michael himself. The Irish poets had also, it may be, what seemed a supernatural sanction, for a chief poet had to understand not only innumerable kinds of poetry, but how to keep himself for nine days in a trance. They certainly believed in the historical reality of even their wildest imaginations. And so soon as Christianity made their hearers desire a chronology that would run side by side with that of the Bible, they delighted in arranging their Kings and Queens, the shadows of forgotten mythologies, in long lines that ascended to Adam and his Garden. Those who listened to them must have felt as if the living were like rabbits digging their burrows under walls that had been built by Gods and Giants, or like swallows building their nests in the stone mouths of immense images, carved by nobody knows who. It is no wonder that one sometimes hears about men who saw in a vision ivy-leaves that were greater than shields, and blackbirds whose thighs were like the thighs of oxen. The fruit of all those stories, unless indeed the finest activities of the mind are but a pastime, is the quick intelligence, the abundant imagination, the courtly manners of the Irish country people.

### IV

William Morris came to Dublin when I was a boy, and I had some talk with him about these old stories. He had intended to lecture upon them, but "the ladies and gentlemen"—he put a communistic fervour of hatred into the phrase—knew nothing about them. He spoke of the Irish account of the battle of Clontarf, and of the Norse account, and said, that one saw the Norse and Irish tempers in the two accounts. The Norseman was interested in the way things are done, but the Irishman turned aside, evidently well pleased to be out of so dull a business, to describe beautiful supernatural events. He was thinking, I suppose, of the young man who came from Aoibhell of the Grey Rock, giving up immortal love and youth, that he might fight and die by Murrugh's side. He said that the Norseman had the dramatic temper, and the

Irishman had the lyrical. I think I should have said epical and romantic rather than dramatic and lyrical, but his words, which have so much greater authority than mine, mark the distinction very well, and not only between Irish and Norse, but between Irish and other un-Celtic literatures. The Irish story-teller could not interest himself with an unbroken interest in the way men like himself burned a house, or won wives no more wonderful than themselves. His mind constantly escaped out of daily circumstance, as a bough that has been held down by a weak hand suddenly straightens itself out. His imagination was always run-ning off to Tir-nan-oge, to the Land of Promise, which is as near to the country-people of to-day, as it was to Cuchulain and his companions. His belief in its nearness, cherished in its turn the lyrical temper, which is always athirst for an emotion, a beauty which cannot be found in its perfection upon earth, or only for a moment. His imagination, which had not been able to believe in Cuchulain's greatness, until it had brought the Great Queen, the red eye-browed goddess to woo him upon the battlefield, could not be satisfied with a friendship less romantic and lyrical than that of Cuchulain and Ferdiad, who kissed one another after the day's fighting, or with a love less romantic and lyrical than that of Baile and Aillinn, who died at the report of one another's deaths, and married in Tir-nan-oge. His art, too, is often at its greatest when it is most extravagant, for he only feels himself among solid things, among things with fixed laws and satisfying purposes, when he has reshaped the world according to his heart's desire. He understands as well as Blake that the ruins of time build mansions in eternity, and he never allows anything, that we can see and handle, to remain long un-changed. The characters must remain the same, but the strength of Fergus may change so greatly, that he, who a moment before was merely a strong man among many, becomes the master of Three Blows that would destroy an army, did they not cut off the heads of three little hills instead, and his sword, which a fool had been able to steal out of its sheath, has of a sudden the likeness of a rainbow. A wandering lyric moon must knead and kindle per-petually that moving world of cloaks made out of the fleeces of Manannan ; of armed men who change themselves into sea-birds ; of goddesses who become crows ; of trees that bare fruit and flower at the same time. The great emotions of love, terror, and friendship must alone remain untroubled by the moon in that world, which is still the world of the Irish country-people, who do not open their eyes very wide at the most miraculous change, at the most sudden enchantment. Its events, and things, and people are wild, and are like unbroken horses, that are so much more beautiful than horses that have learned to run between shafts. One thinks of actual life, when one reads those Norse stories, which were already in deca-dence, so necessary were the proportions of actual life to their efforts, when a dying man re-remembered his heroism enough to look down at his wound and say, " Those broad spears are coming into fashion" ; but the Irish stories make one understand why the Greeks call myths the activities of the dæmons. The great virtues, the great joys, the great privations come in the myths, and, as it were, take mankind between their naked arms, and without putting off their divinity. Poets have taken their themes more often from stories that are all, or half, myth-ological, than from history or stories that give one the sensation of history, understand-ing, as I think, that the imagination which remembers the proportions of life is but a long wooing, and that it has to forget them before it becomes the torch and the marriage-bed.

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One finds, as one expects, in the work of men who were not troubled about any prob-abilities or necessities but those of emotion itself, an immense variety of incident and character and of ways of expressing emotion. Cuchulain fights man after man during the quest of the Brown Bull, and not one of those fights is like another, and not one is lacking in emotion or strangeness ; and when one thinks imagination can do no more, the story of the Two Bulls, emblematic of all contests, suddenly lifts romance into prophecy. The characters

too have a distinctness one does not find among the people of the Mabinogion, perhaps not even among the people of the Morte D'Arthur. One knows one will be long forgetting Cuchulain, whose life is vehement and full of pleasure, as though he always remembered that it was to be soon over ; or the dreamy Fergus who betrays the sons of Usnach for a feast, without ceasing to be noble ; or Conall who is fierce and friendly and trustworthy, but has not the sap of divinity that makes Cuchulain mysterious to men, and beloved of women. Women indeed, with their lamentations for lovers and husbands and sons, and for fallen rooftrees and lost wealth, give the stories their most beautiful sentences ; and, after Cuchulain, one thinks most of certain great queens—of angry, amorous Maeve, with her long pale face ; of Findabair, her daughter, who dies of shame and of pity ; of Deirdre who might be some mild modern housewife but for her prophetic wisdom. If one does not set Deirdre's lamentations among the greatest lyric poems of the world, I think one may be certain that the wine-press of the poets has been trodden for one in vain ; and yet I think it may be proud Emer, Cuchulain's fitting wife, who will linger longest in the memory. What a pure flame burns in her always, whether she is the newly-married wife fighting for precedence, fierce as some beautiful bird, or the confident housewife, who would awaken her husband from his magic sleep with mocking words ; or the great queen who would get him out of the tightening net of his doom, by sending him into the Valley of the Deaf, with Niamh, his mistress, because he will be more obedient to her ; or the woman whom sorrow has sent with Helen and Iseult and Brunnhilda, and Deirdre, to share their immortality in the rosary of the poets.

“ ‘ And oh ! my love ! ’ she said, ‘ we were often in one another's company, and it was happy for us ; for if the world had been searched from the rising of the sun to sunset, the like would never have been found in one place, of the Black Sainglain and the Grey of Macha, and Laeg the chariot-driver, and myself and Cuchulain. ’

“ And after that Emer bade Conall to make a wide, very deep grave for Cuchulain ; and she laid herself down beside her gentle comrade, and she put her mouth to his mouth, and she said : ‘ Love of my life, my friend, my sweetheart, my one choice of the men of the earth, many is the women, wed or unwed, envied me until to-day ; and now I will not stay living after you. ’

## VI

We Irish should keep these personages much in our hearts, for they lived in the places where we ride and go marketing, and sometimes they have met one another on the hills that cast their shadows upon our doors at evening. If we will but tell these stories to our children the Land will begin again to be a Holy Land, as it was before men gave their hearts to Greece and Rome and Judea. When I was a child I had only to climb the hill behind the house to see long, blue, ragged hills flowing along the southern horizon. What beauty was lost to me, what depth of emotion is still perhaps lacking in me, because nobody told me, not even the merchant captains who knew everything, that Cruachan of the Enchantments lay behind those long, blue, ragged hills !

W. B. YEATS.

*March 1902.*

## Birth of Cuchulain I

IN the time long ago, Conchubar, son of Ness, was King of Ulster, and he held his court in the palace of Emain Macha. And this is the way he came to be king. He was but a young lad, and his father was not living, and Fergus, son of Rogh, who was at that time King of Ulster, asked his mother Ness in marriage.

Now Ness, that was at one time the quietest and kindest of the women of Ireland, had got to be unkind and treacherous because of an unkindness that had been done to her, and she planned to get the kingdom away from Fergus for her own son. So she said to Fergus : “ Let Conchubar hold the kingdom for a year, that his children after him may be called the children of a king ; and that is the marriage portion I will ask of you.”

“ You may do that,” the men of Ulster said to him ; for even though Conchubar gets the name of being king, it is yourself that will be our king all the time.” So Fergus agreed to it, and he took Ness as his wife, and her son Conchubar was made king in his place.

But all through the year, Ness was working to keep the kingdom for him, and she gave great presents to the chief men of Ulster to get them on her side. And though Conchubar was but a young lad at that time, he was wise in his judgments, and brave in battle, and good in shape and in form, and they liked him well. And at the end of the year, when Fergus asked to have the kingship back again, they consulted together ; and it is what they agreed, that Conchubar was to keep it And they said : “ It is little Fergus thinks about us, when he was so ready to give up his rule over us for a year ; and let Conchubar keep the kingship,” they said, “ and let Fergus keep the wife he has got.”

Now it happened one day that Conchubar was making a feast at Emain Macha for the marriage of his sister Dechtire with Sualtim son of Roig. And at the feast Dechtire was thirsty, and they gave her a cup of wine, and as she was drinking it, a mayfly flew into the cup, and she drank it down with the wine. And presently she went into her sunny parlour, and her fifty maidens along with her, and she fell into a deep sleep.

And in her sleep, Lugh of the Long Hand appeared to her, and he said : “ It is I myself was the mayfly that came to you in the cup, and it is with me you must come away now, and your fifty maidens along with you.” And he put on them the appearance of a flock of birds, and they went with him southward till they came to Brugh na Boinne, the dwelling-place of the Sidhe. And no one at Emain Macha could get tale or tidings of them, or know where they had gone, or what had happened them.

It was about a year after that time, there was another feast in Emain, and Conchubar and his chief men were sitting at the feast. And suddenly they saw from the window a great flock of birds, that lit on the ground and began to eat up everything before them, so that not so much as a blade of grass was left.

The men of Ulster were vexed when they saw the birds destroying all before them, and they yoked nine of their chariots to follow after them. Conchubar was in his own chariot, and there were following with him Fergus son of Rogh, and Laegaire Buadach, the Battle-Winner, and Celthair son of Uithecar, and many others, and Bricriu of the bitter tongue was along with them.

They followed after the birds across the whole country southward, across Slieve Fuad, by Ath Lethan, by Ath Garach and Magh Gossa, between Fir Rois and Fir Ardae ; and the birds before them always. They were the most beautiful that had ever been seen ; nine flocks of them there were, linked together two and two with a chain of silver, and at the head of every flock there were two birds of different colours, linked together with a chain of gold ; and there were three birds that flew by themselves, and they all went before the chariots, to the far end of the country, until the fall of night, and then there was no more seen of them.

And when the dark night was coming on, Conchubar said to his people : “ It is best for us to unyoke the chariots now, and to look for some place where we can spend the night.”

Then Fergus went forward to look for some place, and what he came to was a very small poor-looking house. A man and a woman were in it, and when they saw him they said : “ Bring your companions here along with you, and they will be welcome.” Fergus went back to his companions and told them what he had seen. But Bricriu said : “ Where is the use of going into a house like that, with neither room nor provisions nor coverings in it ; it is not worth our while to be going there.”

Then Bricriu went on himself to the place where the house was. But when he came to it, what he saw was a grand, new, well-lighted house ; and at the door there was a young man wearing armour, very tall and handsome and shining. And he said : “ Come into the house, Bricriu ; why are you looking about you ?” And there was a young woman beside him, fine and noble, and with curled hair, and she said : “ Surely there is a welcome before you from me.” “ Why does she welcome me ?” said Bricriu. “ It is on account of her that I myself welcome you,” said the young man. “ And is there no one missing from you at Emain ?” he said. “ There is surely,” said Bricriu. “ We are missing fifty young girls for the length of a year.” “ Would you know them again if you saw them ?” said the young man. “ If I would not know them,” said Bricriu, “ it is because a year might make a change in them, so that I would not be sure.” “ Try and know them again,” said the man, “ for the fifty young girls are in this house, and this woman beside me is their mistress, Dechtire. It was they themselves, changed into birds, that went to Emain Macha to bring you here.” Then Dechtire gave Bricriu a purple cloak with gold fringes ; and he went back to find his companions. But while he was going he thought to himself : “ Conchubar would give great treasure to find these fifty young girls again, and his sister along with them. I will not tell him I have found them. I will only say I have found a house with beautiful women in it, and no more than that.”

When Conchubar saw Bricriu, he asked news of him. “ What news do you bring back with you, Bricriu ?” he said. “ I came to a fine well-lighted house,” said Bricriu ; “ I saw a queen, noble, kind, with royal looks, with curled hair ; I saw a troop of women, beautiful, well-dressed ; I saw the man of the house, tall and open-handed and shining.” “ Let us go there for the night,” said Conchubar. So they brought their chariots and their horses and their arms ; and they were hardly in the house when every sort of food and of drink, some they knew and some they did not know, was put before them, so that they never spent a better night. And when they had eaten and drunk and began to be satisfied, Conchubar said to the young man : “ Where is the mistress of the house that she does not come to bid us welcome ?” “ You cannot see her to-night,” said he, “ for she is in the pains of childbirth.”

So they rested there that night, and in the morning Conchubar was the first to rise up ; but he saw no more of the man of the house, and what he heard was the cry of a child. And he went to the room it came from, and there he saw Dechtire, and her maidens about her, and a young child beside her. And she bade Conchubar welcome, and she told him all that had hap-

pened her, and that she had called him there to bring herself and the child back to Emain Macha. And Conchubar said : “ It is well you have done by me, Dechtire ; you gave shelter to me and to my chariots ; you kept the cold from my horses ; you gave food to me and my people, and now you have given us this good gift. And let our sister, Finchoem, bring up the child,” he said. “ No, it is not for her to bring him up, it is for me,” said Sencha son of Ailell, chief judge and chief poet of Ulster. “ For I am skilled ; I am good in disputes ; I am not forgetful ; I speak before any one at all in the presence of the king ; I watch over what he says ; I give judgment in the quarrels of kings ; I am judge of the men of Ulster ; no one has a right to dispute my claim, but only Conchubar.”

“ If the child is given to me to bring up,” said Blai, the distributor, “ he will not suffer from want of care or from forgetfulness. It is my messages that do the will of Conchubar ; I call up the fighting men from all Ireland ; I am well able to provide for them for a week, or even for ten days ; I settle their business and their disputes ; I support their honour ; I get satisfaction for their insults.”

“ You think too much of yourself,” said Fergus. “ It is I that will bring up the child ; I am strong ; I have knowledge ; I am the king’s messenger ; no one can stand up against me in honour or riches ; I am hardened to war and battles ; I am a good craftsman ; I am worthy to bring up a child. I am the protector of all the unhappy ; the strong are afraid of me ; I am the helper of the weak.”

“ If you will listen to me at last, now you are quiet,” said Amergin, “ I am able to bring up a child like a king. The people praise my honour, my bravery, my courage, my wisdom ; they praise my good luck, my age, my speaking, my name, my courage, and my race. Though I am a fighter, I am a poet ; I am worthy of the king’s favour ; I overcome all the men who fight from their chariots ; I owe thanks to no one except Conchubar ; I obey no one but the king.”

Then Sencha said : “ Let Finchoem keep the child until we come to Emain, and Morann, the judge, will settle the question when we are there.”

So the men of Ulster set out for Emain, Finchoem having the child with her. And when they came there Morann gave his judgment. “ It is for Conchubar,” he said, “ to help the child to a good name, for he is next of kin to him ; let Sencha teach him words and speaking ; let Fergus hold him on his knees ; let Amergin be his tutor.” And he said : “ This child will be praised by all, by chariot drivers and fighters, by kings and by wise men ; he shall be loved by many men ; he will avenge all your wrongs ; he will defend your fords ; he will fight all your battles.”

And so it was settled. And the child was left until he should come to sensible years, with his mother Dechtire and with her husband Sualtim. And they brought him up upon the plain of Muirthemne, and the name he was known by was Setanta, son of Sualtim.

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### Boy Deeds of Cuchulain

IT chanced one day, when Setanta was about seven years old, that he heard some of the people of his mother’s house talking about King Conchubar’s court at Emain Macha, and of the sons of kings and nobles that lived there, and that spent a great part of their time at games and at hurling. “ Let me go and play with them there,” he said to his mother. “ It is too soon

for you to do that," she said, " but wait till such time as you are able to travel so far, and till I can put you in charge of some one going to the court, that will put you under Conchubar's protection." " It would be too long for me to wait for that," he said, " but I will go there by myself if you will tell me the road." " It is too far for you," said Dechtire, " for it is beyond Slieve Fuad, Emain Macha is." " Is it east or west of Slieve Fuad ?" he asked. And when she had answered him that, he set out there and then, and nothing with him but his hurling stick, and his silver ball, and his little dart and spear ; and to shorten the road for himself he would give a blow to the ball and drive it from him, and then he would throw his hurling stick after it, and the dart after that again, and then he would make a run and catch them all in his hand before one of them would have reached the ground.

So he went on until he came to the lawn at Emain Macha, and there he saw three fifties of king's sons hurling and learning feats of war. He went in among them, and when the ball came near him he got it between his feet, and drove it along in spite of them till he had sent it beyond the goal. There was great surprise and anger on them when they saw what he had done, and Follaman, King Conchubar's son, that was chief among them, cried out to them to come together and drive out this stranger and make an end of him. " For he has no right," he said, " to come into our game without asking leave, and without putting his life under our protection. And you may be sure," he said, " that he is the son of some common fighting man, and it is not for him to come into our game at all." With that they all made an attack on him, and began to throw their hurling sticks at him, and their balls and darts, but he escaped them all, and then he rushed at them, and began to throw some of them to the ground. Fergus came out just then from the palace, and when he saw what a good defence the little lad was making, he brought him in to where Conchubar was playing chess, and told him all that had happened. " This is no gentle game you have been playing," he said. " It is on themselves the fault is," said the boy ; " I came as a stranger, and I did not get a stranger's welcome." " You did not know then," said Conchubar, " that no one can play among the boy troop of Emain unless he gets their leave and their protection." " I did not know that, or I would have asked it of them," he said. " What is your name and your family ?" said Conchubar. My name is Setanta, son of Sualtim and of Dechtire," he said. When Conchubar knew that he was his sister's son, he gave him a great welcome, and he bade the boy troop to let him go safe among them. " We will do that," they said. But when they went out to play, Setanta began to break through them, and to overthrow them, so that they could not stand against him. " What are you wanting of them now ?" said Conchubar. " I swear by the gods my people swear by," said the boy, " I will not lighten my hand off them till they have come under my protection the same way I have come under theirs." Then they all agreed to give in to this ; and Setanta stayed in the king's house at Emain Macha, and all the chief men of Ulster had a hand in bringing him up.

There was a great smith in Ulster of the name of Culain, who made a feast at that time for Conchubar and for his people. When Conchubar was setting out to the feast, he passed by the lawn where the boy troop were at their games, and he watched them awhile, and he saw how the son of Dechtire was winning the goal from them all. " That little lad will serve Ulster yet," said Conchubar ; " and call him to me now," he said, " and let him come with me to the smith's feast." " I cannot go with you now," said Setanta, when they had called to him, " for these boys have not had enough of play yet." " It would be too long for me to wait for you," said the king. " There is no need for you to wait ; I will follow the track of the chariots," said Setanta.

So Conchubar went on to the smith's house, and there was a welcome before him, and fresh rushes were laid down, and there were poems and songs and recitals of laws, and the

feast was brought in, and they began to be merry. And then Culain said to the king : “ Will there be any one else of your people coming after you to-night ?” “ There will not,” said Conchubar, for he forgot that he had told the little lad to follow him. “ But why do you ask me that ?” he said. “ I have a great fierce hound,” said the smith, “ and when I take the chain off him, he lets no one come into the one district with himself, and he will obey no one but myself, and he has in him the strength of a hundred.” “ Loose him out,” said Conchubar, “ until he keeps a watch on the place.” So Culain loosed him out, and the dog made a course round the whole district, and then he came back to the place where he was used to lie and to watch the house, and every one was in dread of him, he was so fierce and so cruel and so savage.

Now, as to the boys at Emain, when they were done playing, every one went to his father’s house, or to whoever was in charge of him. But Setanta set out on the track of the chariots, shortening the way for himself as he was used to do with his hurling stick and his ball. When he came to the lawn before the smith’s house, the hound heard him coming, and began such a fierce yelling that he might have been heard through all Ulster, and he sprang at him as if he had a mind not to stop and tear him up at all, but to swallow him at the one mouthful. The little fellow had no weapon but his stick and his ball, but when he saw the hound coming at him, he struck the ball with such force that it went down his throat, and through his body. Then he seized him by the hind legs and dashed him against a rock until there was no life left in him.

When the men feasting within heard the outcry of the hound, Conchubar started up and said : “ It is no good luck brought us on this journey, for that is surely my sister’s son that was coming after me, and that has got his death by the hound.” On that all the men rushed out, not waiting to go through the door, but over walls and barriers as they could. But Fergus was the first to get to where the boy was, and he took him up and lifted him on his shoulder, and brought him in safe and sound to Conchubar, and there was great joy on them all.

But Culain the smith went out with them, and when he saw his great hound lying dead and broken there was great grief in his heart, and he came in and said to Setanta : “ There is no good welcome for you here.” “ What have you against the little lad ?” said Conchubar.

“ It was no good luck that brought him here, or that made me prepare this feast for yourself, King,” he said ; “ for from this out, my hound being gone, my substance will be wasted, and my way of living will be gone astray. And, little boy,” he said, “ that was a good member of my family you took from me, for he was the protector of my goods and my flocks and my herds and of all that I had.” “ Do not be vexed on account of that,” said the boy, “ and I myself will make up to you for what I have done.” “ How will you do that ?” said Conchubar. “ This is how I will do it : if there is a whelp of the same breed to be had in Ireland, I will rear him and train him until he is as good a hound as the one killed ; and until that time, Culain,” he said, “ I myself will be your watch-dog, to guard your goods and your cattle and your house.” “ You have made a fair offer,” said Conchubar. “ I could have given no better award myself,” said Cathbad the Druid. “ And from this out,” he said, “ your name will be Cuchulain, the Hound of Culain.” “ I am better pleased with my own name of Setanta, son of Sualtim,” said the boy. “ Do not say that,” said Cathbad, “ for all the men in the whole world will some day have the name of Cuchulain in their mouths.” “ If that is so, I am content to keep it,” said the boy. And this is how he came by the name Cuchulain.

It was a good while after that, Cathbad the Druid was one day teaching the pupils in his house to the north-east of Emain. There were eight boys along with him that day, and one of

them asked him : “ Do your signs tell of any special thing this day is good or bad for ?” “ If any young man should take arms to-day,” said Cathbad, “ his name will be greater than any other name in Ireland. But his span of life will be short,” he said.

Cuchulain was outside at play, but he heard what Cathbad said, and there and then he put off his playing suit, and he went straight to Conchubar’s sleeping-room and said : “ All good be with you, King !” “ What is it you are wanting ?” said Conchubar. “ What I want is to take arms to-day.” “ Who put that into your head ?” “ Cathbad the Druid,” said Cuchulain. “ If that is so, I will not deny you,” said Conchubar. Then he gave him his choice of arms, and the boy tried his strength on them, and there were none that pleased him or that were strong enough for him but Conchubar’s own. So he gave him his own two spears, and his sword and his shield.

Just then Cathbad the Druid came in, and there was wonder on him, and he said : “ Is it taking arms this young boy is ?” “ He is indeed,” said the king. “ It is sorry I would be to see his mother’s son take arms on this day,” said Cathbad. “ Was it not yourself bade him do it ?” said the king. “ I did not surely,” he said. “ Then you have lied to me, boy,” said Conchubar. “ I told no lie, King,” said Cuchulain, “ for it was he indeed put it in my mind when he was teaching the others, for when one of them asked him if there was any special virtue in this day, he said that whoever would for the first time take arms to-day, his name would be greater than any other in Ireland, and he did not say any harm would come on him, but that his life would be short.” “ And what I said is true,” said Cathbad, “ there will be fame on you and a great name, but your lifetime will not be long.” “ It is little I would care,” said Cuchulain, “ if my life were to last one day and one night only, so long as my name and the story of what I had done would live after me.” Then Cathbad said : “ Well, get into a chariot now, and let us see if it was the truth I spoke.”

Then Cuchulain got into a chariot and tried its strength, and broke it to pieces, and he broke in the same way the seventeen chariots that Conchubar kept for the boy troop at Emain, and he said : “ These chariots are no use, Conchubar, they are not worthy of me.” “ Where is Ibar, son of Riangaabra ?” said Conchubar. “ Here I am,” he answered. “ Make ready my own chariot, and yoke my own horses to it for this boy to try,” said Conchubar. So he tried the king’s chariot and shook it and strained it, and it bore him. “ This is the chariot that suits me,” he said. “ Now, little one,” said Ibar, “ let us take out the horses and turn them out to graze.” “ It is too early for that, Ibar ; let us drive on to where the boy troop are, that they may wish me good luck on the day of my taking arms.” So they drove on, and all the lads shouted when they saw him—“ Have you taken arms ?” “ I have indeed,” said Cuchulain. “ That you may do well in wounding and in first killing and in spoil-winning,” they said ; “ but it is a pity for us, you to have left playing.”

“ Let the horses go graze now,” said Ibar. “ It is too soon yet,” said Cuchulain, “ and tell me where does that great road that goes by Emain lead to ?” “ It leads to Ath-an-Foire, the watchers’ ford in Slieve Fuad,” said Ibar. “ Why is it called the watchers’ ford ?” “ It is easy to tell that ; it is because some choice champion of the men of Ulster keeps watch there every day to do battle for the province with any stranger that might come to the boundary with a challenge.” “ Do you know who is in it to-day ?” said Cuchulain. “ I know well it is Conall Cearnach, the Victorious, the chief champion of the young men of Ulster and of all Ireland.” “ We will go on then to the ford,” said Cuchulain. So they went on across the plain, and at the water’s edge they found Conall, and he said : “ And are those arms you have taken to-day, little boy ?” “ They are indeed,” Ibar said for him. “ May they bring him triumph and victory and shedding of first blood,” said Conall. “ But I think, little Hound,” he said, “ that you are

too ready to take them ; for you are not fit as yet to do a champion's work." " What is it you are doing here, Conall ?" said the boy. " I am keeping watch and guard for the province." " Rise out of it, Conall," he said, " and for this one day let me keep the watch." " Do not ask that, little one," said Conall ; " for you are not able yet to stand against trained fighting men." " Then I will go down to the shallows of Lough Echtra and see if I can redden my arms on either friend or enemy." " Then I will go with you myself," said Conall, " to take care of you and to protect you, that no harm may happen you." " Do not," said Cuchulain. " I will indeed," said Conall, " for if I let you go into a strange country alone, all Ulster would avenge it on me."

So Conall's horses were yoked to his chariot, and he set out to follow Cuchulain, for he had waited for no leave, but had set out by himself. When Cuchulain saw Conall coming up with him he thought to himself, " If I get a chance of doing some great thing, Conall will never let me do it." So he picked up a stone, the size of his fist, from the ground, and made a good cast at the yoke of Conall's chariot, so that he broke it, and the chariot came down, and Conall himself was thrown to the ground sideways. " What did you do that for ?" he said. " It was to see could I throw straight, and if there was the making of a good champion in me." " Bad luck on your throwing and on yourself," said Conall. " And any one that likes may strike your head off now, for I will go with you no farther." " That is just what I wanted," said Cuchulain. And with that, Conall went back to his place at the ford.

As for the lad, he went on towards Lough Echtra in the south. Then Ibar said : " If you will listen to me, little one, I would like that we would go back now to Emain ; for at this time the carving of the food is beginning there, and it is all very well for you that have your place kept for you between Conchubar's knees. But as to myself," he said, " it is among the chariot-drivers and the jesters and the messengers I am, and I must find a place and fight for myself where I can." " What is that mountain before us ?" said Cuchulain. " That is Slieve Mourne, and that is Finncairn, the white cairn, on its top." " Let us go to it," said Cuchulain. " We would be too long going there," said Ibar. " You are a lazy fellow," said Cuchulain ; " and this my first adventure, and the first journey you have made with me." " And that it may be my last," said Ibar, " if ever I get back to Emain again." They went on then to the cairn. " Good Ibar," said the boy, " show me now all that we can see of Ulster, for I do not know my way about the country yet." So Ibar showed him from the cairn all there was to see of Ulster, the hills and the plains and the duns on every side. " What is that sloping square plain before us to the south ?" " That is Magh Breagh, the fine meadow." " Show me the duns and strong places of that plain." So Ibar showed him Teamhair and Tailte, Cleathra and Cnobhach and the Brugh of Angus on the Boyne, and the dun of Nechtan Sceine's sons. " Are those the sons of Nechtan that say in their boasting they have killed as many Ulstermen as there are living in Ulster to-day ?" " They are the same," said Ibar. " On with us then to that dun," said Cuchulain. " No good will come to you through saying that," said Ibar ; " and whoever may go there I will not go," he said. " Alive or dead, you must go there for all that," said Cuchulain. " Then if so, it is alive I will go there," said Ibar, " and it is dead I will be before I leave it."

They went on then to the dun of Nechtan's sons, and when they came to the green lawn, Cuchulain got out of the chariot, and there was a pillar-stone on the lawn, and an iron collar about it, and there was Ogham writing on it that said no man that came there, and he carrying arms, should leave the place without giving a challenge to some one of the people of the dun. When Cuchulain had read the Ogham, he put his arms around the stone and threw it into the water that was there at hand. " I don't see it is any better there than where it was before," said Ibar ; " and it is likely this time you will get what you are looking for, and that is a quick death." " Good Ibar," said the boy, " spread out the coverings of the chariot now for me, until

I sleep for a while.” “ It is no good thing you are going to do,” said Ibar, “ to be going to sleep in an enemy’s country.” He put out the coverings then, and Cuchulain lay down and fell asleep.

It was just at that time, Foill, son of Nechtan Sceine, came out, and when he saw the chariot, he called out to Ibar, “ Let you not unyoke those horses.” “ I was not going to unyoke them,” said Ibar ; “ the reins are in my hands yet.” “ What horses are they ?” “ They are Conchubar’s two speckled horses.” “ So I thought when I saw them,” said Foill. “ And who is it has brought them across our boundaries ?” “ A young little lad,” said Ibar, “ that has taken arms to-day for luck, and it is to show himself off he has come across Magh Breagh.” “ May he never have good luck,” said Foill, “ and if he were a fighting man, it is not alive but dead he would go back to Emain to-day.” “ Indeed he is not able to fight, or it could not be expected of him,” said Ibar, “ and he but a child that should be in his father’s house.” At that the boy lifted his head from the ground, and it is red his face was, and his whole body, at hearing so great an insult put on him, and he said : “ I am indeed well able to fight.” But Foill said : “ I am more inclined to think you are not.” “ You will soon know what to think,” said the boy, “ and let us go down now to the ford. But go first and get your armour,” he said, “ for I would not like to kill an unarmed man.” There was anger on Foill then, and he went running to get his arms. “ You must have a care now,” said Ibar, “ for that is Foill, son of Nechtan, and neither point of spear or edge of sword can harm him.” “ That suits me very well,” said the boy. With that out came Foill again, and Cuchulain stood up to him, and took his iron ball in his hand, and hurled it at his head, and it went through the forehead and out at the back of his head, and his brains along with it, so that the air could pass through the hole it made. And then Cuchulain struck off his head.

Then Tuachel, the second son of Nechtan, came out on the lawn. “ It is likely you are making a great boast of what you are after doing,” he said. “ I see nothing to boast of in that,” said Cuchulain, “ a single man to have fallen by me.” “ You will not have long to boast of it,” said Tuachel, “ for I myself am going to make an end of you on the moment.” “ Then go back and bring your arms,” said Cuchulain, “ for it is only a coward would come out without arms.” He went back into the house then, and Ibar said : “ You must have a care now, for that is Tuachel, son of Nechtan, and if he is not killed by the first stroke, or the first cast, or the first thrust, he cannot be killed at all, for there is no way of getting at him after that.” “ You need not be telling me that, Ibar,” said Cuchulain, “ for it is Conchubar’s great spear, the Venomous, I will take in my hand, and that is the last thrust that will be made at him, for after that, there is no physician will heal his wounds for ever.”

Then Tuachel came out on the lawn, and Cuchulain took hold of the great spear, and made a cast at him, that went through his shield and broke three of his ribs, and made a hole through his heart. And then he struck his head off, before the body reached the ground.

Then Fainnle, the youngest of the three sons of Nechtan, came out. “ Those were foolish fellows,” he said, “ to come at you the way they did. But come out now, after me,” he said, “ into the water where your feet will not touch the bottom,” and with that he made a plunge into the water. “ Mind yourself well now,” said Ibar, “ for that is Fainnle, the Swallow, and it is why that name was put on him, he travels across water with the swiftness of a swallow, and there is not one of the swimmers of the whole world can come near him.” “ It is not to me you should be saying that,” said Cuchulain, “ for you know the river Callan that runs through Emain, and it is what I used to do,” he said, “ when the boy troop would break off from their games and plunge into the river to swim, I used to take a boy of them on each shoulder and a boy on each hand, and I would bring them through the river without so much as to wet my

back.” With that he made a leap into the water, where it was very deep, and himself and Fainnle wrestled together, and then he got a grip of him, and gave him a blow of Conchubar’s sword, and struck his head off, and he let his body go away down the stream.

Then he and Ibar went into the house and destroyed what was in it, and they set fire to it, and left it burning, and turned back towards Slieve Fuad, and they brought the heads of the three sons of Nechtan along with them.

Presently they saw a herd of wild deer before them. “What sort of cattle are those?” said the boy. “They are not cattle, but the wild deer of the dark places of Slieve Fuad.” “Make the horses go faster,” said Cuchulain, “until we can see them better.” But with all their galloping the horses could not come up with the wild deer. Then Cuchulain got down from the chariot and raced and ran after them until two stags lay moaning and panting from the hardness of their run through the wet bog, and he bound them to the back of the chariot with the thongs of it. Then they went on till they came to the plain of Emain, and there they saw a flock of white swans that were whiter than the swans of Conchubar’s lake, and Cuchulain asked where they came from. “They are wild swans,” said Ibar, “that are come from the rocks and the islands of the great sea to feed on the low levels of the country.” “Would it be best to take them alive or to kill them?” “It would be best to take them alive,” said Ibar, “for many a one kills them, and many a one makes casts at them, but you would hardly find any one at all would bring them in alive.” With that, Cuchulain put a little stone in his sling and made a cast, and brought down eight birds of them, and then he put a bigger stone in, and with it he brought down sixteen more. “Get out now, Ibar,” he said, “and bring me the birds here.” “I will not,” said Ibar, “for it would not be easy to stop the horses the way they are going now, and if I leap out, the iron wheels of the chariot will cut through me, or the horns of the stags will make a hole in me.” “You are no good of a warrior, Ibar; but give me the reins and I will quiet the horses and the stags.” So then Ibar went and brought in the swans, and tied them, and they alive, to the chariot and to the harness. And it is like that they went on till they came to Emain.

It was Levarcham, daughter of Aedh, the conversation woman and messenger to the king, that was there at that time, and was sometimes away in the hills, was the first to see them coming. “There is a chariot-fighter coming, Conchubar,” she said, “and he is coming in anger. He has the bleeding heads of his enemies with him in the chariot, and wild stags are bound to it, and white birds are bearing him company. By the oath of my people!” she said, “if he comes on us with his anger still upon him, the best of the men of Ulster will fall by his hand.” “I know that chariot-fighter,” said Conchubar. “It is the young lad, the son of Dechtire, that went over the boundaries this very day. He has surely reddened his hand, and if his anger cannot be cooled, the young men of Emain will be in danger from him,” he said.

Then they all consulted together, and it is what they agreed, to send out three fifties of the women of Emain red-naked to meet him. When the boy saw the women coming, there was shame on him, and he leaned down his head into the cushions of the chariot, and hid his face from them. And the wildness went out of him, and his feasting clothes were brought, and water for washing; and there was a great welcome before him.

This is the story of the boy deeds of Cuchulain, as it was told by Fergus to Ailell and to Maeve at the time of the war for the Brown Bull of Cuailgne.

Cuchulain of Muirthemne : the story of the men of the Red Branch of Ulster (1911)

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