

TOM PEETE CROSS

PR

8711

.C7

copy 2

FT MEADE
GenColl

HARPER
and BARD

*The Beauties of
Irish Literature*



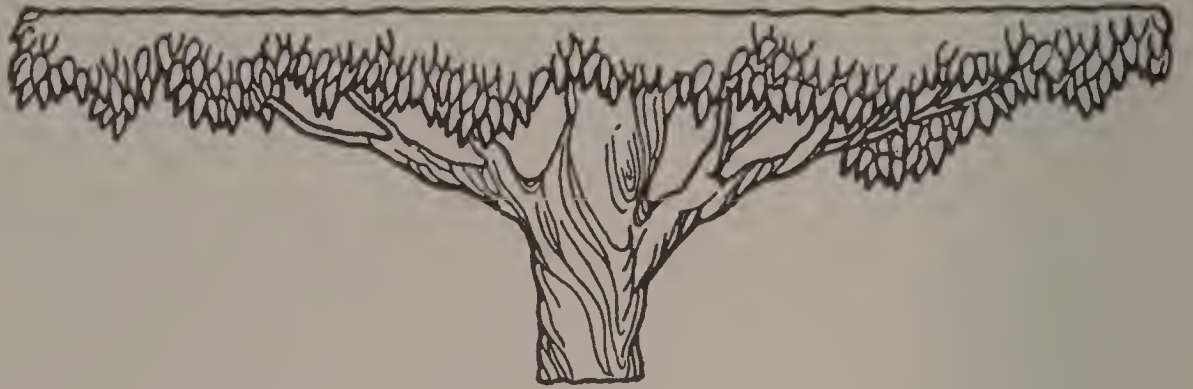
Class PR 8711

Book .C7

Copyright N^o 40742

COPYRIGHT DEPOSIT.

HARPER *and* BARD



TREE OF KNOWLEDGE
UNIFORM WITH THIS VOLUME



Percy Holmes Boynton
THE CHALLENGE OF MODERN CRITICISM

Tom Peete Cross
HARPER AND BARD

Robert Morss Lovett
PREFACE TO FICTION

Adolf Carl Noé
FERNS, FOSSILS AND FUEL

Louise Marie Spaeth
MARRIAGE AND FAMILY LIFE AMONG STRANGE PEOPLES

James Westfall Thompson
THE LIVING PAST





T O M P E E T E C R O S S

PROFESSOR OF ENGLISH AND COMPARATIVE LITERATURE
THE UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO

HARPER AND BARD

THE BEAUTIES OF IRISH LITERATURE



THOMAS S. ROCKWELL COMPANY

PUBLISHERS

1931

CHICAGO

102
COPY 2

PR 8711
C7
COPY 2

COPYRIGHT, 1931, BY
THOMAS S. ROCKWELL COMPANY ✓
CHICAGO



Printed in United States of America

31-124524

MAY 22 1931 ✓

R

©ClA 38360 ✓

CONTENTS



ONE

THE KINSMEN OF ITH

9



TWO

THE STORY-TELLERS

19



THREE

THE MYTHOLOGICAL CYCLE

29



FOUR

THE CU CHULLIN CYCLE

60



FIVE

THE OSSIANIC CYCLE

101



ONE

THE KINSMEN OF ITH

*“For good is the land which ye inhabit;
plenteous her harvest, her honey, her fishing,
her wheat, and her other yieldings; moderate are
her heat and her cold; within her borders are all
things that ye need.”*

THIS gracious speech about Ireland was made by a chieftain from Spain named Ith. He had seen Ireland from a tall tower built on the northern coast of Spain, and had journeyed there to look the land over. The inhabitants of Ireland at that time were called the Tuatha De Danann. They received Ith kindly, but when he said how beautiful he thought their country was, they killed him, for they were afraid that he would go back to Spain and persuade his friends to invade Ireland.

Ith's friends and relatives were angry at the murder of their chief and came to Ireland to avenge him. They took away the island from the Tuatha De Danann, who vanished into the great earth mounds scattered over

Ireland, and became the fairy folk so familiar in Irish song and story. From these mounds they came forth at times to take part in the affairs of mortal men.

This is the legend the Irish tell to account for the coming of the Celts to Ireland. These Celtic invaders were descendants of a great race that four hundred years before the birth of Christ had stretched across the whole of Europe. Several centuries before Christ some of them emigrated to England and Ireland. In England the Saxons drove them into Wales, where the original Celtic language, in the form of Welsh, is still spoken. They were not disturbed in Ireland, and their descendants live there now. Another branch of the race settled in Galatia in Asia Minor.

It is almost impossible to separate Celtic legend and tradition from actual history. However, back of the legend is more than a grain of truth. Modern scholars believe that the original inhabitants of Ireland actually did come from Spain. One reason for this belief is that the stone tools found in Ireland are like those of the same period found in Spain.

In fact, the Celts probably were drawn to Ireland by rumors of gold to be found there. They came to the southeast coast, near the gold fields in the present county of Wicklow. The gold was very nearly gone when they

arrived, but they remained to raise cattle. It is probable that they did not all come at once, and that they were of different tribes. They scattered to the north and west of the island, where they established little kingdoms, each with its own king. Every three years a great religious assembly provided a bond of union; they spoke the same language; and probably had the same religion and racial customs.

The races that preceded the Celts in Ireland have been called Pre-Celtic. According to Irish mythology there were four invasions before the relatives of Ith came to revenge his death. The first invasion was made by the followers of Partholon. Then came the Nemedians, the Fir Bolg, and the Tuatha De Danann. In mythology the Celts are called the Milesians because they were led by the sons of Mil, who was a grandson of Ith. There was also a race of monstrous pirates called the Fomorians, who lived in the islands of the north and harassed the settlers. The tales of the mythological cycle tell about these five races and their struggles for Ireland. The Cu Chullin and the Ossianic cycles are also composed of stories about the Celts, but of a later time.

It is customary to divide the time before recorded history into four ages according to the kinds of implements men used. The first is the Stone Age. It goes

back into the mists of time when men used rough chipped flints for tools. The second is the Copper Age, when men had discovered how to melt copper out of the ore and how to shape it into weapons. In the third, the Bronze Age, men learned to mix copper and tin to make bronze. The fourth, the Iron Age, has continued down to the present time. The Celts had advanced as far as the Iron Age when they came to Ireland.

The Stone Age is divided into two periods, the Old Stone Age and the New Stone Age. In the Old Stone Age the tools were rough and unfinished; in the New Stone Age the stone implements were polished. The first settlers of Ireland were New Stone people. They have left very few traces behind them, but we know that they lived on the northeast coast, where the large supplies of flint were. There is nothing to tell where they came from. Apparently not from Scotland, although that is the nearest country, because their tools are not like those left during the same period in Scotland. Possibly they came from Denmark, or from England. The mythology of Ireland insists on tracing all of the early settlers, both Celtic and Pre-Celtic, to Spain.

When the earliest Pre-Celtic settlers came to Ireland, about 7000 B. C., they found a country covered with heavy forests of oak and pine. The climate was moister

than it is now, rains more frequent, and the rivers larger and swifter in consequence. Dangerous swamps dotted the forests. Packs of large, fierce wolves roamed in the woods. A few of the great Irish elk, with antlers fourteen feet from tip to tip, ate the grass in the swamps. Wild boars of tremendous size and ferocity lived in the thick underbrush, and there were bears prowling about the edges of the forests. The earliest comers stayed close to the shore and ate shellfish and such small game as they could catch in primitive snares. They made boats of hides stretched over a wooden frame and sailed far out to sea and caught the deep-sea fish whose bones have been found in the shell heaps.

In time they ventured up the rivers to make homes on the open hillsides. They became traders in very early times. Sailors from France and Spain brought them copper and bronze weapons and took back gold from the Wicklow valleys. With these better implements they could cut down trees and kill wolves and bears, so that they ventured farther inland and began to raise cattle and sheep and pigs. The coast dwellers had lived in the open, but the Bronze Age herders built themselves houses of logs. No trace of these wooden houses is left, but descriptions of them are found in early Irish literature. A favorite method of getting rid of an enemy was to

shut him in his house and burn it down around him. In various places in Ireland, banks of earth still remain to show where forts were built, probably more for the protection of the cattle against wolves than for safety from a human foe.

Although the Pre-Celtic tribes were widely separated by forests, rivers, and swamps, they spoke the same language and had the same religion. Society was organized on the basis of mother right; that is, the child took his descent from his mother rather than from his father, and the children belonged to the mother's tribe.

The Stone and Bronze Age people were believers in rebirth. Any person could be reborn as an animal, or as another person. They believed in the power of the dead and made human sacrifices to their gods. Their religion included many gods and goddesses who lived much like people, but who had powers greater than mortals. Wizards and magicians are common characters in their stories. They believed in totemism. Each tribe or clan had some animal as its totem. The members of the tribe were forbidden to harm that animal or eat of its flesh. The tales give instances where a hero died for having chased or eaten his totem animal.

The Celts probably came to Ireland about the year 400 B. C. They divided the island into several provinces

—Ulster in the north, Connacht in the west, Leinster in the east, and Munster in the south, and, later, Meath in the center of the island. Each district had its own chief king, with many lesser kings under him. The High King, who had authority over all the rest, built his capital, first on the hill of Usnach, in what is now West Meath, and later at Tara in Leinster, northeast of the present city of Dublin.

True history does not begin in Ireland until some time after the Celtic invasion. The early historian Tighernach, who died A. D. 1088, says that the records of the Irish cannot be relied upon before the reign of Cimbaeth. Tighernach had access to all the records that had escaped the ravages of the Danes. Cimbaeth was the founder of Emain Macha, the capital of Ulster. He was believed to have ruled about 300 B. C. During his reign the Red Branch warriors, of whom the great Irish hero Cu Chullin was later a member, were organized. Tighernach obviously felt that the records after the reign of Cimbaeth were accurate. A modern historian hardly feels sure, however, until the reign of Cormac mac Art, who came to the throne of Ireland in A. D. 227. Cormac, according to tradition, organized an army after the model of the Roman army at that time in control of Britain. This army, legend says, he put under the leadership of

Finn mac Cumhaill. Finn is the hero of the cycle of tales and ballads that are called Ossianic, because many of them are attributed to his son Oisín.

The Irish Celts were a cattle-raising people. This fact colors all of their literature. The great epic of the race concerns a cattle raid. Cattle were used as a standard of value; and raids into the territory of another tribe in search of cattle or wives provided much of the excitement for the warriors, and much of the material for the poets. They were a barbaric people. They killed the men captured in war and made slaves of the women. Men brought home the heads of their enemies, and displayed them, and made balls out of their brains to use as trophies.

The High Kings of Ireland tried to unite the provinces. In the year 388 after Christ, the High King Niall of the Nine Hostages was strong enough to make marauding expeditions into England. It was perhaps on one of these expeditions that a Christian youth named Patrick was brought to Ireland as a captive. After sixteen years of slavery the boy escaped from the country. In 432 he returned to Ireland as the great missionary of Christianity. Although the faith had been slowly coming into the country for two centuries, brought by traders, slaves and missionaries, it was the coming of Patrick that finally established Christianity as the dominant religion.

Ireland quickly became the center of Christian learning in Europe. Students came from foreign lands to study with the famous Irish teachers. Missionaries were sent out from the Irish monasteries to England and France. The ancient Irish poets had used a literary language that could not be understood by the common people. In order to break the influence of the heathen poets, the Christian teachers adopted a new alphabet borrowed from the Romans. This they used to write down the old sagas in the language of the people. Occasionally they changed the pagan traditions in the stories so as to introduce Christian teachings but in general stayed pretty closely to the old accounts.

For nearly a thousand years after the birth of Christ there was peace in Ireland, broken only by cattle raids and unimportant bickerings between tribes. Rome thought that the island was too small to bother with so that Ireland was left alone to develop her civilization in her own way. Art flourished. After the coming of Christianity a great body of literature was written. Then, from the eighth to the eleventh century, the history of Ireland is a confusion of attacks by the Norsemen and the Danes. The Danes came to fight the Norsemen and remained to pillage on their own account. They burned the towns in the north and destroyed the monasteries; the great libraries

of early Celtic literature were often entirely lost. For a time a Norse king set up his power in Ulster. In 1014 the Irish, under King Brian Boroimhe (Boru), defeated the Scandinavians at Clontarf near Dublin. After that the invaders settled quietly in the country, married Irish women, and became part of the Irish race.

Henry II of England invaded and conquered Ireland in 1172. This date marks the end of any true Celtic literature and art in Ireland. The bards sang songs for three centuries more, but they were more concerned with their hatred of the English than they were with the glories of the ancient Celtic race.

✕



TWO

THE STORY-TELLERS

*“Sweet-stringed tunes, rhymes smoothly flowing,
In the north and south of Erin,
Shall reign for aye, till the day of doom,
As the bards have sung in meeting places.”*

A STORY-TELLER in ancient Ireland was a man of rank and of consequence. His authority was next to that of the king himself. He sat beside the king at table. He might not lodge, when he went forth to travel, in the house of any man not of noble rank. His regular income was twenty-one cows and their grass in the territory of the king, besides food for himself and for twenty-four attendants. He could have two dogs and six horses, and he could give temporary safety from arrest to any person in trouble. He might be either a bard, a file, or an ollamh.

But these titles were won by years of labor. An ordinary bard studied for seven years. A file or ollamh must work for twelve. The highest rank, that of ollamh,

included scholars and poets of great learning and genius. The student started by learning some of the simple stories and poems, and a little about philosophy and law. As he went on he learned the more complicated tales, more about law and grammar, and the art of composition in the meters used by each class of poets. At the end of seven years he might stop studying and become a practicing bard. If he continued, he learned the poet's speech, a form of the language so old that it could no longer be understood by ordinary people. In his eighth year he studied magic and incantations, and learned to compose the legends of the kings. The last years of his course were spent in learning the higher forms of magic, in learning to write the more difficult forms of verse, and in finishing the study of law. When, after twelve years, he received the rank of ollamh, he had the right to wear the cloak of crimson and yellow feathers, and to carry the golden rod of office. He was then fitted to be the adviser of kings, the historian of a race, and the judge of a nation.

In time the duties of a file became so burdensome and the body of material that he must memorize so extensive that a division was made in the office. The business of magic and enchantments was given to the druids, who became the religious leaders. The giving of legal decisions

became the duty of the brehons. The file remained the poet and philosopher.

To be a literary artist in ancient Ireland was no small task. An ollamh must be familiar with three hundred and fifty tales, besides many poems. These tales were divided into various classes: Destructions of Fortified Places, Cattle Raids, Courtships or Wooings, Battles, Tragical Deaths, Feasts, Adventures in the Fairy World, Elopements, and Visions. Not only must the chief poet know these stories, but he must be able to arrange them in succession. It was his business to harmonize all the tales into a connected historical sequence.

By A. D. 900 a new system of dealing with ancient traditions was introduced by the school of learning established after the coming of Christianity. Scholars now began to reconstruct all the early history of Ireland on the central theory that the country had been subject to the Milesians for ages before the Christian era. All mythology and tradition was examined and arranged in definite time and sequence back to the flood. Every distinguished family in Ireland was thus able to trace its descent directly to one of the sons of Mil, and through them to Noah.

After the Christian schools were well established and writing was common, the file became less important as a preserver of tradition. The stories that had been the

special property of the poets could now be written down. Irish literature is indebted to these chief poets for the stories of the mythological cycle and for the tales about the heroes of the Red Branch of Ulster. After the decline of the ollamh and the file, the bards, who had been looked down upon by the chief poets, came into their own. Among the masses of the people they were the story-tellers, the preservers of the great traditions of the race. They composed most of the stories of the Ossian cycle and the later tales of the kings. Many of the tales about Finn they attributed to Oisín, who, according to tradition, was the greatest singer of his time. So great was the power of the bards among the common people that after the Norman invasion the English kings made frequent efforts to suppress them.

Hundreds of the early Irish manuscripts were destroyed by the Danes in their ravages during the ninth and tenth centuries. Many of those that survived are lost now, but copies of some of them were made by copyists or scribes, and have come down to us in manuscripts transcribed after the Scandinavian invasions. The most important of these manuscripts are: the *Lebor na h-Uidre*, or Book of the Dun Cow, written about 1100; the Book of Leinster, written about 1150; and the Yellow Book of Lecan, written about 1400. Still later, scholars copied and

arranged the whole history of Ireland in sequence as they got it from the ancient tales. The most famous of these histories is the *Annals of the Four Masters*. These annals were written down in a monastery in Donegal by four brothers of the Franciscan order. The work was finished in 1636. They trace the history of Ireland from the deluge, which they date in the year of the world 2242, down to the Norman conquest of Ireland in 1172 after Christ. Another famous history of Ireland is that of Geoffrey Keating, written a little after 1632.

Nobody knows just how much of the real history of Ireland is given in the legends. Probably very little in the cycle of mythological tales. In the heroic legends of the Red Branch warriors and the Finn cycle there may be a bit more. Yet the ancient writers did not invent the tales entirely; many they copied from still older manuscripts. The pictures of life and customs in the sagas can be relied upon as true representations of actual conditions. In the oldest sagas (those dealing with Cu Chullin) the warriors fight in chariots; in those dealing with a later time (the tales of Finn), they fight on horseback. That is actually what did occur. The descriptions of weapons, of clothing, and of houses, correspond exactly to what was true of each period as it is revealed by scientific investigations. From the literary standpoint, however,

it is the beauty of the tales and not their historical content that is significant.

The most important fact concerning the literature of Ireland has been the position of the country as an island not connected with England. The Romans never attempted to invade Ireland; no Roman settlements were made there. The influence of Roman civilization and the Latin language upon the west and north of Europe was profound. The people lost their national characteristics. They learned to write in Latin rather than in their own language. Only three nations kept at all outside the influence of Rome and produced literature in everyday speech that reflected life and thought in pagan times. These three were the Anglo-Saxons, the Icelanders, and the Irish. And the most ancient Irish literature is the earliest of the three.

Writing appeared in Ireland very early. Stone inscriptions show that it was known as early as the third century B. C., shortly after the Celts arrived in Ireland. A curious kind of lettering called Ogam is found on numerous stone monuments and is mentioned in many of the stories of the Red Branch, but the writing of Ogam requires too much space to have been used for any literary purpose. Latin writers dealing with Ireland mention the writing of the natives, and the ancient tales often speak of writing,

so that it must have been fairly common. The materials used were probably wooden tablets covered with wax, since writing on parchment was unknown until the Christian era.

All of the Irish literature now in existence was written down after the introduction of Christianity, but it is evident that the writers of the early sagas and romances, who were dealing with happenings of six or seven hundred years before, could not have kept so accurately to their stories if they had not had some actual written material as a guide. The coming of Christianity to Ireland did not mean the exclusive use of Latin for all composition, as it did in most other countries of western Europe. Instead, the learned men of the Church made a Celtic alphabet, imitated from one of the Latin alphabets, but with it they wrote in the language of the people. They largely discarded the old poetic language of the ollamh and wrote in common speech. Thus they gave a new impulse to the native literature instead of crushing it.

The great Irish epics and sagas are in prose. Lays and laments in verse are scattered through them, but the main story is in prose. Outside of the stories there is a great body of poetry, mostly lyrical. The early Irish had a keen appreciation of nature for its own sake. The

poet and magician Marvan chose to live in a hut in the forest. When he was asked the cause of such strange behavior he gave his reasons in a poem:

*“The voice of the wind against the branchy wood
Upon the deep-blue sky:
Cascades of the river, the note of the swan,
Delightful music!
The strain of the thrush, familiar cuckoos,
Above my house.
Swarms of bees and chafers, the little musicians of
the world,
A gentle chorus;
Wild geese and ducks, shortly before the summer’s end,
The music of the dark torrent.”*

Dr. Kuno Meyer translation

The Irish were probably the earliest European race to use rime in writing verse. The training of the poets was long and hard, but it made them masters of their craft. Even in the degenerate days of the later bards no poet would have been guilty of the haphazard meter of much early English verse. Poetry was far more widely used than in other countries. The decisions of judges were put into verse form to give them nobility. Even treatises about geography were written in verse. There is little love poetry, however; most of the love poetry that remains is in the form of laments for dead lovers.

Early in the fifth century when the Huns, Vandals, and Visigoths overran Gaul, Ireland offered a haven of refuge for the scholars of western Europe. Fleeing from the barbarians they brought to Ireland a great advance in classical learning, and gained for themselves safety and peace in a land that had been for centuries hospitable to scholarship. Recent investigations have shown that communication and commerce between Gaul and Ireland were common in the early Christian centuries. The fugitive scholars probably came to the south and west of the island. There they made learning so famous that they attracted students for hundreds of years. They established schools which taught Latin grammar, oratory, poetry, and a little Greek. Late in the sixth century masters went from these schools back to the continent where they established famous monastic schools in Gaul, Italy, and even in Germany. The influence of the foreign scholars on Irish literature was profound. They taught the use of classical verse forms: rime, meter, and pattern of syllables. They made of the early Irish churchman, who was already a literary man, a scholar and a humanist.

The early Irish sagas fall naturally into three groups: the mythological cycle, which deals with the five invasions; the tales of the Red Branch heroes, chiefly about Cu Chullin; and the cycle centering around Finn and

Oisin. Together they carry the traditions of Ireland from the earliest times to the third century after Christ. They make up a body of literature unique among the literatures of the world—the expression of a race practically untouched by outside influences. They give us a picture of pre-Christian Ireland—her wars, her religion, her customs, and her ideals. But they do more than that. Through them we hear the earliest voice in the dawn of Western European civilization.

✕



THREE

THE MYTHOLOGICAL CYCLE

TALES OF THE FIVE INVASIONS

*“Should anyone enquire of me about Erin,
I can inform him most accurately
Concerning every invasion that took place,
From the beginning of all pleasing life.”*

Fintan's poem

SAINTE FINNIAN of Moville in the County of Donegal was hungry. He went to the home of Tuan mac Cairill, a chieftain living near by, and asked for food. The chief, who was not a Christian, refused to entertain the saint, who thereupon sat down on the doorstep and fasted. Tuan was a kindly man, so kindly that he could not bear for long the sight of the aged saint perched starving upon his threshold. He brought St. Finnian in to his table. The two men became friends, and Tuan told to St. Finnian the story of the first invasions of Ireland. He was able to do so because he was the nephew of Partholon, the earliest prehistoric settler. He

had been reborn, in true mythological fashion, and thus had lived on till the coming of Christianity.

The tale of the invasions really starts with the coming of Partholon and his followers. But Christian scribes have given an earlier story in order to connect the settlement of Ireland with the biblical account. Ceasair, the daughter of Bith, who was a fourth son of Noah, came to Ireland forty days before the flood. With her were her father, her husband Fintan, and her brother Ladhra. Noah had refused to give them space in the ark. He had suggested that they go to the western part of the world where there had been no people and hence there could have been no sin, and where the flood, which was a punishment for sin, would perhaps not reach. Ladhra died shortly after the party reached Ireland. He was the first man to die in that country.

The flood did reach Ireland, and all the company except Fintan were drowned. He was saved by a miracle. A deep sleep fell upon him, and he did not wake until after the water went down. He lived on in Ireland until six centuries after the birth of Christ. Because of his great age he could settle land disputes, and he told the story of Ceasair's expedition to the scribes.

According to another account, Partholon, who was the first real settler, came from Spain with one thousand

followers. He was fleeing from his own land because he had killed his father and mother. He landed in Ireland two hundred and seventy-eight years after the flood. Ten years after his arrival he fought a terrible battle with the Fomorians, monstrous sea pirates who had only one hand or one foot, whose eyes were in their shoulders or in the backs of their heads, and who had the heads of horses or goats. The Partholonians defeated them with great slaughter. This was the first battle to be fought in Ireland.

After thirty years Partholon died. During his time forests were cut down and land was cleared for grazing. His descendants ruled over the island for three hundred years, and their followers increased to nine thousand. But a plague came upon them because of the crime of Partholon, so that all his people perished. South of Dublin to this day is a mound that is called the tomb of the people of Partholon.

The Nemedians, followers of the sons of Nemed, came thirty years later. They in their turn cleared the forests, built forts, and fought with the Fomorians. The ancient Christian scribes trace the descent of both Partholon and Nemed to Magog, the son of Japheth, the son of Noah. It was in Nemed's time that many of the lakes and plains of Ireland were formed.

A chief of the Fomorians built a high tower on Tory

Island, off the coast of Donegal. Nemed and his followers fought four great battles with the Fomorians, and defeated them each time. But a plague carried off two thousand of the Nemedians, so that the pirates conquered them. Then the Fomorians laid a heavy fine on the Nemedians. Each first of November, which is the Irish Samhain, they were required to pay to their conquerors a tribute of two-thirds of their produce of corn, of cattle, and of children.

When they could endure the oppression of the Fomorians no longer, the Nemedians rose against their enemies, stormed the tower, and at the second attack, pulled it to the ground. As they fought, the tide came up over Tory island, and both Nemedians and Fomorians were overwhelmed. After the battle there were only thirty Nemedians left. This remnant of the race escaped in boats to the continent of Europe, where they separated. Half of them went to the north and half to the south. Again Ireland lay waste for two hundred years.

The part of the Nemedians that went to the south found their way to Greece. There they were made slaves and were forced to carry heavy leather bags of earth from the river valleys up the mountains in order to make vineyards. From the sacks they got the name of Fir Bolg, which, so the ancient tales assure us, means "men of the

bags.” The fifteen Fir Bolg slaves increased to five thousand. There came a time when they remembered the stories of the green island in the west that their ancestors knew. Then they tired of slavery, made themselves boats out of their leather bags, and sailed back to Ireland. They were led by Dela, the son of Loich, who was the great-grandson of Nemed. Dela had five sons, who divided Ireland between them. Slainghe, who was the eldest, was made high king. He built his palace at Tara in Leinster. The old accounts say that the Fir Bolg ruled in peace for thirty-seven years. But in those years there were nine high kings of Ireland.

The fifteen Nemedians who went to the north lived in the Scandinavian countries, where they, too, multiplied until they were a large nation. There they studied magic and wizardry and every other art. They were called the Tuatha De Danann, which perhaps means “the people of the goddess Danu.” After two hundred years they also remembered the lovely island their ancestors had told about and set sail in three hundred ships to find it. They took with them the stone called Lia Fail, or stone of destiny, which roared when the rightful king of Ireland was crowned upon it. It was used for centuries by the kings of Tara, but in the sixth century it was lent to the king of Scotland, who never returned it. Edward I took

it to England in 1293, and it is now the Coronation stone under the king's throne in Westminster Abbey.

Another treasure of the Tuatha De Danann was the sword of Lugh of the Long Arm. This was a magic sword that could speak. A third treasure was a magic spear that returned to its owner's hand. Most interesting of all was a famous iron pot or caldron, from which no man ever went away unsatisfied.

Nuada, son of Eochaid, was the leader of the Tuatha De Danann when they returned to Ireland. His brother was a gigantic wizard whom they called the Dagda. A young man called Bres was also with them. His mother was a Tuatha De Danann princess, but his father was Elotha, the king of the Fomorians. Bres was a handsome and courageous warrior, but of a mean and miserly disposition, which was to cause him trouble later.

At the time when the Tuatha De Danann landed in Ireland, the Fir Bolg were ruled by the last of their high kings, Eochaid, and by Sreng, a young and famous warrior. On the arrival of the new-comers a vision was revealed to Eochaid, so that he was troubled and sent for his wizard, Cesard.

"I saw a great flock of birds," said the king, "coming from the depths of the ocean. They settled all over us and fought with the people of Ireland. They brought

confusion on us, and destroyed us. One of us struck the noblest of the birds and cut off one of its wings.”

By means of ritual and the use of magic Cesard revealed to the king the meaning of his vision. “Warriors are coming across the sea,” he said, “a people skilled in every art. They will be victorious in every strife.”

The Tuatha De Danann burned their ships when they arrived in Ireland, so that they could say that they had flown across the water by magic. Either the smoke of the ships or a mist had hidden their landing, and no man saw them come; hence some of the ancient writers say they were demons or phantoms. When the cloud cleared away the Fir Bolg saw them close at hand. Then they sent out Sreng to visit them, for they thought he would terrify the strangers with his uncouth and ferocious looks. The Tuatha De Danann saw him coming and said, “Let us send Bres to meet him.”

The two warriors spoke to each other and were astonished to find that they spoke the same language, and that they were both descendants of Nemed. They examined each other's weapons. The spear of Sreng was blunt and heavy, while the javelins of Bres were slender and had sharp points. They exchanged weapons, so that each camp might see what the spears of the other were like.

“Tell the Fir Bolg,” said Bres, “that they must either give my people half of Ireland or battle.”

“On my word,” replied Sreng, “I would rather give you half of Ireland than face your weapons.” But when he returned to his own camp and gave the king his message, Eochaid forgot the vision and the wizard’s prophecy and decided to give battle rather than half of Ireland. He was afraid that if he gave half the enemy would in time take all.



THE FIRST BATTLE OF MOYTURA

The troops of the Tuatha De Danann encamped on the plain of Moytura, which is to the south of the present county Mayo. Then for three days their wizards sent clouds of mist, furious rains of fire, and a downpour of red blood upon the heads of the Fir Bolg. The power of the Fir Bolg sorcerers was just strong enough to stop the attack. Then the Tuatha De Danann sent their poets to make a second offer of peace if they received half of Ireland. Again the Fir Bolg refused, but an armistice was granted until each side could make weapons like those of the other.

Six weeks of the summer was gone before the weapons were finished. The hosts arose that day with the first glimmer of sunlight. The close-packed companies ad-

vanced to battle with the Tuatha De Danann. Then the poet, Fathach, went in front of the Fir Bolg troops to spread the report of their fury. He raised a pillar of stone, against which he rested. Then he sang:

*“Many will be the gashed bodies in the east,
Many a head will be severed with vigor and heroism.”*

In the space of one day great numbers were destroyed. By the close of the first day, the Tuatha De Danann were defeated and returned to their camp. The Fir Bolg did not pursue them across the battlefield, but returned in good spirits to their own camp. They each brought with them into the presence of their king a stone and a head, and made a great cairn of them. The physicians had made a great well of water and crushed healing herbs into it until the water was thick and green. The wounded warriors were dipped into the well and thus became whole again.

The second day's fighting was worse than the first. There was straining of spears and shivering of swords and battering of bodies. When night fell the Fir Bolg were driven across the battlefield back to their camp, but they each had again a stone and a head to add to the cairn before the king.

The third day neither side gained the advantage, but during the night, Fintan with his thirteen sons joined

the ranks of the Fir Bolg, so that their spirits rose.

The fury of the battle on the fourth day of the fighting was so great that Fathach, the poet, returned from his column of stone for fear of his life. The monsters and "hags of doom" heard the battle noises and cried aloud, so that their voices penetrated the hollows of the earth. It was then that Bres made an attack on the Fir Bolg army and killed one hundred and fifty men. He struck nine blows on the shield of Eochaid, the high king. The king in his turn dealt Bres nine wounds on the head and thigh. Then Sreng turned his face to the army of the Tuatha De Danann and slew one hundred and fifty warriors. He struck nine blows on the shield of their high king Nuada, and Nuada dealt him nine wounds.

Then a suitable place was cleared for the chiefs. To them was left the battle. Each of them inflicted thirty wounds on the other. Sreng dealt a blow with his sword at Nuada, and cutting away the rim of his shield, severed his right arm at the shoulder, so that the king's arm with a third of his shield fell to the ground. The Dagda came and stood over Nuada, and fifty soldiers and physicians came and carried him from the field. The severed arm was raised on a pile of rocks and on them the blood trickled.

Eochaid and his son now joined in the fray and acquitted themselves valorously. But the battle raged so long and so fiercely that Eochaid was overcome by weariness and thirst. He called Sreng to him and said, "You must maintain the fight while I go in search of a drink, for I cannot endure this consuming thirst."

He took a hundred warriors to go in search of water. The Tuatha De Danann saw him go and their wizards hid from him all the streams and rivers in Ireland till he was led far astray. Then they fell upon him and killed him. Sreng continued to fight for a day and a night after his fellows, but in the end he offered to share the land with the Tuatha De Danann. The Tuatha De Danann gave the Fir Bolg their choice of all the provinces of Ireland. The Fir Bolg chose the province of Connacht, and Sreng became their king.

Ⓟ Ⓟ

From this time on the Fir Bolg were a subject race. The rulers of the rest of Ireland forced them to pay tribute in the form of service in war. The mighty Finn, hero of the Ossian cycle of sagas, and his famous band of warriors known as the Fian, were of the Fir Bolg. Historians trace the descendants of the Fir Bolg in Connacht down to the seventeenth century. They appear in the Ulster epic as the subjects of Queen Medb of Con-

nacht. The hero Cu Chullin killed one of their princes on the great cattle-raid of Cooley.

¶

¶

THE SECOND BATTLE OF MOYTURA

Nuada could no longer be king of the Tuatha De Danann because no man with a blemish could rule over them. They therefore elected Bres as their king. Diancecht, the surgeon, and Creidne, the smith, worked for seven years to make a silver hand that would repair the king's deformity. During that time Bres was not a popular king. He levied heavy taxes on his people; the ancient bards report that the knives of his friends were not greased at his table, and his guests went from his feasts with no smell of ale on their breaths. Worse than that, he was inhospitable to a poet, in direct opposition to the law and to public opinion. This poet, Coirpre, made a satire on the king:

*“Without food quickly served,
Without milk whereon a calf can grow,
Without shelter for a man under the bloomy night,
Without means to entertain a bardic company—
Let such be the condition of Bres.”*

This was the first satire ever written in Ireland. The people were delighted with it, for they hated Bres. Just at this time Nuada came back with his silver hand and

Bres was removed from the throne. He took ship to the islands of the Fomorians and asked his father for ships and men with which to go back and conquer Ireland for himself. His father consented rather reluctantly, and sent with Bres a powerful warrior called Balor of the Evil Eye. Balor had one eye in the middle of his forehead to see through, but he had another in the back of his head. This rear eye was so powerful that when it was open its beams slew every one in their path. It took four men to raise the lid of that eye with a polished rod.

The Tuatha De Danann had in their army Nuada of the Silver Hand, the Dagda and his brother Ogma, and a newcomer called Lugh. This young man had been reared by Eochaid of the Fir Bolg. His father was one of the Tuatha De Danann, however the boy had come back to his people as soon as he was grown. They were glad to have him, for he was master of all the ancient arts of Ireland. In after days Lugh was the father of the great hero, Cu Chullin.

The armies took seven years to prepare for battle. The smith Goibniu made the arms for the Tuatha De Danann. The Dagda, who was a great magician, prepared to throw the mountains of Ireland down on the heads of the Fomorians, and to shut off the river and lakes from

them, so that they would die of thirst. Morrighu, the goddess of war, was persuaded to join the Tuatha De Danann.

Under a truce the Dagda visited the camp of the Fomorians. They had heard that he was greedy and especially fond of porridge. They accordingly prepared for him a kettle of soup made of eighty pots of milk with meal and fat to thicken it, and with halves of pigs and sheep cooked along with the rest. When it was cooked they had no pot large enough to pour it in, so they had to put it in a hole in the ground. Then they gave the Dagda a spoon so large that the bowl of it would contain a man and a woman, and said, "Unless you eat all that is there, you shall be put to death."

The Dagda ate it all with good appetite and scraped the hole with his finger. Then he went to sleep to digest his soup. When he awoke he went home to the Tuatha De Danann camp, but he had to go very slowly because of the food he had eaten. His club, which he trailed behind him, was so heavy that it made a furrow deep enough to serve as the boundary between the two provinces.

The battle began on the last day of October. In the terrible fighting Nuada of the Silver Hand was killed. In the heat of the battle Lugh of the Long Arm went

up to Balor of the Evil Eye and whispered something to him. No one heard what it was, but Balor became so enraged that he lifted the lid of his evil eye without help. Then Lugh cast a stone through the evil eye so fiercely that it went through Balor's brain and out the eye in his forehead and he died. Bres was captured but his life was spared, because his mother had been of the Tuatha De Danann. The sword of the Fomorian King, was captured by Ogma. As Ogma drew it out of the scabbard to clean the blood off of it, the sword began to speak and related all the deeds that it had done.

But the Fomorians captured booty also—the famous harp of the Dagda. It had sleep strains; when they were struck no man could remain awake. It had weep strains and laugh strains, and no man could resist them. The Dagda went to the hall of the Fomorians to regain his harp. The Fomorians had hung it on the wall, but when its master called to it, it came down from the wall and went to him so fast that it killed nine men who were in the way. Then he played the sleep strain on the harp, and all the Fomorians lay down and slept, and the Dagda escaped.

The Fomorians were defeated so badly that they returned to their own country across the sea, and they never molested the people of Ireland again. The Tuatha

De Danann elected as king the Dagda, who ruled in the land for one hundred and sixty-eight years.

¶

¶

Among the most popular of the Irish stories are three that are called the Three Sorrows of Story Telling. They are "The Fate of the Children of Tuirenn," "The Fate of the Children of Lir," and "The Fate of the Children of Usnach." The first two belong to the mythological cycles of tales, but the last, which is the famous story of Deirdre, is one of the Red Branch tales. "The Fate of the Children of Lir" shows plainly the changes made by the Christian narrator.

¶

¶

THE FATE OF THE CHILDREN OF TUIRENN

Lugh, the son of Kain, sent his father to gather together all the fairy people to help in the war against the Fomorians. Kain was hurrying across the plain of Muirthemne in Ulster when he met three warriors, the sons of Tuirenn. Now a blood-feud existed between Kain and the house of Tuirenn, so that Kain had no desire to meet them. Striking himself with his magic wand, he turned into a pig, and joined a herd of swine feeding near by. But the quick eye of Brian, the eldest of the three warriors, saw him. Using his magic wand, he

turned his two brothers into dogs, who attacked the pig and drove it toward Brian, who thrust his spear into its heart.

Kain cried from the body of the pig in a human voice begging to be allowed to resume his human form before he died.

“I had rather kill a man than a pig,” said Brian.

When Kain stood before them in human form, he cried, “If ye had slain a pig, ye needed to pay only the blood-fine of a pig, but now ye have slain a man and ye must pay the blood-fine of a man. And the weapons ye slay me with shall tell the tale to him who shall avenge my death.”

“Then we will slay you with no weapons,” shouted Brian. He drew out the spear, and he and his brothers stoned Kain to death. When they tried to bury the body the earth refused to receive it six times, but the seventh time it remained under the sod.

After the battle Lugh missed his father and set out to look for him. When he crossed the place of his father’s grave, the stones of the field called out to him and told him the manner of his father’s death. Lugh jumped from his horse, dug up his father’s body, and kissed it three times. Turning to his companions he said, “Now will it be ill with the sons of Tuirenn.”

Lugh returned to Tara, called for the slayers of his father, and demanded his blood-fine. Brian swore that he and his brothers had not killed Kain.

“Nevertheless,” said he, “we will give the blood-price for Kain, as though we had done the act.”

In the presence of the assembled warriors Lugh pronounced the blood-fine. “Three apples, the skin of a pig, a poisoned spear, a cooking spit, and three shouts on a hill.”

The fine sounded easy, but when the sons of Tuirenn had accepted it, Lugh explained what he meant. The apples were to be those that grew in the garden of the sun, the pig skin was a magic skin that healed the wounds of any man it was laid upon, the spear belonged to the king of Persia, the cooking spit belonged to the sea nymphs of the sunken island of Finchory, and the three shouts were to be given on the hill belonging to Moachan, a fierce warrior who had sworn never to let any man raise his voice there.

The sons of Tuirenn spent all of their lives paying the blood-fine for Kain. Each time they returned with a part of it Lugh reminded them of what was still to be paid. Brian put on a water dress and stole the magic spit from the fifty nymphs on the island of Finchory, which is far under the sea. After a terrible fight the

brothers killed Moachan and his sons; and although they were mortally wounded, they gave three feeble cries from the top of the hill. They then sent in haste to Lugh asking him to lend them the magic pig skin that would cure their wounds, but Lugh refused to send it. They died, and their aged father dug a wide grave for the three and died with them.



THE FATE OF THE CHILDREN OF LIR

Lir, a warrior of the Tuatha De Danann, had four children—a daughter called Fionuala, and three sons, Conn, Fiacha, and Hugh. The mother of the children had died, and Lir had married a lovely woman named Aoife. At first Aoife was a devoted step-mother to the children, but as time went on she felt that her husband slighted her because of his love for his sons and daughter. Her jealousy grew so great that she lay in bed a whole year, brooding over her wrongs until she resolved to kill the four children.

First she tried to bribe the servants into murdering the children. They refused, and she had not the courage to do it herself. Instead she persuaded them to go bathing in Lake Derryvaragh. When they were in the water, she changed them into four white swans and laid a curse upon them. For three hundred years they were

to live in the waters of Lake Derryvaragh; for three hundred years in the waters of the Straits of Moyne, between Ireland and Scotland; for three hundred years in the Atlantic ocean by Inshglory. Never could they be saved from their bird fate until a Christian bell was heard over Ireland.

As soon as the wicked deed was done Aoife repented, but she could not undo the spell. She tried to make their lot easier by giving the swans the power of human reason and human speech and the gift of sweet music. This kindness did not save her from being punished for her crime. She was turned into an evil demon of the air and was never heard of again.

When Lir found what had happened to his children, he moved his home to the shore of the lake, so that he might be near them. Other people came in companies to hear the sweet music of the swans, and for three hundred years there was peace and gentleness in the land.

But the day came when they must leave their friends for the lonely, dangerous seas of Moyne. Here they endured terrible hardships in the cold storms. Fionuala sheltered her brothers with her wings and sang:

*Cruel to us was Aoife
Who played her magic upon us,
And drove us out on the water—*

*Four wonderful snow-white swans.
“Three sons and a single daughter
In clefts of the cold rocks dwelling,
The hard rocks, cruel to mortals—
We are full of keening tonight.”*

When the time for the third period of their doom came, they flew to Inshglory, off the coast of County Mayo, where a young Milesian farmer who lived on Erris Bay befriended them. A hermit came to live on Erris Bay. He built a chapel with a bell. When the swans heard the bell ring they swam to the shore singing a song in praise of God. The good saint was amazed to hear swans sing, but when he had heard their story, he was glad to baptize them. As he did so their swan feathers fell away revealing four wizened old people. They died almost at once. The hermit buried them all in one grave as Fionuala requested. “Lay us in one grave,” she said, “and place Conn on my right hand and Fiacha at my left hand, and Hugh before my face, for there they were wont to be when I sheltered them many a winter night on the seas of Moyle.”

☉

☉

The Tuatha De Danann had ruled for almost two hundred years when Ireland was again invaded, this time by the sons of Mil. The story has already been told

of Ith, who paid with his life for his appreciation of the beauties of the land. At the time Ith came to Ireland, the country was ruled by the three grandsons of the Dagda, who had for wives the three women whose names are poetic synonyms for Ireland throughout Irish literature—Banba, Fodla, and Eriu or Erin.

The sons of Mil came to Ireland to avenge the death of their grandfather Ith. They had with them thirty-six chiefs and their families, and the first poet whose name has been recorded, Amergin of the White Knee. The Dagda had been a poet of the highest rank, an ollamh, but his reputation as a poet has been almost forgotten in his fame as a magician and warrior.

When the Milesians marched to Tara, they found assembled there the three kings of the Tuatha De Danann. They requested an armistice to decide whether they should fight or give hostages. The Milesians agreed and withdrew to the length of nine waves from the shore. Then the Tuatha De Danann raised a magic wind that tore at the Milesian ships and made Ireland look no bigger than a pig's back to their sight. Amergin sent a man up the masthead to see if there was wind aloft. There was none, so that he knew it was a magic tempest. Then Amergin chanted a lay and the waters became calm. When one of the Milesians exulted aloud at the thought

of how they would slay all of the Tuatha Da Danann, the tempest rose again. Many of the Milesian ships were lost, but the rest of the army finally reached land safely. At Teltown they met and defeated the Tuatha De Danann, killing the three kings and queens.

From this time on the Tuatha De Danann took refuge in the green hills of Ireland. There they had wonderful palaces adorned with great beauty. Therein were trees with fruit that never failed, together with a never ending supply of roast pig and good beer. There no one ever died. From these mounds they came forth at will to take part in the affairs of mortal men. They are found implicated in the affairs of the Red Branch. Women of the Tuatha De Danann seek mortal lovers, and men of the fairy world carry off earthly women to be their wives. These alliances are the subject matter of many tales. There is a story that Ethne, one of the Tuatha De Danann women, lived for fifteen hundred years until the coming of St. Patrick and by him was converted to Christianity.

The Dagda seems to have been the most important chieftain of the Tuatha De Danann. It was he who portioned out to them the fairy palaces of Ireland, called sidhe (shee). One he gave to Lugh, one to Ogma, and he kept two for himself. One of these he later lost to his son Angus. It is probable that some at least of these

ancient mounds were used as burial places for the early Irish kings, so that there would be plenty of reason for the Irish to associate them with the fairy people.

Of all the wooing stories that a file must know, there is none more lovely than the tale of Etain, half fairy and half mortal lady. So beautiful was she, legends tell, that she set the standard of what was fair in ancient Ireland. She was of the race of the Tuatha De Danann who had made their homes in the fairy mounds since their defeat by the Milesians. Like many another fairy woman, she became the wife of a mortal man and loved him tenderly, giving up her fairy privileges for his sake.

¶

¶

THE WOOING OF ETAIN

Midir, the fairy king of the mound of Bri Leith, loved Etain, the loveliest of all the fairy women. His wife Fuamnach hated Etain because of Midir's love for her. When she could bear her jealousy no longer, Fuamnach sought the aid of a druid. With his help she changed Etain into an insect. Then she raised a great wind and blew the frail insect about Ireland for seven years. At the end of that time Etain was blown to the palace of Angus, the son of the Dagda. In spite of her changed shape, Angus recognized Etain, took her in and cherished

her. He made a bower of blossoms and precious herbs for her, which he carried with him wherever he went.

But the jealous Fuamnach heard of the care that Angus gave Etain. She went to her husband and said, "Invite thy foster son Angus to visit thee, and I will go in search of Etain."

When this was done and Angus was gone from his palace, Fuamnach sought and found Etain in her bower. Again she transformed the unfortunate princess into a little animal, some say a butterfly, and raised such a blast of wind that Etain was driven over Ireland for another seven years. Weak and fainting, she fell through the roof of a dwelling where the men of Ulster were sitting over their ale. She dropped into the cup of the wife of Etar the warrior. The wife of Etar drank her with the beer that was in the cup, and in the course of time Etain was born again as the earthly daughter of the wife of Etar. They gave her the name Etain, the Daughter of Etar. In her father's palace she grew to maidenhood more fair than any other girl in all Ireland.

When Angus found how he had been deceived, and that Etain was gone from the bower where he kept her, he was very angry. He sought and found Fuamnach at the house of Bresal Etarlam, the druid. In his wrath he cut off her head and took it back to his kingdom,

where he stuck it upon a stake in front of his stronghold.

In the days when Etain was grown to a lovely golden-haired maid in her father's palace, there ruled in Ireland a high king called Eochaid Aiream. When he had been king for almost a year, he sent out a command that all the kings of Ireland and their wives should assemble at the end of the summer for the Festival of Tara. The kings of Ireland sent back answer: "We will not come to the Festival of Tara while the king of Ireland is without a wife who is worthy of him, for there can be no king without a queen, nor any noble who is wifeless."

Thereupon Eochaid sent out messengers to search through Ireland for a maid who would be a wife worthy of the king. She must be lovely in form and in face, and of high birth. Moreover she must never have been wife to any man. They came upon Etain at her father's palace and brought word of her beauty to the king.

When Eochaid went to see Etain to judge whether his couriers had given true reports of her loveliness, he found her bathing by the side of a fountain. Her arms were white as the snow of a single night; her cheeks were rosy as the foxglove. Even and small were her teeth, and they shone like pearls. Her eyes were as blue as the hyacinth, her lips delicate and crimson; very soft and white were her shoulders. White as the foam of the

waves was her side, long was it and soft as silk; smooth and white were her thighs, and her feet were white and slim. On her head were two tresses of golden hair, and each tress had been plaited into four strands; at the end of each strand was a little ball of gold. Never was a maid fairer than she, or more worthy of love.

She had long loved Eochaid for the tales of his comeliness and valor that she had heard, so that she went with him gladly. And great was the welcome that they gained at Tara when the festival was held.

Eochaid had a brother named Ailill, who came to the festival at Tara, and who loved Etain so greatly that he fell very ill. When the festival was over he was carried to Eochaid's palace at Tethba. There he wasted with the sickness for a year, but he would tell no one the cause of his trouble.

When Eochaid left Tethba to be gone for a year on a royal progress around Ireland, he called Etain to him and said: "Lady, deal gently with Ailill so long as he is alive, and should he die, see to it that his grave be dug, and that a standing stone carved with his name in Ogam be set up in memory of him."

When Etain went to the house where Ailill lay in his sickness, she soon saw what was the cause of his illness. She was greatly grieved that her husband's

brother should die for love of her, so that she made a tryst with him to meet her at the break of day in a house outside of the walls of the palace. There she would give him his desire, for she would not dishonor her husband in his own house. Each day for three days she made the tryst with Ailill, and each day he lay awake all the night thinking of their meeting, but fell asleep just at daybreak and so missed the tryst. Each day a strange man appeared at the place where Etain waited for Ailill and talked to Etain, but she did not know him.

On the third day, when Ailill had failed to keep his tryst, the stranger told Etain that he was Midir, her former husband. "It was I," he said, "who prevented Ailill from coming to meet thee, and saved thine honor. Wilt thou come with me?" But Etain loved her husband Eochaid and would not leave him.

When Etain returned to Tethba on the third morning she found that Ailill was cured of his sickness, and when Eochaid came back from his progress, he was pleased with his wife that she had been gracious to Ailill.

But Midir was resolved that he would have Etain again for his wife. One morning the high king went out upon a hill by Tara to look at the plain of Breg. As he looked about he saw a fair young warrior by his side, who had not been there the instant before.

“I give you welcome,” said Eochaid, “though I do not know your name.”

“My name is not known to you,” said the warrior. “I am Midir of Bri Leith.”

“For what purpose do you come?” asked the king.

“I have come to play a game of chess with thee,” replied Midir.

Now Eochaid was very skillful at chess, so that he readily accepted the challenge of Midir. They played two games, and, since Midir did not put forth his skill, Eochaid won them both. He demanded heavy stakes of Midir: that he clear away the rocks from the plain of Meath, that he remove the bushes from the land around Tethba, that he cut down forests, and that he build a road across the bog of Lamrach. All of these things Midir did with the aid of his fairy hosts.

After Midir had done all the things that Eochaid had asked, he demanded that they play one more game of chess. The stake of this last game was to be set by the winner. In that game Eochaid was defeated.

“What stake do you wish from me?” Eochaid asked.

“That I may hold Etain in my arms and obtain one kiss from her,” said Midir.

Eochaid could not refuse, but, wishing to postpone, and if possible prevent, the fulfillment of the bargain,

he said, "Come to my stronghold one week from today and you shall get what you request."

Now Midir had been wooing Etain secretly all this time, but she had refused to go with him back to the fairy world. She had said that she would go with him only if Eochaid permitted her to do so. She was sure that her husband loved her too much to allow her to leave him.

At the end of the month Eochaid called together his warriors at Tara. They guarded the palace without and filled the hall within. The king was with Etain in the midst of the warriors. The door of the hall was bolted. Yet, when the time came, Midir appeared in the midst of the crowded hall.

"I have come for my promise," he said. Then he placed his right arm about Etain and rose with her through the smoke-hole in the roof of the great hall. When the warriors rushed out to capture the abductor they saw only two swans flying about the palace. They watched the swans fly off, and the way that they took was the way to the fairy mound of Femun.

Then Eochaid dug up each of the fairy mounds of Ireland that he might get his wife back again. The hosts of Midir fought long and bitterly against him. Once Midir sent sixty women all in the shape of Etain,

and Eochaid chose one of them. When he found that he had been deceived, he returned again to sack Bri Leith. But this time Etain herself came to him, and he bore her away to Tara, where she lived with him all of her life.

p

p

From the time of the Milesians, the history of Ireland emerges somewhat from the shadowland of misty legend. The hero tales of the Milesians, who are the Celts of history, have usually some basis of fact. Whether there is any truth at all in any of the tales of the mythological cycle, or whether they were born in the imaginations of the poets, will probably never be known, yet the heroes and heroines of both the mythological and the heroic stories have left their names all over Ireland. Their battles, their harbors, their homes, and the marks of their passing are immortalized in the place names of the fords, mounds, and plains of the island.

According to tradition the events of the mythological cycle were followed by those of the Ulster, or Red Branch, cycle, which corresponds in Ireland to the legends of the Round Table in England and on the Continent.

x



FOUR

THE CU CHULLIN CYCLE

TALES OF THE RED BRANCH WARRIORS OF ULSTER

*“My spouse is the hound of Cullin, and not a
hound that is feeble;*

*A brave and valiant hero, like a fury he fights
in the tumult,*

*Dexterous of aim and agile, and quick and sure
at the hunting;*

*And find ye a man among men folk, a mould
that may match with Cu Chullin.”*

The Boast of Cu Chullin’s Wife, Emer

KING CONCHOBAR, according to the Irish annals, ruled in Ulster about the beginning of the Christian era. He had his capital at Emain Macha, just west of the site of the present town of Navan. There he gathered about him a company of heroes called the Red Branch, said to have been named from the building where they kept the captured weapons and heads of their slain enemies.

Among this company of heroes was Cu Chullin, son

of the king's sister, Dechtire. Next to him in feats of arms was Conall Cernach, his friend and companion. Fergus mac Roigh, a good-natured giant of a man, who had been tricked out of the kingship of Ulster by Conchobar, was also a friend of Cu Chullin.

Most of the heroic stories of the Red Branch warriors center around Cu Chullin, but there is one which, although not about him, is so famous that it must be told here. It is the tragic tale of Deirdre, the third of the "three sorrows of story-telling."



THE FATE OF THE CHILDREN OF USNACH

King Conchobar and his Red Branch warriors went to a feast at the house of Feidlimed, who was chief story-teller to the king. As they sat in Feidlimed's hall, word was brought to them that the wife of Feidlimed had given birth to a daughter. The child was brought in for them to see. She was very lovely even then. But Cathbad, the druid, took the baby and said, "Her name shall be called Deirdre, which means trouble, for woe shall be upon her."

The men of Ulster demanded that the child be killed, but Conchobar said, "Not so! She shall be reared in my house, and when she is grown she shall be my wife."

Conchobar was a man of middle age even then, and

his wife, Medb, had left him years before and had married Aillil, the king of Connacht.

The warriors could not turn Conchobar from his purpose. The baby was taken to a house apart from the court. There she was cared for by Levorcham, a slave woman. She was permitted to see no man save her tutor until she should be the king's wife. She grew to be the fairest maiden in all Ireland. Blue were her eyes, yellow her hair, and her teeth were like a shower of pearls in her mouth.

It happened on a day when Deirdre was fourteen that snow lay upon the ground, for it was winter, and her tutor killed a calf beneath her window. The blood of the calf ran out upon the snow and a raven flew down from a tree and drank of the blood. Then Deirdre cried to her nurse, "Such a man could I love and him only, who has the three colors yonder—his hair like the raven, his cheeks like the blood, and his body like the snow."

Levorcham was surprised that she should think of such a man, for the knowledge of all men save the king had been kept from her. "You have described Naisi, one of the three sons of Usnach," she said.

"Then go and find him," pleaded the maiden, "and tell him how much greater my love is for him than for King Conchobar."

“Tell him yourself, if you can,” said Levorcham. But she went out and sought Naisi until she found him, and he came to Deirdre’s dwelling at the beginning of the night, without her tutor’s knowledge.

When Naisi saw the beauty of the maiden, he was filled with a flood of love for her. She begged him to take her and escape from Ireland, but Naisi thought of the prophecy of Cathbad and of the anger of Conchobar, so that he was afraid. But Deirdre won him in spite of his fears.

In the middle of the next night Naisi, with his two brothers, Ardan and Ainle along with him, came and lifted the girl over the wall of her house and carried her off. Long were they pursued by Conchobar, until at length they entered a ship and were driven to the coast of Scotland.

They took shelter there with the king of Scotland and served him well in war. They made themselves houses near the king’s dwelling, where they placed Deirdre for fear that men might see her and slay them on her account. For it was the fate of Deirdre that her beauty should bring trouble to all those she loved, just as Cathbad had prophesied.

The king saw Deirdre and desired her for his wife, so that he gathered together the men of Scotland to destroy

the sons of Usnach. But Deirdre warned her husband and they fled away in the night and took refuge on an island of the sea.

When Conchobar heard of the trouble of the sons of Usnach, he determined to send to them and invite them back to Ireland so that he might kill them and have Deirdre for his wife as he had planned. He sent Fergus mac Roigh with a pledge of friendship and safety to Naisi and his brothers. When Fergus landed on the island he sent forth a great cry. Naisi and Deirdre were sitting in their hunting booth playing chess when the call came.

Naisi lifted his head and listened, and said, "I hear the call of a man of Erin."

"That is not the call of a man of Erin," said Deirdre, "but the call of a man of Scotland."

Two times Fergus called, and both times Deirdre insisted that it was not the cry of a man of Ireland. At last Naisi recognized the voice of Fergus, his friend, and sent his brother to greet him. Then Deirdre told Naisi that she had known the voice of Fergus from the beginning.

"Why did you conceal it then, my queen?" asked Naisi of his wife.

"I had a vision last night," said Deirdre. "Three birds came to us from Emain having three cups of honey in

their beaks, and they left them with us, but they took with them three sups of our blood.”

All of Deirdre's pleadings were of no avail. The sons of Usnach were homesick for the sight of Ireland once more, and with Fergus's pledge of safety they were not afraid to return. In the morning they set sail, while Deirdre wept and sang a lament for leaving the land where she had been happy.

Fergus mac Roigh was under a taboo never to refuse an invitation to a feast. The king knew of this taboo, and he caused Barach, an Ulster warrior, to ask Fergus to remain at his home for a feast while Deirdre and the sons of Usnach went on to Emain Macha without him. As they came near the king's palace terrible dreams and visions troubled Deirdre. She saw a blood-red cloud over the palace. With all her power she urged her husband and his brothers to wait for Fergus or to turn aside to the home of Cu Chullin for safety. But they could not be persuaded that treachery was planned against them.

When they reached Emain Macha, they were sent to the house of the Red Branch and not to the king's own palace where the warriors were gathered. In the night the king sent Levorcham to see how Deirdre looked. The old nurse knew of the evil that was planned and brought

back the story that Deirdre had wholly lost her beauty. But the king thought of her a second time and sent a man-servant. The sons of Usnach had shut and barricaded the windows and doors of the Red Branch, but the man climbed up to a small opening in the back and looked down upon Naisi and Deirdre playing chess. Naisi saw the face looking at them and hurled a chessman at it so fiercely that it broke one of the man's eyes. The servant ran back to Conchobar and told him that it was worth losing an eye to behold such beauty.

Then Conchobar was mad with drink and desire for Deirdre, so that he forgot the giving of his word and sent his forces under the leadership of Eoghan against the Red Branch. All night long the battle stormed. The sons of Usnach with the help of Fergus's sons repelled the attack and put out the fires that were set to the building. In the morning one of the sons of Fergus accepted a bribe of lands and cattle to desert Naisi. But still the forces of Conchobar could not prevail, until Cathbad, the same druid that had given Deirdre her name, made a spell against them. When Deirdre and the three brothers were escaping from the Red Branch, which by morning was almost half burned down, they were met by magic waves, so that they threw down their weapons and tried to swim. Then the soldiers of Conchobar captured them.

Cathbad had made Conchobar swear that if he worked the spell against the sons of Usnach no harm would be done to them. The king had promised; but, when they were brought before him, so great was his hate that he commanded that they be at once beheaded, all three with one sword stroke. Then the druid cursed Emain Macha and the house of Conchobar. He said that the palace should be burned to the ground, that woe should fall upon the province of Ulster, and that no son of Conchobar should ever rule after him. And that curse was fulfilled, for Fergus burned the palaces of Emain in his wrath at having been tricked by Conchobar; woe fell upon the province in the wars with Connacht; and no descendant of Conchobar ever ruled in Ulster.

Deirdre tore herself away from the men who were guarding her and uttered a lament over the grave of Naisi. She sang:

*“The lions of the hill are gone
And I am left alone—alone—
Dig the grave both wide and deep,
For I am sick and fain would sleep.*

*“Woe to me! By fraud and wrong,
Traitors false and tyrants strong,
Fell Clan Usnach, bought and sold,
Through Barach’s feast and Conor’s gold.*

*“Woe to Emain, roof and wall!
Woe to Red Branch, hearth and hall!
Tenfold woe and black dishonor
To the foul and false Clan Conor!”*

*“Dig the grave both wide and deep,
Sick I am and fain would sleep!
Dig the grave and make it ready,
Lay me on my true-love’s body.”*

As she finished the lament she fell into the grave where the three sons of Usnach were buried and died upon their bodies.

This is the end of the tragic tale of Deirdre as the recent story-tellers tell it, but there is another tale which the older bards know that is even more terrible. They say that after the murder of Naisi, Deirdre was seized by the men of Ulster, and her hands bound behind her back, and that she was then taken before King Conchobar, who forced her to live with him for a year as his wife. During that year she neither smiled nor laughed, nor did she ever raise her head from her knee.

At the end of the year the king was tired of such a wife, so that he came to her and said, “What is it that you hate most in the world?”

“Thou thyself, and after thee, Eoghan, son of Dur-

of Ireland, where it has been used as the basis of many poems and plays. But it is time now to turn to Cu Chullin, the hero of the most thrilling of the romantic tales.

¶

¶

THE BIRTH OF CU CHULLIN

Dechtire, the sister of King Conchobar of Ulster, together with fifty of her maids, went away without the knowledge of her brother. The king searched for three years, but no trace of them was found. At the end of that time a flock of birds came to visit a field near the king's palace at Emain Macha. They devoured the herbage of the field, even to the roots of the grass under the ground. The men of Ulster were angry at seeing them destroy the grass. Accordingly they harnessed nine chariots in order to hunt the birds, for hunting birds was a custom in Ulster.

The birds flew before them all day. The chariots followed, for there were no stone or earth walls in Ireland then, nothing but smooth fields. Beautiful and lovely was the bird flock and the bird song which accompanied it. In front of the whole band were two birds separated from the rest. They flew ahead of the chariots to the borders of the province. Then night came and a heavy snow fell. Conchobar ordered his attendants to unhitch the horses from the chariots and sent Fergus to search

for a house where they might find food and shelter for the night.

After some time Fergus came upon a little dwelling where a man and woman gave him welcome. He thought that the place was too small for the company, but when they came inside there was room for all. When they had eaten, Bricriu of the Poison Tongue, the trouble maker, went out from the house and heard the sound of sweet melody. He followed the sound and found that it came from a mansion not far away. There he was met by a handsome warrior who bade him welcome.

“Have you missed anyone from Emain Macha?” the warrior asked.

“We have, indeed,” replied Bricriu. “Fifty young maidens have been lost to us for three years.”

“The fifty young maidens are here,” said the young man, “and with them is Dechtire, who has been my wife. They were changed into birds that they might fly to Emain Macha to draw the Ulstermen hither.”

The young warrior was the god Lugh the Long Handed. When Bricriu returned the king asked him what he had seen. He told of the mansion and in it the group of women richly dressed, one of them a princess of truly royal bearing. In the morning the king went to see the mansion, but found nothing but a hut and

in it a baby boy, just born. Then Bricriu explained that the boy was the son of Dechtire. They wrapped the baby warmly and took him home to Emain Macha. He was given the name Setanta, but later he won for himself the name Cu Chullin, which means "the Hound of Cullan."

☺

☺

The story of the Tain Bo Cuailnge, or Cattle Raid of Cooley, is the great epic of ancient Ireland. It is found in several of the oldest manuscripts and was written down as early perhaps as the seventh century. Cooley is a district of Ulster lying in the present county of Louth. Today it is a manufacturing district, one of the most prosaic parts of Ireland.

The story of how the Tain came to be written down is as follows:

☺

☺

THE WRITING OF THE TAIN

According to the annals of the Four Masters, Guaire Aidhne, son of Colman, was king of Connacht in the middle of the seventh century. It was said of him that he was so hospitable that his right hand had grown longer than his left from constant giving. Because of his reputation for good entertainment, the Bardic Institution, or company of the poets of Ireland, came to visit Guaire.

Seanchan was chief poet of Ireland at the time. He

took with him to Connacht one hundred and fifty bards, one hundred and fifty students, one hundred and fifty men servants and the same number of women servants, together with hounds and female relatives. Guaire welcomed the great company and led them to a dwelling which he had caused to be built for their special use. His servants laid a feast before them and the king assured them that whatever they desired they might ask for and they should have it.

Each night a member of the company made an extraordinary wish. They wished for blackberries and strawberries when the season was winter; they wished for garments of spider's web, for pet cuckoos, for a meal of the fat of a water blackbird, and other strange desires. All of these Guaire procured for them with the help of his brother Marvan, who lived in the woods as a swineherd, but who was a magician as well. In order to fulfill one of the wishes Marvan was forced to kill his own pet white boar.

Because of the loss of his boar Marvan planned to have revenge on the Bardic Institution. He came to the house that Guaire had built for them and asked them for entertainment. They sang for him until they could sing no more. Then one of the bards said, "I am the best story-teller in Ireland. I will tell a story for thee."

“If thou art the best story-teller in Erin,” said Marvan, “thou knowest the principal stories of Erin.”

“I do indeed,” replied the poet.

“Well, then,” said Marvan, “relate to me the Tain Bo Cuailnge.”

Silence seized the story-teller and Seanchan reproved him for it. “What are you about,” said he, “in not telling the story to Marvan?”

“Have patience, O chief poet,” said the bard. “I have not heard that the Tain was ever written in Erin, nor do I remember it all.”

At this Seanchan was silent, for he did not know all of the Tain. Then Marvan put them under a taboo not to stay more than two nights in one place, nor to compose more than one poem until they found the Tain. Thus he planned to free his brother of the great company.

There was a tradition that the Tain had been taken into Scotland, so that the bards journeyed to that country to search. They traveled across Scotland from the north to the south and from the east to the west, and remained there a year, but they found no tidings of the Tain. Seanchan was troubled because of their failure and turned his face again to Ireland.

They were met there by St. Caillin, the brother of Seanchan. With him they proceeded to visit Marvan

to tell him of their failure and to ask him who could relate to them the story of the Tain.

“There is no man living in Erin who can tell it to you,” said Marvan, “nor is there any man among the dead who can relate the Tain, save one man only.”

“Who is that one person?” asked Seanchan.

“Fergus mac Roigh,” replied Marvan, “for it was he who had knowledge of the exploits of the men of Erin and of Ulster in the Tain, as it was his own pupil Cu Chullin who carried it on.”

Then Marvan directed them to send messages to all the saints of Ireland to come to the tomb of Fergus. There they were to fast for three days and three nights and pray that God would send the spirit of Fergus to them to tell them the story of the Tain. Caillin went forth and brought seven saints to the tomb. They feasted for one night; then they fasted and prayed for three nights, and the spirit of Fergus appeared to them. At first the warrior did not wish to sit down in the company of the saints, but they persuaded him, so that he told the story of the Tain seated upon his own grave.

There was no parchment at hand to write down the tale as Fergus spoke it, and the saints were afraid that they would forget parts of it. St. Ciaran killed his pet brown cow, and he and St. Caillin wrote the story on the hide

as Fergus spoke it. That is how the story of the Tain Bo Cuailnge came to be written down in the book called the "*Book of the Dun Cow*."

¶

¶

THE TAIN BO CUAILNGE

THE PILLOW TALK

One night when Ailill and Medb, king and queen of Connacht, had spread their royal bed, an argument came up between them as to which had the greater riches. In the morning, to settle the matter, they counted over all their possessions. They counted their pails and their cauldrons, their jugs and their iron vessels, and found that each had the same number. They counted their rings and apparel, their flocks of sheep, their horses, their droves of swine. All these were equal in value.

It was not until they came to number over their cattle that a difference was found. Among the herds of Ailill was a special bull called Finnebennach, the White-horned. He was a calf of one of Medb's cows, but he had gone over to the herds of the king, for he did not think it fitting for such a bull as he to be under the rule of a woman.

Then Medb sent for Mac Roth, the messenger, and bade him go through all the provinces of Erin to find another bull as great as the Finnebennach.

"Verily," said Mac Roth, "I know where the bull is

that is best and better again, in the province of Ulster, in the district of Cuailnge, in the house of Dare; even Donn Cuailnge, he is called."

"Go thou and ask Dare for the loan of the Brown Bull of Cuailnge, and at the year's end he shall have the bull back again with fifty heifers. If the border folk be unwilling to part with the bull let Dare himself come with it, and I will give him a measure of the smooth land of Mag Ai as large as his own lands and a chariot of the worth of seven bond-maids," commanded the queen.

Mac Roth went with nine companions to visit Dare and told him of the queen's offer, at which he was very joyful and promised to deliver the bull into the land of Connacht. But when the companions of Mac Roth were in drink that night, they boasted that if Dare had not given up the bull willingly it would have been taken by force. When this speech was repeated to Dare he was wrathful. "I swear by the gods my people swear by," he said, "they shall in no wise take by foul means what they cannot take by fair."

In the morning when Mac Roth came to take the bull he was refused. Back then went the messengers to Medb, who was at Cruachan, the stronghold of Connacht. Mac Roth told her how the dispute arose.

"Then," declared Medb, "if the Brown Bull of Cuailnge

is not taken with their will, he will be taken against their will, for taken he shall be.”

It must be known that these were no common bulls. They were so broad of back that fifty boys might play their evening games between the horns; their bellowings struck terror into the hearts of all who heard them. It was said that they were the last of a series of transformations and rebirths of two fairy swineherds.

¶

¶

As soon as she was resolved to go to war against Ulster, Medb began to gather her troops for the fray. First she went to visit her druid to find out if she should return safely from the conflict. The druid said to her, “Whoever returns not, thou thyself shalt return.” But as she was going home from the druid’s dwelling she saw a maiden standing on the shaft of her chariot. This was Fedelm, a maiden out of a fairy mound, and Medb asked her what would be the fate of her army on its invasion of Ulster. Three times the fairy gave the same reply:

*“Crimson-red with blood are they;
I behold them bathed in red.”*

When Medb pressed her for more details she sang a song about Cu Chullin and the part he would have.

*“All your hosts he’ll smite in twain,
Till he works your utter ruin.”*

The warning of the fairy maiden did not deter Medb from her course, and she set to work immediately to gather her army. She persuaded the kings of Leinster and Munster to join her. Fergus mac Roigh and fifteen hundred Ulster warriors also formed part of her army. They had never forgiven King Conchobar for his treachery in killing the sons of Usnach. Fergus himself, because he was familiar with the country which they were to invade, was placed at the head of Medb's troops. She promised her lovely daughter Finnabar in marriage to no less than twelve kings in order to get their help on the Tain.

When her army was gathered together Medb set out for Ulster. Her spies had brought word that the men of Ulster were all in bed with a sickness. This ailment came upon them periodically as punishment for a cruel wrong they had done to Macha, a fairy goddess.

The Connacht army crossed the river Shannon at the present town of Athlone and came to thick forests near the present Kells. There they had to cut a path for their chariots. They camped that night on the borders of Ulster.

Cu Chullin hid himself during the day, but came out at night and killed one hundred of Medb's soldiers. Two guards were placed at the ford to watch for him. When he found them he cut off their heads and those of their

charioteers, stuck them up on poles at the ford, and sent the chariots, bearing the headless bodies dripping blood, back to Medb.

The queen asked Fergus that night about this seventeen-year-old youth who was able to perform such feats. Fergus and others of the Ulstermen who were with Medb's army spent the night telling her about the boyish deeds of Cu Chullin. There is not space here to tell of the many deeds that the hero did in his boyhood: of how he defeated the boy troop of Ulster singlehanded; of how he took arms on the day he was seven years old and slew the three sons of Nachta Scene; of how he caught the wild deer in the marshes, tied them to his chariot, and brought them home alive to Emain Macha; of how he got his famous horses, the Grey of Macha and the Black of Sainglenn, out of the lochs of Ireland and tamed them in one night of circling around Ireland. But there is one of the boyish deeds, which, because it explains how he got his name, should be told here:

e

e

THE SLAYING OF THE SMITH'S HOUND

A smith of Ulster was called Cullan. One night he made a feast for King Conchobar and his warriors. When the king was setting out in his chariot for the feast he passed the boys playing and invited little Setanta to

go with him. The boy refused, because they were not yet done with their game.

“There is no need for you to wait,” he said. “I will follow the track of the chariots.”

Conchobar and his men went on to the smith’s house, where a great feast had been prepared for them. They ate and drank and were merry, so that they forgot that the boy had said he would come after them.

Cullan, the smith, said to the king, “Will there be anyone else of your people coming after you tonight?”

The king said that there would not be. He had forgotten the coming of Setanta.

“I have a great hound,” explained the smith, “and when I take the chain off him, he will let no one come into my land, and he has the strength of a hundred.”

When the boys at Emain Macha were through playing, Setanta started out to follow the trail of the chariots. He came to the land of Cullan and the great hound rushed at him as if to swallow him in one mouthful. The lad had not any means of defense, but he threw his ball straight down the beast’s red throat, and grasping the great hind legs, dashed the hound’s brains out against a stone. The men at the feast heard the yelping of the great dog and were afraid.

“Alas, O warriors,” cried Conchobar, “in no good luck

have we come here to enjoy this feast. My sister's son, who has come to meet me, is undone through this hound."

As one man, arose all the renowned men of Ulster. Fergus arrived first and set the boy, all unharmed, on his shoulder, and so brought him to Conchobar.

But Cullan was grieved at the slaughter of his hound. "Welcome thy coming, little lad," he said, "for the sake of thy father and thy mother, but not for thyself. Good was the friend thou hast robbed me of. He was the protection of our cattle, both at home and afield."

"Be not angered thereat, O Cullan, my master," said the boy. "If there is a puppy of this dog in Erin he shall be reared by me till he be fit to do the business as was his sire. Until then myself will be thy hound."

"Well hast thou given judgment, little lad," said Cathbad, the druid. "From this thou shalt take the name of Cu Chullin, the Hound of Cullan."

"I like better my own name, Setanta, son of Sualtam," answered the boy.

"Say not so, lad," Cathbad continued, "for the men of Erin and of Scotland shall hear that name, and their mouths shall be full of the praise of that name."

¶

¶

The queen offered gold to Cu Chullin if he would join the forces of Connacht. When that failed, she offered

to give him the beautiful Finnabar in marriage, but that only roused the hero's contempt. He sent a message by Fergus mac Roigh that he would stop the night killings if she would send one warrior each day to meet him in single combat at the ford. During the time these combats were going on the Connacht army was to remain in camp.

This was a fair offer according to the ancient rules of Irish chivalry, and Queen Medb thought that it would be better to lose one man a day than a hundred each night; so she agreed to the conditions. Thus every day but three from the first of November to the first of February Cu Chullin fought a combat at the ford. He always killed his foe. The warriors of Connacht became so afraid of him that Queen Medb had to offer them bribes.

There is not space to tell of all the combats at the ford, but some are of special interest.

¶

¶

THE COMBATS AT THE FORD

On the day that Fergus came to the ford to make the terms regarding the single combats, a proud young warrior named Etarcumal came with him to look at Cu Chullin. When Fergus had returned to the camp of Medb, Etarcumal stayed behind to taunt Cu Chullin. Now Cu Chullin had no desire to fight with the young man, because he had come with Fergus, but he had no choice.

He took his sword and cut away the sod from under the feet of Etarcumal, so that he was stretched out on his back like a sack. Still the young man would not return to his camp. Cu Chullin then gave a well aimed sword stroke and sheared his hair from off his head from one ear to the other.

“Hold, fellow, get thee home now,” said Cu Chullin, “for I have made a laughing stock of thee.”

“I will not go,” said Etarcumal, “until I take thy head or thou takest mine.”

Then Cu Chullin severed his body in four pieces with two sword strokes. This was the first of the fights at the ford.

In turn Cu Chullin fought with and killed: Nathcran-tail, the father of four and twenty sons; Cur, son of Da Loth, whom he killed by throwing an apple through his head; the six princes hired to be bodyguard to Queen Medb, who came against him all at once, contrary to the agreement; Redg, the queen’s jester; Ferbaeth, his own old comrade in arms; and a great many others.

The goddess of war, Morrighu, came to Cu Chullin and offered him her love, but he refused it, so that from that time on she worked evil against him in his combats. During the fight at the ford with Loich she changed herself into a cow and drove a herd of fifty heifers across

the ford. Then she made herself into a great eel and twisted herself about Cu Chullin's legs, so that Loich wounded his breast while he was freeing himself. She came in the form of a grey wolf; while he was fighting with the wolf, Loich wounded his side.

Then Cu Chullin called for his charioteer Laeg, who was with him through all his battles, to bring him the Gae-Bulga. The Gae-Bulga was a spear that went into the body at one point, but when it was in the body it opened out into many points. This weapon had been given to Cu Chullin by his teacher Scathach, when he was learning feats of arms in Scotland. He thrust the Gae-Bulga into the breast of Loich. It pierced his heart, and he knew that he was dying. He made a last request of Cu Chullin, that he be allowed to fall with his face to the east, so that no man could say that it was in fear or in flight that he died. Cu Chullin stepped back, and Loich fell on his face and his soul departed.

For many months Cu Chullin had no sleep, save such as he could get while leaning on his spear. There came a day when he was bleeding from many wounds and very weary. He was about to get into his chariot to make one last attack on the Connacht army and to die fighting, for he was sure that he would be killed by the next man who fought him at the ford, so weary was he, when Laeg saw

the figure of a tall man coming through the enemy's camp. Straight through Medb's army the man walked, but no one seemed to be aware of his passing.

"Who art thou?" asked Cu Chullin wearily.

"Thy father from fairyland am I, Lugh. Heavy are the bloody wounds upon thee. Sleep thou a while, and for three days and three nights I will guard the ford." And he sang a lullaby that cast Cu Chullin into a deep sleep. While Cu Chullin slept his father laid healing herbs upon his wounds, so that he recovered from them and woke with the strength of twenty men.

During those three days of his sleep, one hundred and fifty boys of Ulster, led by Conchobar's son Follomain, came to do battle with Medb's army. They had only their boy weapons with which to fight. Three times their number of Connachtmen fell at their hands in that fight, but not one of the boys escaped alive. When Cu Chullin awoke and learned of the slaughter of the boy army, he called for his scythed war-chariot, donned his finest war garments, and drove against the host of Connacht.

At this time, on account of his great anger did Cu Chullin's distortion occur. One eye sank into his head; the other sprang forth on his cheek the size of five fists. His mouth was twisted up to his ears; his knees shifted so that they came behind him; the sinews of his neck

became as large as the head of a child. His hair stood out in spikes around his head, and a great red fire surrounded him. The heat of his body was so great that it melted the snow for thirty feet in every direction.

He drove six times through the army of Medb, and at each circuit he left the bodies of the slain piled six deep. Thus did Cu Chullin avenge the slaughter of the youths.

Only once did Cu Chullin spare the life of a warrior who fought against him at the ford. As the winter went on, Medb found it harder and harder to get warriors to fight with him. She promised each of them Finnabar for his wife if he should win, and made them drunk with wine to give them courage. This she did to Larine mac Nois, the brother of Lugaid, who was a friend and foster-brother of Cu Chullin. She hoped that if Cu Chullin killed Larine it would inflame Lugaid against him, for she thought that Lugaid could kill Cu Chullin. Lugaid understood the plot of Medb and went to Cu Chullin.

“They have persuaded a brother of mine to come and fight thee on the morrow, to wit, a foolish, dull, uncouth youth, dealing stout blows. Slay not my brother, lest thou leave me brotherless.”

“Kill him I will not,” cried Cu Chullin, “but the next thing to death will I do to him.”

When Larine reached the ford in the morning Cu

Chullin brushed his weapons aside, seized him in his arms and squeezed and shook him until the air was filled with dust. Then from the middle of the ford Cu Chullin hurled Larine far from him across the camp until he fell at his brother's door. From that time forth Larine never got up without a groan; he never lay down without a hurt; and he never ate without a pain.

As the winter wore on, Medb broke her promise to Cu Chullin and sent often as many as twenty men against him at once. He killed them all and never gave way himself until he fled before Fergus rather than fight with his old friend. When he fled from Fergus the army of Medb marched across the ford and camped in Ulster. But by now the weakness of the Ulstermen had left them and they gathered to do battle against the army of Connacht. One last fight, the worst of all, did Cu Chullin fight with his own comrade in arms, Ferdiad.

Fergus came the night before to warn Cu Chullin that Ferdiad was coming to fight with him the next day. Cu Chullin was sorrowful, for he had been a fellow student with Ferdiad in Scotland. Ferdiad loved Cu Chullin also, and said to his charioteer that he would rather die by the hand of Cu Chullin than that Cu Chullin should fall by his hand. But Ferdiad had given his promise to Medb and could not break it.

On the first day Ferdiad had the choice of weapons, for he had been the first to reach the ford. He chose to fight with spears and javelins. When the night came the two heroes gave their weapons to their charioteers and kissed each other three times in memory of old friendship. Ferdiad sent food and drink across the ford to Cu Chullin, while Cu Chullin sent healing herbs to Ferdiad.

The second day the choice of weapons fell to Cu Chullin. That day he chose to fight with lances and in chariots. They each made such great wounds in the bodies of the other that the birds could have flown through the holes. Again that night they exchanged gifts across the ford, but their wounds were too great to be healed, even with the fairy herbs sent by the father of Cu Chullin.

The third day's fighting was with swords. Neither one gained the advantage. The fourth day decided the conflict. Each of the warriors tried new feats they had invented for the occasion. So fierce was the fighting that the river was forced out of its bed. So close was the fighting that Cu Chullin's fairy friends came to take part in it, and one of them was killed by Ferdiad. At last Cu Chullin sent for the Gae-Bulga. He threw it with all his might. It split the breastplate of Ferdiad, and opened with a hundred barbs in his body, so that he died.

Then Cu Chullin carried the body over the ford to his own side and made a lament over his dead friend. The hurt of his own wounds was so great that when he had finished singing he fell in a faint at the side of Ferdiad.

This was the last of the great combats at the ford.



THE ENDING OF THE TAIN

Cu Chullin had pretended to flee when Fergus came to fight him at the ford. The two warriors had made a bargain that if Cu Chullin would retreat from Fergus at the ford, then Fergus would flee from Cu Chullin sometime when he needed it. This was the reason that Fergus fled with his army in the great battle of the Tain, and the reason for the defeat of the forces of Queen Medb.

As has been seen, the great host had crossed the ford into Ulster. The men of Ulster rose from their sickbeds and gathered to protect their province. Bands of troops led by all the great warriors of Ulster gathered at Garich upon the plain of Meath. The messenger of Queen Medb, Mac Roth, watched them come and brought word to the queen. Fergus told the queen the name of the leader of each troop by Mac Roth's description of their dress and armor. Fergus had been an Ulster man himself before he left the province in anger at the treachery of King Conchobar to the sons of Usnach.

But Fergus was a mighty warrior for Connacht in that battle. Three times he drove the Ulster forces back until King Conchobar himself hurried northward to see what was the cause of the retreat. Then the enemies met face to face after many bitter years. Fergus smote three tremendous blows upon the shield of Conchobar, so that the shield screamed and the waves of the sea answered.

“Who holds his shield against me in this battle?” demanded Fergus.

“O Fergus,” cried the evil king, “one who is greater than thyself, who slew the three sons of Usnach in spite of thy promise of protection, who banished thee out of thy lands and made of them a dwelling place for foxes, who will drive thee back to the entertainment of the women of Connacht.”

Then Fergus would certainly have slain the king, for he hammered his shield with mighty blows, if Cu Chullin had not saved Conchobar. Cu Chullin had heard the cries of the shield as he lay in his tent, and Laeg had told him that the king was being hard pressed by Fergus. Then Cu Chullin rose up from his sick bed, cast off the bandages from his wounds, and with his blood gushing from them in rivers, charged into the midst of the battle.

He said to Fergus, “You did promise to flee from me when I should require it, even as I fled from you.”

Fergus made three great strides from Cu Chullin, turned, and fled. As he retreated the men of Leinster and the men of Munster fled with him. Then Cu Chullin marched into the press of the battle around Queen Medb. It was noon when he came. By sunset none of the men of Connacht remained on the plain of Meath, save only those that were dead.

¶

¶

THE BATTLE OF THE BULLS

Before the battle of Garich, Queen Medb had captured the Brown Bull of Cuailnge and had sent the bull with fifty heifers back to her palace at Cruachan in Connacht. When he saw the strange land he raised his head and bellowed, so that the sound of his bellowing rang over all the plains of Ireland. Finnebennach, the White-horned, heard him with terrible anger, for he would let no bull make a sound louder than a cow's moo in his territory. He hastened to Cruachan to look for the daring Brown Bull of Cuailnge.

Then the men who were returning from their own great defeat stayed to watch the fight of the bulls. They tore the earth so furiously that great sods flew over their shoulders; they rolled their eyes like lightnings. They fought all day, thrusting and charging and goring. That night the struggle of the bulls carried them all over Ireland.

When morning came the men of Connacht saw the Brown Bull returning with the torn and bleeding body of Finnebennach on his horns.

The men of Connacht would have killed the Brown Bull if Fergus had not forbidden it. "I pledge my word," he cried, "what has already been done is a small thing in comparison with that which will now take place, unless with his spoils and victory you let the Brown Bull of Cuailnge go from you into his own land."

The Brown Bull went homeward, and as he went he shook parts of the body of Finnebennach from his horns. There are today places in Ireland named Bull's Loin, and Bull's Ribs, and Bull's Hind Leg. He drank of the river Shannon at Athlone. When he came to his own land of Cuailnge there were women and children weeping for him. In the fury of his great rage he killed them. Then he turned his back to the hill and gave mad bellowings of triumph until his heart burst and he belched it up with great rivers of blood and died.

This is the end of the Tain Bo Cuailnge.

© ©

Cu Chullin died when he was twenty-seven years old. He took arms on a certain day when he was seven years old because Cathbad, the druid, had prophesied that whoever took arms on that day would be glorious and

renowned, but that the life of that person would be short.

“What care I,” cried Cu Chullin. “Little it matters to me if I live but a day and a night in the world, if my fame and my deeds live after me.”

He went to woo the maiden Emer, daughter of Forgal, who lived at Lusk, near the present city of Dublin. She was the only girl in Ireland who could talk to him in the ancient poet’s language. Her father did not wish her to marry a warrior. He persuaded Cu Chullin to go to Scotland, there to learn feats of arms from the famous woman warrior Scathach. Here he had as fellow school-mates many of the famous heroes of Ireland. Some of them fought with him in the Tain, and some fought against him. During his stay in Scotland he helped Scathach defeat her rival, Aoife. But Aoife fell in love with Cu Chullin, and when he left Scotland he left a ring for his child that was to be born to her.

Scathach gave Cu Chullin one weapon that she gave to no other of her pupils. That was the Gae-Bulga, which won for him the fight with Loich and with Ferdiad.

Back in Ireland Cu Chullin found that Emer was a prisoner in her father’s dwelling. He leaped with the warrior’s leap over the three walls of the fortress, seized Emer, and sprang back into his chariot. Forgal’s warriors pursued him; each time they overtook him he

stopped and killed a hundred men. So he came to Emain Macha, where he was wedded to Emer.

Once only was he separated from his wife as long as he lived. The tale of that separation is told in "The Only Jealousy of Emer," or as it is sometimes called, "The Sick-Bed of Cu Chullin." The tale relates how the fairy goddess Fand lured Cu Chullin away to live with her in Mag Mell, the fairy Other World. Emer was jealous of the fairy and prepared to kill her. Then Fand saw that she must not take Cu Chullin from the love of Emer, and she returned to her fairy husband.

Cu Chullin was successful in everything, but great grief came to him once. This is the story of that tragic grief:

Ⓟ Ⓟ

THE DEATH OF CONLACH

When Cu Chullin left Aoife in Scotland he gave her a gold ring and told her that if the child was a boy she was to keep him until his finger was large enough to fit the ring and then to send him to Ireland. He left three commands for his son. He was never to tell his name to any man through fear; he was never to refuse to fight in a single combat any warrior who came against him; and he was never to give way before any champion.

In time the boy was born and named Conlach, and

grew up under the teachings of his mother and Scathach, who were both famous warriors. When his finger was large enough to fit the ring he set out for Ireland to visit his father Cu Chullin, whom he had never seen. He came to Emain Macha when an assembly was taking place. Conchobar sent a messenger to ask the young man's name, but Conlach refused to tell it. Then Cu Chullin went to find out who the strange youth was, but had no better success. Thereupon Cu Chullin was angry and challenged the youth to single combat.

The fight was bloody between them, and the hero Cu Chullin was forced to retreat to a neighboring ford and to call for the Gae-Bulga. With this terrible weapon he killed Conlach. As the boy lay dying, Cu Chullin knelt by him on the sand and saw the ring on his finger. Then great was his grief, for he saw that he had killed his own son.

Conchobar laid a heavy blood-fine upon Cu Chullin for the slaying of Conlach, but Cu Chullin grieved for his son until his death.

¶

¶

THE DEATH OF CU CHULLIN

During the combats at the ford, Cu Chullin had killed the wizard Calatin and his twenty sons. Calatin's wife

bore three daughters after his death. These girls were reared to be witches, so that they might take revenge upon Cu Chullin. Lugaid, son of Curoi, and Erc, son of Cairbre Naifer, hated him because he had slain their fathers. Medb raised another army to go into Ulster and these enemies of Cu Chullin joined her. Conchobar knew that the raid was directed against Cu Chullin, so he sent for the hero to come to Emain Macha.

The three daughters of Calatin flew to Emain and surrounded the house, making the sounds of battle to lure him out to his death. They imitated shouts of warriors, clangs of weapons, and groans of the dying. Inside the palace the druids and the musicians and Emer, his wife, tried to keep Cu Chullin from rushing out to join the imaginary fight. They held him by force, and finally persuaded him that it was an enchantment that he heard. During the night the druid took him away and put him in Deaf Valley, where no sound could penetrate, but even here the witches came and made the yells of battle. Again the druid saved Cu Chullin from going forth.

Then one of the witches came in the form of a crow and taunted Cu Chullin for allowing his estates to be ruined, and another came in the form of a beautiful woman and urged him to go forth lest he should lose his renown as a warrior. At this he rose and took up his weapons.

As Cu Chullin went out to battle he was met with evil omens. His grey steed refused to be yoked to the chariot. As he passed along a plain he met three old hags cooking a dog.

“Come and eat with us,” they said.

“I shall not visit you,” he replied. For it was forbidden for him to eat the flesh of his name animal.

“Cu Chullin eats only in the homes of the rich,” sneered one of the hags.

Then for fear of offending he sat down and ate. When he tasted the flesh his left side became paralyzed.

He came to a ford and there he saw a red woman on the edge of the river washing a chariot and armor. When she lowered her hand the river became red with blood.

“What is it that you do?” asked Cu Chullin.

“I wash the harness of a king who will perish,” she said.

When he came to his own lands he found the enemy drawn up so closely that their shields made one solid wall. He fought them all day until the field was covered with parts of men’s bodies, as a meadow after a snow storm is covered with snowflakes. Then a druid came to him and asked for a spear. It was unlucky to refuse the request of a druid. Cu Chullin threw a spear at the druid so hard that it passed through his body and killed seven men besides. Lugaid picked up the spear, for it

was said that the spear of Cu Chullin would kill kings. Then Lugaid cast the spear back at Cu Chullin and it killed his faithful charioteer, Laeg.

“Now must I be both a warrior and a charioteer,” said Cu Chullin.

A second druid came and asked for a spear. The hero cast it at him as he had the other. It passed through his body and killed eighteen men besides. Erc picked it up and cast it back at Cu Chullin, striking the grey horse of Macha. Cu Chullin took a fond farewell of his horse, which galloped off to plunge beneath the waves of the lake from whence he had come.

A third druid came to Cu Chullin and asked for a spear. A third time Cu Chullin cast it, and it passed through the druid's body and killed twenty-seven men besides. Lugaid picked it up and hurled it at Cu Chullin. It struck him and passed through his body. The black horse of Sainglenn broke away from the chariot and never stopped running until he, too, plunged beneath the waves of his lake home. Cu Chullin lay dying alone in his chariot.

As he felt death come upon him he was thirsty and said to his enemies, “I would fain go as far as that lake to drink from it.”

“We give thee leave,” they said, “provided that you come to us again.”

“I will bid you come for me,” said Cu Chullin, “if I do not return to you myself.

He dragged himself to the little lake near-by to drink. On the shore of the lake was a pillar of stone. With the last of his strength he tied himself with his girdle upright against the stone. He did not wish to die either sitting or lying; it was standing that he wished to meet death. No one dared go near him until a raven came and perched on his shoulder so that they knew that he was dead.

⦿ ⦿

Other additions to the tale say that Conall Cernach revenged the death of Cu Chullin, recovered his head and returned it to Emer. She caused a wide grave to be dug to hold them both, for she would not live after him.

Other sagas of the Red Branch are told, more than a hundred of them, but there is not space to retell them here.

✕



FIVE

THE OSSIANIC CYCLE

TALES OF FINN AND THE FIAN

These are the things that were dear to Finn—

*The din of battle, the banquet's glee,
The bay of the hounds through the rough glen ringing,
And the blackbird singing in Letter Lee.*

Oisín's poem

TRADITION tells that about two hundred years after Cu Chullin died beside the standing stone, there ruled at Tara as high king Cormac mac Art, grandson of that Conn of the Hundred Battles who is a familiar figure in the later tales of the Red Branch. According to the Four Masters, Cormac came to the throne in A. D. 227. At this time there were in Ireland two distinct classes of people. The descendants of Mil, or Milesians, were the rulers of the land, but they occupied only one-third of it. The remainder of the island was in the possession of subject races, many of them descendants of the ancient Fir Bolg.

A band of these vassals fought with Queen Medb on the great cattle raid of Cuailnge, and there are other mentions of them in the sagas of the Red Branch. In Connacht the subject races were called the Clanna Morna; in Leinster, the Galioins; and in Tara, the Luagni.

It was the custom of the Milesians to exact heavy tribute from their subjects. One of the demands was for armed levees. Since freemen could not be forced to serve for more than a few weeks each year, and then not at harvest or seeding time, the armies must come from the vassal tribes. The demand was met by the formation of a distinct warrior class which was compelled to be ready for military service at any time. These bands of professional soldiers were called fiana. From November to May they were quartered with the landowners. They lived on their war plunder and served the king by protecting the land from invasion, by collecting taxes, and by carrying out the royal decrees. From May to November they lived in the open, hunting and fishing. Thus the Milesian high kings had at all times a trained standing army.

In time the chiefs of the bands of fiana came to be almost as powerful as the kings whose servants they were. Stories grew up about these leaders. Goll mac Morna was the great hero among the Clanna Morna. Finn mac Cumhaill led the Galioin.

The oldest preserved Ossianic stories take the form of poems in which some hero of the fiana—usually Finn or his son Oisín—is represented as celebrating the exploits of his band. As the centuries pass Oisín (Ossian) becomes more and more prominent as a singer until, in most of the later ballads, he is the official poet and singer of Finn's band. During the latter part of the eighteenth century he came to be thought of as the most ancient bard of the Celtic people—a sort of Celtic Homer, who had composed and sung by the power of primitive, untutored genius. But not all the stories about the fiana are in verse; many are in prose, some of the prose narratives running to considerable length. Since the Middle Ages, tales and ballads of Finn and his companions seem to have flourished, especially in the south of Ireland and in Scotland. The whole body of material is known as the Finn cycle, or, more commonly, the Ossianic cycle of Gaelic literature.

The stories are more numerous than the sagas of the Ulster cycle, and they lack the sweep and dignity of the earlier epic. They are more artificial; the subjects are often trivial; and there is a more modern tone of many tales.

During the period between A. D. 400 and A. D. 700 the Finn stories spread by word of mouth. About A. D. 900 the conquering Milesians adopted them into the chro-

nology that was being built up by the scribes to show that the sons of Mil had been rulers of Ireland since prehistoric times. Because of the long period during which the tales were transcribed by oral tradition alone, there are often many versions of the same story. The tales were modernized to fit each succeeding generation.

The Finn epic probably originated in the account of a blood-feud between a chieftain of one clan and the members of another clan who had slain his father. Such feuds are common among primitive people, and similar tales of revenge are widespread in popular literature.

© ©

THE BIRTH OF FINN

Cumhall, son of Tredhorn, was leader of the fiana of Leinster. He had carried off, against her father's will, Muirne of the Smooth Neck, the daughter of Teigue. Her grandfather was Nuadha, of the Tuatha De Danann. Cumhall had been leader of the fiana under Conn of the Hundred Battles, but he had quarreled with the king, and the hero Goll mac Morna had been recalled from Scotland to head the royal army.

Goll and Conn made war against Cumhall. In the battle of Cnucha, near the present city of Dublin, Cumhall was slain. Thus it was that the blood-feud began, to be carried on by a baby not yet born to Muirne.

When the time was come for the baby to be born, the king gave orders that if it was a boy it was to be killed at once; if it was a girl it should be spared. Twelve watchers sat beside the bed of Muirne. The child was a girl, and the watchers departed to bring the news to the king and to eat and drink after their long watch. But when they were all gone Muirne called to Bodman, an old nurse who had attended her. When the nurse came, Muirne had a little boy in her arms.

“Take him away,” she begged, “before they kill him.”

Bodman gave the baby a strip of pork to keep him quiet and hid him in the pig’s hut until morning. Then she took him under her mantle and went to her brother’s house. Her brother was a carpenter. She begged him to make her a hut in the forest near the hill of Almhain in Leinster, which belonged to Muirne as an inheritance from her grandfather. The man was curious about what his sister was hiding under her mantle, but she would not tell him. When he had finished the house she called to him.

“What is this?” said she, and pointed to the ground near the hut. Her brother bent over to see what she pointed to and she cut off his head with his own ax.

The baby’s mother had said that his name should be Demne, but as he grew older his hair was so fair and his

eyes so blue and his skin so white that he was called Finn, meaning "Fair." She taught him to run swiftly by chasing him with a whip up the mountain. When he slowed so that she caught him, she struck him with the whip.

While he was still a baby and unable to walk, he choked to death a cat that tried to take his strip of pork from him. One day a greyhound smelled the meat and came to steal it. The baby seized him by the jaws and tore him in two.

Only once did Finn's mother come to see him, for she was afraid to disclose his hiding place. That was when he was six years old and she had been married to the king of Kerry. She found her son asleep in the hunting booth; and she held him gently in her arms and made a little song, beginning:

"Sleep, my little son, sleep with the slumber of pleasure."

When she had finished her song she commanded Bodman to care for him until he was fit for the chase and ready to be leader of the Fian, as his father had been before him. He lived in the forest another year.

¶

¶

THE BOYISH EXPLOITS OF FINN

The first chase of Finn was a duck, which he killed by throwing a spear at her as she swam on the lake near

his hut. On another day, when he was seven years old, he went down on the plain near a palace and there found some boys hurling. Finn joined in the game and defeated all of them. The next day when he came they hurled their spears at him to kill him, but he dodged them all. When he came again the boys were swimming in the lake. They defied him to come in with them, but he jumped in and held nine of them under the water until they were drowned.

At another time he chased a herd of deer and brought back two of them to the lodge. After that he would catch deer whenever there was need. Then Bodman knew that it was time that Finn went forth to learn more of the world. He took military service under two kings to learn deeds of arms. In a fight with Liath Luachra he regained a bag of jewels that had been his father's. These he gave to the old men of the Fian, who had served under his father.

But Finn knew that he could not be a member of the Fian without knowledge of poetry. Therefore he sought out Finnegas, who dwelt on the river Boyne. Now Finnegas had watched beside the pool of Feic for seven years hoping to catch the salmon that was in the pool, for whoever ate the salmon would have all knowledge. While Finn was his pupil, Finnegas caught the salmon

and gave it to Finn to cook, but with the warning that he was to eat no bite of it. When Finn went to turn the fish on the spit he burned his thumb and thrust it into his mouth to ease the pain. Instantly he had all knowledge. From that time forth whenever Finn wanted knowledge all that he needed to do was to place his thumb in his mouth, and everything was revealed to him.

From Finnegas the boy learned the twelve books of poetry. At the end of his studies he made a lay to prove his skill, beginning:

“May! It is a pleasing time, most excellent in color.”

¶

¶

By the time he was grown, Finn had made himself leader of the Fian, a position he held until his death when he was very old. In Finn's time a man needed to pass severe tests in order to become a member of the band. He needed to be versed in the twelve books of poetry. He was placed in the ground up to his waist with only his shield and a hazel stick as long as his forearm. With these he must defend himself when nine warriors hurled their spears at him. If he was hurt he was not taken into the Fian. He must have his hair braided and then he must run through the forests of Ireland with the warriors of the Fian after him. If he was caught, or if he cracked a twig under his foot, or

if his hair was disturbed, he was not taken into the Fian. He had to be able to jump over a stick level with his brow, go under a stick the height of his knee, and remove a thorn from his foot, without slacking his pace.

The members of the Fian also had certain taboos. They must never receive a marriage portion with a wife; they must never offer violence to any woman; they must never refuse anyone anything they possessed; if a Fenian was killed his parents might not collect any blood-fine for his death.

They fought on foot or on horseback, not in chariots, as the Red Branch warriors had done. Dogs enter largely into the tales, for during half of the year the warriors of the Fian were hunters. Finn had two great hounds, Bran and Scolan, which he loved dearly. One of the great griefs of his life was when he killed Bran by accident. Finn regained his father's shield, the shield made from the wood of the hazel tree that had died when the head of Balor of the Evil Eye was placed in its branches. After the last great battle, when Finn was slain and the power of the fiana broken forever, a swineherd burned the shield on the battlefield.

Finn built a palace on the hill of Almhain, where he lived in the winter months. Here he had a great retinue of servants and a large family, for he had married early

and often. During the summer months he hunted with the warriors of the Fian. Each day they hunted in the forest. As they killed the game they sent it to a cooking place, where certain of their band prepared holes in the ground and lined them with hot stones. In these holes the game was cooked. At evening the hunters returned to the cooking places, bathed themselves, ate, and made their beds ready for sleep. In many parts of Ireland today the Irish point out bare places that they call the "cooking places of the Fiana."

Finn made peace with Goll and with Cormac, who had succeeded to the kingship. Among the members of the Fian were Diarmaid, Caoilte mac Ronan, Conon Maoil, Oisín, Finn's son, and Oscar, his grandson. A tale was told of the birth of Oisín.



THE BIRTH OF OISIN

One day as Finn was hunting, his dogs started a fawn, which ran toward his dwelling. They left the other hunters behind. Then the fawn lay down, while the two hounds began to play around her and to lick her face. She followed Finn home, still playing with the dogs.

That night Finn awoke and saw beside his bed a woman who was fairer than any woman he had ever seen.

"I am Sadb," she told him, "and I was the fawn you

chased today. I am under an enchantment because I would not marry the druid of the fairies, who is black and ugly. It was revealed to me that if I might enter thy house I would be freed of the enchantment.”

And Finn loved Sadb and made her his wife. For many months he never left her side. She loved him with a love that was as true as his for her. But word came to Finn that the Northmen were invading the land, and he remembered a saying of Goll mac Morna,—“A man lives after his life, but not after his honor.” Then he went out and drove the enemy away from the shores of Ireland. But when he returned to Almhain, Sadb was gone, and his men had only a story to tell of an enchanter who had come in the form of Finn and lured her outside the gates and turned her into a deer.

Finn searched for Sadb for seven years, but at last he gave up all hope of finding her again. Then one day as he was hunting, his dogs found a naked boy under a tree. They took the lad home, and when he had learned to talk he told Finn that the only parent he had known was a gentle deer and that one day a dark man had come and struck the deer with a hazel wand so that she went away with him.

Finn knew that the boy must be his son and that Sadb had been taken back to the fairy world. He

named the boy Oisín, which means Little Fawn. Oisín became a famous warrior. He was even more famous as a poet and singer; so that when men tell a tale of the Fian they end by saying: "Thus sang the bard Oisín, son of Finn."

¶

¶

During the forty years that Finn was leader of the Fian many brave and noble deeds were done. Invaders were driven out of Ireland, battles were fought, and adventures in the fairy world befell the heroes. If the stories of Finn and his warriors were all collected they would fill many large volumes. At one time Finn's band captured King Cormac himself, and the king would have suffered a dreadful death if Finn had not saved him. They forced the high king to go under the yoke, but Finn saved his honor by going beneath the yoke with him. They pursued the Gilla Dacker and his horse into fairyland and brought back the fourteen warriors that he had carried away. They placed a standing stone cut with letters of Ogam over the grave of the fair giantess who was killed while under their protection. They helped to rescue Finn when a fairy had turned him into an old man.

It was said of Finn that he gave gold away as if it were the leaves of the forest trees, and silver as if it were the waves of the sea. Always he was generous to a foe, save

to Diarmaid, who had once been his friend but who had eloped with Finn's affianced wife. This story comes at the end of Finn's life, so that it will be told later.

One of the most popular tales of how Finn repulsed foreign invaders deals with Midac, son of Colga, King of Lochlann.

¶

¶

THE FAIRY PALACE OF THE QUICKEN TREES

The king of Lochlann, or Scandinavia, whose name was Colga of the Hard Weapons, invaded Ireland to take it from Cormac mac Art. Finn and his hosts met the king of Lochlann in battle, and when that contest was over there was no chief or noble of that army left alive save Midac, the youngest son of Colga. Him Finn let live, and brought him up in his own household.

When Midac was grown to manhood, Finn made him one of the Fian, and the young prince hunted and fought with them. But he never lost a chance to become acquainted with the palaces and fortresses of the Irish, and with their ways of making war. At last Conon Maoil became suspicious of Midac, so that he advised Finn to give the prince a place of his own.

This counsel seemed good to Finn and his companions. They gave Midac his choice of land. He chose the land near the mouth of the river Shannon, which he received,

together with cattle and wealth of all kinds. For more than fourteen years no man of the Fian was invited into the fine palaces that he built on either side of the river Shannon. Then one day Conan Maoil taunted Midac:

“If Finn and his Fian have never feasted with me,” said Midac, “it is none of my fault; for my house has never been without a banquet fit for him, or for any king or chief. He should not have waited for an invitation, since I am one of the Fian and brought up in his own household. However, I have now a feast prepared at the Palace of the Quicken Trees, which is near this hill; and it is to this that I wish you to come.”

This invitation Finn accepted. So Midac went to prepare for his guests. It was agreed that Oisín and five other chiefs should wait on the hill till Finn and his companions returned. When they drew near the palace they were amazed at its size and beauty. It stood on a little plain surrounded with quicken trees all covered with scarlet berries. Near the palace was a pathway leading down to the ford. The other palace was across the ford.

Finn and his companions went into the banquet hall, where a great feast was spread. As they sat down on the soft couches, Midac came in and looked at them without a word, then went out and closed the doors. And suddenly the warriors saw that what they had

thought was a splendid hall was only a hut and that instead of the soft couches they were sitting on the bare, cold earth. They tried to rise, but they could not move. Finn put his thumb in his mouth, and, when he had withdrawn it, groaned aloud.

“Alas,” he said, “I grieve that my death is near, and the death of these dear companions. For fourteen years has Midac plotted against us, and now I can see no escape. In the palace across the river is an army of foreigners, whom Midac has brought hither for our destruction. We may not be released until the blood of the three kings who are with them is sprinkled on this clay.”

Then the warriors prepared for death and sang the war cry of the Fian in a slow sad strain.

Oisín, waiting on the hill, was alarmed when he heard no news of his father, so that he sent two of his men to see what was the matter. As these two came near the Palace of the Quicken Trees, they heard the war cry and wondered to hear it so slow and sad.

Finn heard them talking outside the door and called to them. “Do not come inside the door,” he said, “for fear you may fall under our enchantment.”

He urged them to flee from the palace to save themselves, but they refused. When he saw that the young men would not leave the Palace of the Quicken Trees

while he was in danger, Finn sent them to guard the ford, which was so narrow that one man could keep it.

For three days then, the young man defended the ford against the hosts of Midac. Held back by their resistance, the foreigners did not enter the Palace of the Quicken Trees where Finn and his companions sat fixed to the cold clay floor, almost fainting with hunger and thirst. The third night the three kings rose up from the table where they had been feasting in the palace across the ford and took their swords to end the combats at the river and to put an end to Finn and his companions. Diarmaid met them at the ford, remembered what Finn had told him, and cut off their heads. With the dripping heads he ran to the Palace of the Quicken Trees and sprinkled the clay floor with the blood. Then Finn and his warriors sprang to their feet with exulting cries.

But the danger was not yet over. Finn and his companions would have no strength to enter into the combat until daybreak, so that Diarmaid and Fatha, tired as they were, must hold the ford until morning.

To the palace across the Shannon word was brought that the three kings had fallen. Then all the foreigners armed themselves and marched to the ford. But the way was so narrow that they must come one at a time, and Diarmaid on the right and Fatha on the left parried

and thrust and beat them back until the day broke. During the night Finn and his companions had eaten and recovered from the enchantment. As the first light of dawn appeared in the east there rose a great shout behind the young men who, desperately weary, still held the pass. Finn and Goll and the others ran down the slope to the battle. Even then the fight seemed to go against the Fian until Oscar, best loved of all the youthful champions, killed the king of the foreigners. Then the hosts of Midac broke and fled back to their ships and sailed home to tell of their defeat and slaughter.

Ⓟ Ⓟ

It is impossible to tell of all the adventures and battles, the excursions into fairyland, and the voyages oversea, that made Finn famous for hundreds of years and gave the shanachies, or professional story-tellers, material for hundreds of tales and ballads. But there is one tale which, because it is the best of them all, should be retold. It is the account of Finn's enmity against one who had been his friend. It is the tale, too, of a wilful woman.

Ⓟ Ⓟ

THE PURSUIT OF DIARMAID AND GRAINE

When Finn was an old man he had no wife, and he fixed his desire on the fair young daughter of Cormac mac Art, the high king. Graine was the name of the

maid, who was more fair than any maid in Ireland. She had refused to wed any king or prince in the land, but when Finn sent to her father desiring her for a wife, Cormac dared not refuse. Graine, when she saw Finn, said, "A wonder it is to me that Finn did not ask me as a wife for Oisin, or for Oscar, rather than for himself, for he is older than even you, my father."

When Finn came to claim Graine, Cormac made a great feast at Tara. At the feast was Diarmaid, handsomest of all the warriors of the Fian. It was not to be wondered at that Graine fell in love with him when she first saw him, for on his forehead was a love spot, which no woman could resist. It had been placed upon his brow by a fairy he had seen in an enchanted dwelling.

During the course of the feast, Graine prepared a great cup of wine into which she mixed a sleeping potion. This she sent by her maid to Finn and to all the warriors of the Fian save Diarmaid and Oisin. As they drank they fell into heavy slumber. Then Graine went to Oisin saying: "Wilt thou receive courtship from me?"

"That will I not," replied Oisin, "nor from any woman that is betrothed to Finn."

Then the princess went to Diarmaid and asked him the same question, but he refused in the same words that Oisin had used.

“I put you under heavy taboo, Diarmaid, that you take me out of Tara this night,” she said, “for I have loved you since I saw you long ago win a hurling match under my window.”

Diarmaid struggled against his fate. He begged her to change her mind, but she would not. His friends urged him not to seek to break the taboo that she had laid upon him. With tears Diarmaid took leave of his former companions, for he knew that when Finn found what he had done they must needs hunt him like a wild beast. Outside the walls of Tara he urged Graine to turn back, but instead of that she led him to where she had caused a chariot and horses to be concealed. That night they camped near the river Shannon.

When Finn awoke he was filled with a mighty rage. He gathered his warriors together and set out on the trail of the lovers. Each day he found the hut they had used for shelter, the bed of rushes and the remains of the meal they had eaten. To this day there are all over Ireland flat rocks that are called the beds of Diarmaid and Graine.

For sixteen years Finn pursued Diarmaid around Ireland. Often his warriors urged him to leave the chase for matters of more importance, but when he remembered the beauty of Graine, jealousy consumed him and he

urged them on. As the friends of Diarmaid among the Fian had no wish to see him killed, they contrived to send him warnings of their approach. Sometimes they sent Finn's own dog Bran, who loved Diarmaid. Once they had Fearghoir, whose shouts could be heard over three cantreds, call a warning. Once Finn came close enough to the lovers to see Diarmaid give three kisses to Graine, and Finn swore that Diarmaid should pay for those kisses with his head. It was at this time that Angus Og, the fairy foster-father of Diarmaid, saved Graine by carrying her off under his mantle, and Diarmaid saved himself by vaulting on his spear over the heads of Finn's army.

Time after time Finn sent great armies after Diarmaid, but to no avail, for he met and killed them all. He slew the three deadly hounds loosed upon him, and bound the three green chiefs so tightly that they died in their bonds before Finn could loosen them.

A quicken tree with magic berries stood in the center of the cantred of Dubhros, guarded by a foul and hideous giant called Searbhan Lochlannach. No one dared approach the giant, for he could be killed only by three blows of the iron club that was fastened to his belt. Finn wanted some of the berries to eat, for it was said that they gave youth to all who ate of them, and

now Finn was old. Graine also wished to eat of the berries. Finn commanded the warriors of the Clanna Morna to get some of the berries for him. As they passed through the forest toward the cantred of Dubhros they were overcome by Diarmaid, but when he knew what they had come for he cut their bonds and went with them to the magic tree. There, after a terrible fight, Diarmaid snatched the giant's club from his belt and with three blows dashed out his brains. Then Graine and the men of Clana Morna ate their fill of the rich fruit. When they were full Diarmaid picked a load of the berries for them to take to Finn. But when they came to him, Finn smelled the smell of Diarmaid on the berries and would not taste them. He gathered together an army of hired soldiers with the promise that if they killed Diarmaid he would make them members of the Fian. Oscar and Oisín went with them to the magic quicken tree.

Diarmaid and Graine were asleep in the bed of the giant in the top of the tree when Finn with his hired soldiers came and camped at the foot in the shade, for the day was hot. Finn sent for a chess board and said to Oisín, "I would play a game with thee."

The game was played with great skill and cunning until Oisín had but one move to make to turn the game

against Finn. Diarmaid, from his bed in the top of the quicken, could see the move that was to be made and threw a berry at the man to be moved. Oisín moved that man and turned the game against Finn. It was not long until the game was in the same state a second time; again Diarmaid threw a berry and struck the man to be moved. A third time it happened and a third time Diarmaid showed Oisín the move, so that this time Oisín won the game.

Finn knew all the time that Diarmaid was in the bed in the top of the tree. Now he called the hired soldiers and made them take hands around the tree, warning them on pain of death not to let Diarmaid through. It was shown to Angus what a strait his foster-son was in, and he came to the rescue of Diarmaid without the knowledge of Finn. When one of the warriors climbed up into the tree, Angus flung him down with a stroke of his foot. As the man fell, Angus made him look like Diarmaid, so that the hired soldiers waiting at the foot of the tree rushed in and cut off his head. When he was dead the warrior took his own form again. This happened for nine times, until Finn was full of anguish for all the warriors who were killed in the shape of Diarmaid.

Angus would have saved them both, but Diarmaid refused to go under his mantle, and as he had done before,

sent Graine with Angus. Then Diarmaid called to Finn, "I will go down to thee, O Finn, and I will deal slaughter upon thee and upon thy people, for I am certain that they wish to work me death, and I have no friend nor companion any more in the world. But I swear, O Finn, that thou shalt not get me for nothing."

"Give him mercy and forgiveness," begged Oscar, the grandson of Finn.

"I will not," declared Finn, "to all eternity, and he shall not get peace or rest forever till he give me satisfaction for every slight that he has put upon me."

Then Oscar, best loved of all the youths of the Fian, took the side of Diarmaid against them all. "I pledge the word of a true warrior," he cried, "that I will not suffer the Fian of Erin to give him cut or wound, and I take his body under the protection of my valor."

When Diarmaid heard the brave words of Oscar he rose and sprang far out from the tree, beyond the reach of the soldiers of Finn, and Oscar went with him. From that day forth these two fought together against the Fian. But at the end of sixteen years, Cormac, the high king, gave to Finn another of his fair daughters that he might let Diarmaid be, so that they made peace with each other. During the time of that peace Graine bore to Diarmaid four sons and one daughter.

After many years had passed and Diarmaid and Graine were prosperous in their own dwelling, they made a great feast for Finn and for King Cormac, the father of Graine. During the days of that feasting the warriors of the Fian went out to hunt a wild boar. Now Diarmaid was under a taboo never to hunt a boar, and after the hunt was well started Finn reminded him of his taboo.

“Now, by my word,” said Diarmaid, “it is to slay me that you have brought me on this hunt, O Finn; and if I am here fated to die, I have no power to shun it.”

They tracked the wild boar throughout the woods until they found him; and in that hunting, the boar turned upon Diarmaid, whose weapons made no wound in the beast. The animal leaped and struck Diarmaid and ripped open his body.

Then Finn came and taunted him. “It likes me well to see thee in this plight, O Diarmaid,” he said, “and I grieve that the women of Erin are not gazing upon thee, for thy beauty is turned to ugliness.”

“Nevertheless, it is in thy power to heal me,” said Diarmaid, “for whoever will drink water carried in thy hands will be healed of any hurt.”

But Finn said, “Thou hast not deserved of me that I should give thee that drink.”

Diarmaid pleaded with Finn, recalling to him the many times he had saved his chieftain's life, in the days before either of them had seen Graine. Oisín and Oscar added their pleadings to those of the dying man. At last Finn went to the spring and took up some water in his joined hands. But before he reached Diarmaid he let the water slip through his fingers. A second time he lifted the water, but the thought of Graine came before him, and he opened his hands. Then said Oscar, "I swear that if you do not bring the water speedily, O Finn, there shall but one of us leave this hill."

At that Finn brought the water, but before he reached the place Diarmaid was dead.

It is told further that the four children of Diarmaid and Graine made war upon Finn in revenge for their father's death. In that war the daughter was killed. Finn was afraid of the wrath of the sons of Diarmaid, so that he went to Graine and plied her with soft words until he won her to his will, and married her as he had wished to do in the beginning. Then he brought her to the Fian. When they saw her coming lovingly with Finn, she who had been the cause of all the sorrow and the death of Diarmaid, the warriors of the Fian gave a mighty shout of mockery and derision, so that she bowed her head in shame.

“We are sure, O Finn,” said Oisín, “that thou wilt keep Graine well from this time forward.”

Then Graine persuaded her sons to make peace with her husband, and Graine and Finn lived together.

¶

¶

The power of the Fian was broken, and Finn and his grandson Oscar were killed at the battle of Gabhra, which was fought, according to the Annals of the Four Masters, in A. D. 283. In that great battle Oscar was slain by Cairbre, son of Cormac, the high king, for the forces of the king were allied against the Fian. Finn came to weep over the death of his most beloved grandson and was killed by the sons of Uirgenn, in revenge for the fact that Finn had killed their father long before.

The Clanna Morna were allied with the high king's forces in that battle because Finn had driven Goll, chief of the Clanna Morna, out of the Fian, and had killed him.

According to tradition, Oisín and Caeilte lived on in Ireland for more than a century. When St. Patrick came to the island he met the two old men and converted them to Christianity. They told him all the tales of Finn and the lost glories of the Fian. St. Patrick was much enthralled by the grandeur of the tales, so that he kept the old men with him and had their stories written down by his scribes. The tales told by Oisín and Caeilte

to St. Patrick are gathered into two collections, both called the "Colloquy of the Ancients."

There is another tale of Oisín which says that he was taken away by Niamh of the Golden Hair, daughter of the king in the Land of Youth. He lived with her in the Land of Youth for three hundred years, but the time seemed to him like three weeks. At last Oisín was homesick for Ireland and for a sight of the Fian; so he begged the princess to let him return on a visit. She gave him the same white horse to ride which had carried them both to the Land of Youth, but warned him that he must not dismount from it.

When Oisín came to Ireland and called for the Fian, there was no answer. The land seemed overgrown with brambles, and the men that he saw were small and weak. When he spoke to them, asking for news of the Fian, they said that they had heard old tales of the warriors of the Fian, but that the race had long since passed from the earth. Then Oisín rode to the site of his father's palace at Almhain and found only ruins covered with weeds.

As he turned to go away he saw a crowd of men trying to lift a broad flat stone. One of them came to him and said, "Come and help us, thou mighty hero, for thou art a man of strength."

As Oisín leaned down to move the stone with one hand, his saddle girths burst and he rolled on the ground. Instantly the white horse shook himself and vanished into the clouds, leaving Oisín a feeble old man lying on the ground. The men lifted him up and asked who he was.

“I was Oisín, son of Finn,” said the old man, peering about with dim eyes, “and I pray ye tell me where he now dwells, for I have been to his dwelling on the hill of Almhain and there all is desolation, and I have neither seen him nor heard his hunting horn from the eastern to the western sea.”

The men about marveled to hear him speak of things so long past. They took him to St. Patrick who listened to his tales and had them written down by his scribes.

Although most of the stories say that Finn was killed by the sons of Uirgenn at the battle of Gabhra, there are others who claim that he and the heroes of the Fian still sleep in the hills of Ireland. When they are needed, say the shanachies, they will come forth to ride again over the plains of Erin shouting the war cry of the Fian.



JUN 1 1931

LIBRARY OF CONGRESS



0 013 014 747 1

